

by Charles Rubin

Classified ads are a simple but effective method of announcing your products or services in cyberspace, and they should be a part of your online marketing plan. But when you post a classified ad, you're competing with dozens of other ads. This week, we'll look at five guerrilla tips that will help you make the most of your classified ads in the online marketplace. Check back next week for the rest of the list.

1. Plan the entire sales process

Don't go into the advertising battle half-cocked. Think through the entire process that will begin with a response to your ad, and make sure you're ready for the results. If the ad offers a free information kit, for example, make sure you have the information kit ready to go before you ever place the ad. If you're filling orders or sending out information by snail mail, prepare an order confirmation notice in advance and send it out as quickly as you can so your customers know you got the order and are following up right away.

2. Check your competition

Before posting an ad anywhere, spend a week or two reading the ad areas you plan to target. Look for ads offering similar products or services, and think about how you can present your case in a more compelling way.

3. Use a strong title

Your classified ad is nothing more than a title in a list of titles until someone opens it and reads it. It's the title's job to get people interested enough to see what you have to say, so....

Tell what the ad is about in 40 characters or less. Ad titles longer than this may not be

completely displayed on the screen. I see lots of ads whose titles are too vague, like "More Income Now!" or "Free Information Kit." Titles like "Make \$500/week Reading" or "Free Guide To Thinner Thighs" are better.

Use power words. Every professional advertiser knows that words like "free," "secret," "money," "guarantee," "earn," and "save" push people's buttons and make them want to hear more. Become a student of print advertising headlines and learn how to use power words in your own ad titles.

Don't shout. Ad titles that are printed with all capital letters or which contain lots of asterisks, exclamation points, dollar signs, or other keyboard symbols are the online equivalent of shouting. They say to your audience that you're not smart enough to write an effective ad title, so you're trying to get their attention by shouting instead.

4. Make your message complete but concise

Your reader's patience is severely limited, so craft your advertising message carefully to explain:

A) what you're offering

B) why the reader might want it, and

C) what they should do to get it.

The trick is to include enough information in A and B so the reader is motivated to take step C. Make sure the reader clearly understands what you're selling and what's good about it (including comparisons or proof of your product's advantages), but avoid lengthy case studies or anecdotes. For example....

If you're selling something based on lower prices, list some of the prices so customers can easily compare them with your competition.

If you're selling a service, explain it in terms of real benefits people get from using it. Instead of "We offer health insurance services for small businesses," say, "We can slash your company's health insurance costs by 30 percent or more."

5. Use people talk

Write your ad in a conversational tone, as if you're talking directly to the individual reading it. Avoid passive language such as "our services are designed for...." Instead, use active language such as "we've designed our service for...." In the second sentence, you're talking to an individual.

Classified ads are popular because they work. But like any marketing weapon, guerrillas learn to make the most of them in battle. Follow these strategies when creating and placing your ads, and you'll be well ahead of the competition. Check back next week for more tips on making classified ads work hard for you.