

They laughed when I sat down at the piano, but when I started to play!

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The rise of social media is only the latest Golden Gun for advertisers, and already they are looking for a new one.

When the clicking of a mouse took over advertising on the world wide web, and especially through social media, it seemed to deal a mortal blow to the kind of creative thinking that had burst onto the scene with ideas like this one for piano lessons from 1926. All that any advertisement would have to do from that moment on would be to mention the topic. Algorithms would do the rest – find an audience of likely buyers, wave a notice under their noses, and start counting the sales.

It is widely thought these days that advertising ‘used to be’ a fascinating art that seldom failed to work, and never failed to surprise. Films like *Days of Wine and Roses*, and especially TV shows of the *Madmen* variety, developed the legend and made sure it lingered on. The fact is, however, that the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. There always have been millions of very ordinary and second-rate adverts for every one that could actually be called ‘novel’, ‘creative’, or even ‘interestingly different’, and the arrival of the internet hasn’t made things any better, or any worse.

The piano school advert that stirred the world of Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway was certainly unusual, and it has remained as an icon of the art, quoted in every book on advertising and looked longingly back on. That’s partly because it demonstrated in such an appealing way that emotion could be brought into play in the art of remote selling. It hinted that anyone could learn the piano, it said it was cheap and easy to do so, and it dangled the lure of the admiration and approbation of friends. It certainly did not say anything about learning for the sake of learning. And it wasn’t entirely new. Twenty years earlier the Winton Motor Carriage Company had tried the emotional appeal of making life easier:

Dispense with a horse!

The thinking was that everyone who could afford their own transport arrangements should know that keeping a horse was expensive, time-consuming, and often inconvenient. A new-fangled petrol-fired carriage, on the other hand, would do all a horse could do without the drag.

Looking back at old advertisements today in the hope of finding a dazzle of creativity is fun, but largely a forlorn quest. The press and print journals of a hundred years ago were filled with useful but rather plain appeals to spend your money on this or that. Call them announcements if you will, for that is what they added up to.

When wireless broadcasting began to include advertising in its daily programming it seemed as if here at last was the medium to make all others redundant. And so, it proved at first to be. Suddenly you could actually talk directly to a huge audience and charm them into buying what you were selling. You could even repeat the brand name over and over again to make sure people would ask for the right one.

Quickly recognising the value of this new medium, the station owners shortened the advertising time and raised the fees. A 15-second slot became expensive, 30 seconds doubly so, and a whole minute could cost a fortune.

It was a hiccup, but the people who wrote radio ads for a living came up with what they considered the scientific approach to rule out failure and ensure that even the shortest of short slots would be worth it. Their formula has been lovingly rendered for all time as follows: ‘First you gotta tell them what you gonna tell them. Then you tell them. Then you tell them what you told them.’

It wasn't creative of itself, but it worked.

Are you suffering the unbearable pain of Flat Feet?

Dr, Bill's Electric Foot Pads will fix you quick.

Remember! Dr. Bill's Electric Foot Pads for Flat Foot pain.

In time, of course, radio gave way to Television as the medium of choice for advertising, and again there were just as many bad adverts as ever, and even fewer good one. Yet the public seemed to enjoy whatever was put in front of them, and TV became the new Golden Gun.

Although it never quite took over from TV, Big Screen cinema advertising was quite a craze for many years. Who can forget those wonderful Peter Stuyvesant ads with their staccato slapping helicopter blade back-track and massive panoramic shots of luxury life in the Caribbean?

And now, courtesy of the world wide web and social media, we have a never-ending parade of algorithm-driven pop-ups. If you are on the computer and connected to the internet you can expect advert and snippets of news to flash up in little corners of your screen at any time, all having been chosen especially for you by an algorithm that makes notes of your likes and interests.

Extra weight? Do this and lose up to 15kilos
Make yourself Fifty Grand a week! No catch.

Messages like this flow incessantly before you. They display little creativity in approach because they do not need to. Who could resist the lure of such rewards?

You could say we are back in the days of simple announcement advertising.

For the moment it is relatively cheap, but the people who spend money on advertising have always complained about the cost, still do, and almost certainly will do so forever.

I know half the money I spend on advertising is wasted. I just don't know which half.

Some big spenders particularly dislike the idea of paying on a 'per-click' basis, which is mainly how the internet advertising works at the moment. So much so that there are strong rumours of changes in the not-too-distant future.

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