

Before You Turn to the Experts

By Ed Newman

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Experts perform a valuable function in our modern world. Whenever we get into an argument, whether heated or as a diversion, it isn't long before we reach for a forceful quote or two from an expert.

Experts strengthen our confidence in views we've chosen to defend. Experts supposedly know what they're talking about because they've got the inside track on specialized knowledge. Experts are called upon to give us the final word in matters both obscure and self-evident.

And sometimes experts are wrong.

IT CAN HAPPEN

Minnesota's 1998 governor's race is a prime example of the experts being wrong. Polls consistently showed Jesse Ventura to be running third and the pundits gave him no chance of winning. Jesse was almost always discussed in terms of whether his candidacy would hurt the Republican Coleman more than the Democrat Humphrey. A former Navy Seal and WWF "wrassler" his candidacy was seldom taken seriously by the mainstream media. I turned on the TV in my Las Vegas hotel room the day after the election and saw the polished bald pate and dimpled chin on national news, and I knew the pros had been wrong.

History shows us that misguided predictions are nothing new. In 1876 an internal memo at Western Union declared, "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us."

According to Dr. Lee De Forest, inventor of the vacuum tube and father of television, man would never reach the moon regardless of all future scientific advances.

In 1949, Popular Mechanics boldly asserted that "computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons."

Actually, there have been a lot of embarrassed experts when it comes to assertions about computers. The editor in charge of business books for Prentice Hall in 1957 said, "I have traveled the length and breadth of this country and talked with the best people, and I can assure you that data processing is a fad that won't last out the year."

Commenting on the microchip, an engineer at the Advanced Computing Systems Division of IBM said, "But what . . . is it good for?" This was in 1968. By 1977, the chairman and founder of NEC

Ken Olson expertly demonstrated his prescience by exclaiming, "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." I still remember hearing opinions of people who shared this sentiment.

The entertainment industry has produced a few guffaws as well. "Who wants to hear actors talk?" said H.M. Warner of Warner Brothers in 1927. Gary Cooper, in turning down the leading role in "Gone With the Wind" said, "I'm just glad it'll be Clark Gable who's falling on his face and not Gary Cooper."

And when the Decca Recording Company rejected the Beatles in 1962, their in-house experts assured management that, "guitar music is on the way out." Yeah, right. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

In fact, misguided experts embarrass themselves in nearly every field of endeavor.

"Airplanes are interesting toys but of no military value," said Marechal Ferdinand Foch, French Professor of Strategy of the Ecole Superieure de Guerre.

In 1899 Charles H. Duell, Commissioner of the U.S. Office of Patents, declared "Everything that can be invented has been invented." I suppose the inventiveness of 19th century inventors left him pretty much blown away and incapable of conceiving anything new. Hmmm.

If you listen around, you'll hear experts cited in the marketing and advertising industries, too.

NOW LOOK

This year Al Ries, the guru of branding, along with his daughter/business partner Laura Ries, wrote a book called *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR*. Quite naturally the book produced some buzz in advertising circles. This was an expert in marketing who seemed to suddenly shift his allegiance from advertising to PR. Is advertising really dead?

Advertising Age magazine wrote articles about the bombshell, with illuminating views from both camps. And where does that leave American businesses? Which experts should we trust? The ones who say skillful PR is the critical key to success? Or the ones who ante up in the advertising camp?

Stop and think about it. Since when has it ever been an either/or type of game. This is not the same thing as a family vacation where either we do or do not go to Europe. Marketing has always been a mix.

The key to success is not either advertising or PR. Instead we draw from a host of tools to generate interest, generate leads, orchestrate buzz, and create sales. Success is built around an integrated mix of all the ingredients at our disposal. Before the internet I used to call it my "Lucky Seven": articles, PR, advertising, direct mail, telemarketing, trade shows, and face to face direct sales. You can have all this and still fail if you do not have systems in place to capitalize on all your marketing actions.

All that aside, the real key to success is an awakened mind, directing all this activity based on observation and critical thinking, focused on satisfying the wants and needs of one's customers.

Ultimately, the right way is the way that works. For this reason, think through WHY you are doing what you are doing.... analyze YOUR situation.

Test ideas and measure results, evaluating and making adjustments accordingly. Learn from your experiences and apply what you have learned.

We live in a very complicated age. You, as advertising and marketing professionals, are perceived as experts by those who entrust their strategic advertising and marketing plans to your direction. You have a responsibility to your companies or clients to become truly informed so that your advice is reliable and trustworthy. You certainly don't want to be numbered with those who must later eat their own words.

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Ed Newman is marketing and advertising manager for AMSOIL INC., the world's leading independent manufacturer of synthetic motor oils and lubricants.

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