

The science and art of creating brilliant emails and websites that sell products and services to schools

By Tony Attwood

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1: Why are fewer emails sent to schools on Fridays?

Many, many years ago there appeared in print a book which suggested that direct marketing could be understood as common sense.

From the moment I first saw it, even though at the time I was just in my first flush of writing advertising, I felt moved to argue against the notion that “common sense” had anything to do with successful direct marketing. Indeed, I said, common sense was exactly the last thing that you needed in terms of selling, advertising, and marketing.

Common sense, I argued, teaches us that we can believe the evidence of our own eyes. It is the philosophy of “what you see is what it is”. You put your hand on the stove when it is working and you get burned. So you never do that again. Common sense.

But as physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, cosmology, music, psychology, and sociology (and quite a few other subject areas as well) all teach us, and indeed as everyday observation assures us, common sense doesn’t actually explain the world that we see around us. There are lots of other things going on, which when it comes down to it, can’t be explained through common sense at all.

Common sense tells us that the sun goes around the earth, because we see it happening every day as that yellow thing in the air that moves across the sky. Common sense tells us that the guy standing 50 yards away is only one inch tall - because that is the evidence of our eyes. And yet by and large we know that isn’t true.

Common sense also tells us that the best way to advertise a product is to start out by telling the potential customer what we have on offer. Like the guy on the market stall who shouts out, “Get your bananas, best bananas, get your bananas.” You tell the potential customer what you have on offer and he or she comes and gets it. That’s common sense, that’s obvious.

The common sense of our ears tells us the musical distance between one note and the next on the piano is equal to the distance between any other note and the next because that is what we hear.

But according to all those sciences listed above, such observations are all nonsense.

But, despite the evidence, the argument continues along common-sense lines saying, if you are sending out an advert to teachers they need to know at once what you sell and who you are, otherwise how do they know who they are dealing with? So you need to say that you are a small family business that has been working in this field for 15 years (for example). If your business is new you need to say that, but justify yourself by saying that you are not encumbered with old ideas.

Many, many firms would argue that these most certainly are two things you need to tell people straight away in your adverts. What you sell, and who you are. That’s common sense.

And yet, and yet... just as in seeing the physical world, sometimes common sense in advertising breaks down - and it certainly does here. Advertisements that start by announcing the product and/or talking about the company selling the product, generally do far, far worse than advertisements that start in others ways. I'll come to the details shortly.

But let me first explore common sense a little bit further for the moment. Here's an example of common sense: when I let go of the apple I am holding it falls to the floor.

But why? I can see no reason. Experience tells me it happens every time, and not just to apples but that doesn't explain why. And given that I know that the earth appears flat, and that the sun goes around the earth, and that the moon is sometimes a full circle but sometimes is just a crescent, I might begin to get a bit worried. In all those cases common sense breaks down.

In fact, I might start thinking that this common-sense notion doesn't tell me anything except that some of the things I observe happening are likely to happen again. It gets dark at night, sometimes it rains...

Common sense in fact is a thought system that finds it hard to explain why things happen, and is quite often quite wrong in the explanations it gives. Worse, it is so persuasive that it is incredibly hard to dislodge even in the face of large amounts of evidence.

H.L. Mencken, one of the most influential American writers and prose stylists of the first half of the twentieth century, stated that "for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong." And that is a fundamental of the thinking behind this book.

In "Everything Is Obvious: Once You Know the Answer" Duncan Watts, a Columbia University professor, sets out why common sense breaks down and why the obvious, simple, everyday answer to anything usually is not the best answer.

Watt's argument is, "We've been trained that there's going to be one answer and it's going to be a complete answer," Watts said. And he added, "You should suspect your intuition."

Of course, what he is promoting is the scientific approach which questions everything. Thus instead of looking at an advertisement which starts with a question in a headline and then goes on to answer that question and asking "is there any evidence that this approach works", common sense rejects this approach without looking at any evidence on the grounds that "people need to know what I am writing about or they won't read on" or "teachers don't have time to read a long email" or "Intelligent people don't get suckered into this cheesy American style of writing."

Watts, and many other writers before him, related success in unravelling the way the world works to the issue of telling a story - we might say building a hypothesis. "The difference is,

we test the stories and modify them when they don't work," he said. "Storytelling is a useful starting point. The real question is what we do next."

As for common-sense views on what will work and what does not, Watts added, "It's extremely successful and reliable. It works so well we are tempted to use it in all circumstances. Common-sense reasoning works very well when the same situation repeats itself over and over."

But in advertising this doesn't happen. The situation is forever changing. One has competitors, trends change, government diktats change, syllabuses change. And what then happens is that common sense gets confused. Because A happened and then B happened it does not, of course, mean that A caused B.

Common sense often confuses correlation with causation, Watts said. Just because A happened and was followed by B doesn't mean A caused B. Advert A which simply set out the product details might get a huge response (B), but that might be because the product was new or the syllabus had just changed. But all that has happened is that the product is new and meets a new demand. Once the product has rivals, and the demand has settled down, that sort of advertising won't continue to work, but that most certainly does not mean that the product has reached the end of the line. It needs a different type of advertising, and experiment and scientific analysis can tell us what that sort of advertising needs to be.

But now we are facing our intuition, and our intuition always tells us to trust our intuition. The temptation to reject any scientific analysis is very strong.

"Measure-and-react is one way to go about it," is how Watt sums up the problem. "Success depends on reacting fast, not on predicting the future. Try lots and lots of things all the time."

Fortunately, "Measure-and-react" is now much easier because we can undertake email campaigns and measure exactly what is going on without spending fortunes on print and design.

Inevitably luck is partially responsible for success or failure - you might hit on exactly the right approach straight off, or a competitor might beat you to it by a few weeks. But there are two things that anyone who uses the scientific approach to advertising has as a major benefit from the start: most other firms will be using intuition and common sense, and that tends to give false results and lead to false logic far more often than the scientific approach.

Thus, I argue that just as common sense doesn't explain a lot of things around us in our everyday lives, so common sense also doesn't explain why advertisement A works very well