
5 tips for writing a killer call-to-action

Even if you don't work in marketing, you have probably heard the term "call-to-action," and know how important it is in digital advertising. Well, it's also important in print advertising. If you're not already familiar with the concept, the description is right there in the name: a call-to-action is the part of your ad that tells consumers what it is that you want them to do. That might involve asking them to visit a website, call a phone number, or to visit your premises. In some cases, it could be to pick up a book, or exercise. The point is, you are "calling" upon people to take some kind of "action." But, when everyone's ads are telling people what to do, you need to make sure consumers are listening to yours.

1 It's right there in the name

Use active verbs. It's not enough simply to use active voice. Realistically, no one is going to write a call to action that reads "this number will be called by you," but even without going to that extreme, it's all too easy to bore consumers into inaction.

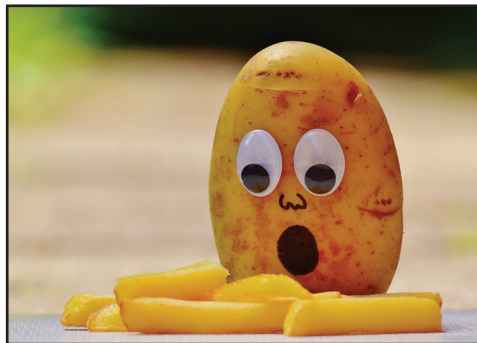
Lazy writing can lead to lines like, “Sign Up,” or “Start Now,” or “Submit Your Request,” and no amount of exclamation points will make those phrases more exciting. Try more descriptive words like “explore,” “discover,” “be-



come,” “transform,” or pair your run-of-the-mill action (e.g. “call now”) with a more engaging preface: “Unleash your personal style. Sign up today.”

2 Lower the stakes

Marketers love to use the word “free,” — and let’s face it, customers love things that are free — but we’re collectively afraid that “free” is a scam. You can set people at ease by limiting their commitment. Using phrases like “cancel anytime,”



or saying “try” instead of “buy” lowers anxiety surrounding the purchase decision.

People tend to be more risk-averse than they are drawn to rewards, so you need to identify any immediate misgivings your potential customers may have, and address them. Maybe customers are afraid of getting one more email newsletter— promise you won’t spam them (and stick to that promise)! They might be worried you’re going to share their information— tell them you won’t.

Put yourself in their shoes and ask what might potentially scare you, and make sure you’re genuinely putting those fears to rest.

3 “What’s in it for me?”

Be compelling. In this case, that means that you have to make consumers viscerally feel why they have to take action. This is where you describe not only what your product does, but why it is important — emotionally. For example, if your product is shoes, you might write “No one should have to wear an uncomfortable shoe. Try a pair today — no-hassle returns.” People wearing uncomfortable shoes



can immediately relate to that, and because it says “try” and not “buy,” there’s no fear of commitment. That lack of obligation is backed up by the tag “no hassle returns.”

Try to read as if you were the customer — ask yourself why you should care. While it’s important to explain what your product does, it’s not enough. Most people make purchase decisions based on emotion, so you need to appeal to those emotions to trigger a response.

Of course, you do need to explain the purpose of your product or service, or to put it another way: what is the value to the consumer? They have a problem, you have the solution. Using the shoe example again: they have uncomfortable shoes — you can fix that. The benefit is having comfortable shoes.

4 The ticking clock

This is an old trick, but it works. You need to create urgency in your call-to-action, and sometimes that can be accomplished simply by including the



word “today” or “now,” as in “try for free today,” or “call now to get your free sample.” You can strengthen that sense of urgency further by actually placing a time limit, as in “limited time offer,” or more specifically, “offer ends in TWO DAYS.” Online, some outlets use this to great effect by literally adding a ticking clock, so visitors to their site can see the time winking away, but in print, it’s just as effective to place an ad for a “ONE DAY SALE.” Provide a discount or other special offer and put a cap on the amount of offers you’ll fulfill, or the time the offer is available.

You can also stress scarcity in supply — for example “only 10 in stock,” or “selling out fast” — or emphasize how great the demand is. People are anxious about missing out on an opportunity, so make that work to your advantage.

5 Clarity is key

Keep your messaging simple, and avoid confusing potential customers by including multiple calls-to-action (or copy that could be interpreted as another call-to-action). Make sure you’re making it absolutely clear what it is you want readers to do upon see-



ing your ad. All of the information present in your ad should follow a very distinct hierarchy, from the most important to the least. Usually (but not always) the most important thing will be your call to action. Once you've convinced readers to follow through, they'll make the effort to read your contact information. If you're not convinced, try removing all but one element of your ad, for example your logo, your address, your offer, your call-to-action. In most cases, it'll probably be your logo or your brand name. At least in that case a customer could look you up — a phone number on its own isn't very likely to gain the same reaction.

Once you've stripped your ad down that far, add back the second most important item, then the third, and so on. Chances are, your audience won't have the attention span for more than three to five items, so make sure to make your point with those. If you have more to say, do it in another ad.

A few more thoughts

We're just seeing the tip of the iceberg when it comes to ad copy here, but calls-to-action are some of the most important bits of copy you'll write, and a lot of these tips are valid across media. Here are a few more things to consider.

Keep it brief: After reading all these tips, it may be tempting to write an extra-long call-to-action to jam in your action, no-obligation assurance, emotional appeal, emphasis of scarcity, and your clearly defined hierarchy, but it's



important to remember above all else to keep this brief. Consumers, even those who are consumers of books and newspapers and other printed materials, tend not to

read the majority of advertising copy. If you've gone past 10-15 words, chances are you've lost them.

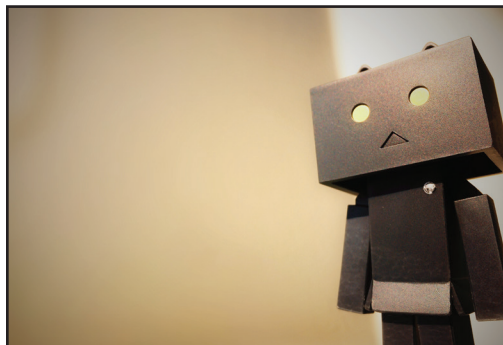
Make sure you can respond: It does you no good if your call-to-action says to “call now to take advantage of this offer” if the people answering the phone don't know what the offer is! If you're directing people to your website, make sure you have a landing page and that it has been tested. Whatever the offer is, make sure you're ready for customers when they come calling.



Consider connotation: It's up to you whether you want to go positive, or go negative. Are you reinforcing what's good about your offer, or highlighting the negatives to be avoided? Phrases like “don't miss” or

“no offer can beat this” or even “end your back troubles today,” can be effective, but “don't,” “no” and “end” all have negative connotations, and can subconsciously affect perceptions of your brand. As always, there are no hard-and-fast rules, and you may find it more desirable to play on those negatives, but it might be worthwhile to step back from your piece and spin things in a more positive light.

Maybe you don't need one: In most cases it's vitally important to have a call-to-action, but occasionally (for example in branding ads, where you're simply trying to establish your presence in the market) a call to action isn't



necessary, and leaving it out can help to declutter your ad and make it stand out on the page. There are no hard-and-fast rules in advertising, so feel free to experiment and discover what works best for you, your brand, and your campaigns.

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