



Developing a stronger HVAC ad campaign

by Bill Krueger, SKSW Inc. – June 2009

Trade publications are filled with ads promoting HVAC products to the commercial marketplace. Unfortunately, not all of these ads are as effective as they could be.

The building construction business as a whole is a complicated one. Driven by multiple influences from technology to geography, to intended use and market conditions – everything is different, by design. This makes it challenging to pinpoint one main audience for an ad campaign. Often ads try to cover multiple targets or messages, but without one intended audience in mind, they run the risk of not speaking directly to anyone.

One key to success is knowing where you are in the selling cycle, and understanding how that cycle changes for different products and markets. Some products get pulled through the cycle, while others are pushed. Ads that have a consumer-driven design will be wasted on engineers, contractors and distributors. They are aware of what might make the product attractive to the end user, but it's not necessarily their motivation. Depending upon the product, you may need to focus on one group, or all of them. And the sell may be very different.

The challenge of change.

What prompted this article was watching the “mini-split” manufacturers and their various ad design approaches in industry trade magazines. Mini-split applications generally require re-thinking typical U.S. building design from the physical structure to the contractor skill set, first cost and even user acceptance. Instead of distributing centrally conditioned air, the concept distributes conditioning capacity and control to the local zone, using refrigerant distribution.

The products are gaining share, but the manufacturers would no doubt like more. Despite improvements in energy efficiency, the comforts of zoning and continuous airflow, and even the convenience of remote control, according to some distributors, they are still meeting resistance. So they are keeping the pressure on, advertising with relatively high frequency.

Differences of opinion.

One manufacturer has taken an architectural design direction in their ads, with minimal product information beyond benefit statements. Another company has tried different directions, starting with a consumer direction that seemed an extension of their presence on another continent. Perhaps realizing that this was a market-changing product, they moved to what now appears a more typical engineer sell.



Another has successfully (author's opinion) addressed, in one ad, one main engineering objection head-on, with a clever headline and pointed copy. Unfortunately, subsequent ads have such a different look, they don't really look like the same company, which can weaken brand recognition. Another company targets just the school market. The differences in style and substance continue across all the manufacturers. Which ones inspire the right people? Some distributors I've spoken with think much of the advertising is off the mark.

What's the right approach?

In order to determine the right approach, your creative team should first understand the market for the product. In our case, I would conclude after reviewing product data and discussions with some distributors and manufacturers, that the primary market is light or mid-range commercial structures, select vertical markets like schools, and residential (which I am not looking at here).

Second, your team should understand who is making or influencing the buy decision, and their issues. Design-build contractors would be a likely answer for the office building market. They are probably working for an owner-developer that is interested in leasing the building quickly, and possibly selling when the time and money are right. The owner-developer wants a building that is attractive, and doesn't cost much to build or run. That will improve chances of high lease rates and profitability.

Adaptability would probably be an important topic to address, as tenants change and move with the tide. The design-build probably has in-house engineering with lots of rooftop experience. An architect may be involved in the initial design stages, but as a sub to the design-build.

For the school market, the architect probably plays a bigger role, and most of the drivers are similar, except tenant change-outs. Low total cost, emphasis on energy savings, and low sound levels are more important.

Focus on the target(s).

So who do we appeal to? Owner, architect, engineer or contractor? For office buildings, the owner's probably driving, but working in conjunction with or following the lead of a trusted design-build contractor. If the design-build tells the owner that a ducted rooftop system will work well, be reliable, economical and flexible as tenant requirements change, it will win the day. If the design-build shows the owner how he can utilize mini-split technology to reach those same goals, he could win that day, too.

Additional markets, especially large ones like schools, deserve targeted campaigns. Unless most or all of the issues are strongly shared, avoid trying to address them with the same campaign. It will muddy the message, and mean less to either target audience.



And then we address the issues.

Advertising has always been about solving someone's problems. In the office building case, keep in mind what the owner-developer wants. Expectations of comfort and reliability are givens, although these points shouldn't be ignored. Energy efficiency is a plus. We might determine that design flexibility, adaptability and cost are where the focus should be.

If there are elephants in the room, don't ignore them. No doubt, there are factions at work – people resist change, especially when it changes their job. What are the objections? Certainly, there is refrigerant piping involved, as opposed to ductwork. That's a big change. You see a mini-split (or ceiling cassette) in every room that's bigger than a grille and makes noise. That's a change. There may be a first cost increase. These and other issues should be tackled at some point in the campaign. Smart readers will notice when you avoid them, and dependent upon market conditions, this can reduce an ad's credibility.

Did we succeed?

If you know your market, understand the concerns of your potential audience and how your product addresses their concerns, and you state this creatively through your advertising, you can develop a message that works.

Of course there are other elements – the creativity of your campaigns (think design for getting noticed, name or theme retention, and word of mouth), the frequency with which ads appear, the coordination of multiple elements (web campaigns, direct marketing, trade shows, etc.) – it's all important. Knowing where you are in the selling cycle, and addressing the message, creativity and delivery to that target, is key to all of it.

Final thoughts on creating an effective ad.

The most effective ads make one strong point, and support that point with concise and relevant images and copy. In our fast paced world, it's unlikely that your target audience will read every word written on the ad—especially if it's weighted down with too much information. Your company's Web site, sales sheets and technical documents should always supplement your advertising efforts. They offer a much better place to discuss more details.

Your ad should essentially accomplish two goals—it should strengthen your overall brand image by introducing new or important information that addresses a need of your identified target, and it should motivate your prospect to call or go to your company's Web site for more information. Keep these points in mind, and you'll develop a better ad campaign.

Question or comments? Let me know your thoughts. Email: bkruieger@sksw.com