Types of Television Commercials

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To the typical television viewer, commercials may seem easy to prepare. That’s almost never the case, however. A television commercial whose message grabs the viewer’s attention and is remembered requires careful planning, writing, and production. Gimmicks alone won’t sell. The mind best remembers an idea that is presented in an interesting, cohesive, and relevant manner. That’s where careful preparation comes into play.

Your primary task as a television copywriter is to interest the viewer in each spot you write. Your task is somewhat easier than that of the radio copywriter because you can use both sight and sound. But simply pointing a television camera at a person or object usually doesn’t produce an effective sales pitch. You must structure the video and audio so that the message involves the viewer and sells the product or service.

If the commercial you’ve written is weak—if it’s uninteresting, confusing, or poorly defined—you’ll have lost your sales opportunity. But viewers don’t have to leave the room to miss a commercial message. They can simply pay limited attention to a spot that doesn’t involve them. You must strive for viewer involvement with each spot you write. In this chapter, we’ll examine what you must do to organize and structure a television commercial that will interest and involve the viewer.

◆ The Copy Platform

To write a cohesive television spot, you need to know as much as possible about the client or service. Whom does the firm want to reach? What geographic area does it want to cover? What are the product’s main selling points? Who are the principal competitors, and what approaches do they use? Gather as much information as you can. To avoid being overwhelmed, develop a copy platform that helps you identify the most important items for your sales theme.

As you’ll recall from our discussion in Chapter 7, the sales theme is the key to a persuasive message. The message can be especially effective if it is developed as a sales slogan, a memorable idea presented in an original phrase. A sales slogan helps viewers recall the advertiser or product name and its selling features. Television can present the sales slogan aurally or visually, or in both ways. A carefully developed sales slogan can be your best aid for recall.

◆ Choosing the Approach

After you’ve analyzed your material and planned your sales theme, you’ll be ready to choose an approach for delivering the information. The approach is the blueprint, the pattern you follow in presenting your sales message. This is the last phase of your planning, and it requires care because choosing the proper style is crucial to creating an effective commercial.

Television spots, like radio spots, may be either hard sell or soft sell. Hard sell, you’ll recall, refers to direct selling of the client’s product or service, and soft-sell spots use an understated, suggestive approach to create a positive image of the client or the products. Only a few basic styles or approaches are used in television commercials, though there are many variations. We’ll stick to six of the most common styles of television spots. They work equally well for local or national copywriters.

Note that the approaches overlap. Almost all spots, for example, include a problem, a solution, and a result. Nevertheless, you should adopt one style as your primary method of presentation. You’ll find that choosing an approach will focus your thinking and help you to write a spot that will be noticed. Note also that although we use the
terms *style* and *approach*, other professionals use such terms as *technique, format, or structure*. The words *style* and *approach* seem most helpful to us in describing ways of organizing commercial data.

**The Problem–Solution Approach**

One of the most common types of TV commercial is the problem–solution spot. This approach has been used successfully for a variety of products. It works best when the qualities of the product can be demonstrated. A situation might be part of the spot, but it should be subordinate to the problem–solution approach.

Here are some characteristics of an effective problem–solution commercial:

- The problem identified in the spot must be believable. Whether it is bad breath or water spots on fine crystal, it must be a problem the target audience can relate to. If the problem isn’t one the viewer has experienced, heard about, or wants to avoid, the commercial could be offensive.
- The product must be introduced as a natural, realistic solution to the problem. Too many gimmicks or incredible solutions do little for the credibility of the product. The product’s ability to solve the problem and the manner of presentation must seem reasonable to the viewer.
- The product should be introduced as a solution to the problem, and the solution should show the user experiencing benefits or achieving satisfaction after using the product. That is the high point of this type of commercial. The user may feel better because he or she has solved an annoying problem, saved money, or increased his or her status. Just as the problem must be believable, the demonstration of benefits must also relate to something familiar to the viewer.
- The name of the product or service must be identified clearly, and it must be associated with the problem the product claims to solve.

The Bank Atlantic commercial in Figure 11.1 illustrates a consumer problem. The problem is evident, and the business is easily identified as the solution to the problem.

**The Demonstration Approach**

The demonstration spot is one of the mainstays of television because it draws on TV’s greatest strength—its ability to show the product being used. It is easiest to demonstrate functioning products like a lawnmower or a reclining rocker. But products whose operation is not observable, like a flashlight battery or an animal flea collar, can also be demonstrated, although it takes more imagination. If a demonstration is properly implemented, it can involve the viewer in the commercial message and provide convincing reasons to buy the product.

Follow these rules in using a demonstration in a commercial:

1. Be certain the significance of the demonstration is clear to the viewer. If you think viewers might not understand, tell them what you plan to do before you do it.
2. Get to the point quickly. Avoid complicated dialog or situations.
3. Write more video than audio into a demonstration spot. The video portion of your spot must be strong because it carries the demonstration. Check your final draft. If the point of the demonstration isn’t clear from the video portion alone, rework the spot.
4. Use closeup and extreme closeup shots to enhance the demonstration. Let the viewer see the product as he or she would see it in person. Don’t show parts of the product that are too small for the camera to show clearly.
FIGURE 11.1  Problem-Solution Commercial (Courtesy Philip E. Cohen, Harris-Drury-Cohen)
5. Don’t use a lot of technical jargon in the audio portion of the script. Show the viewer how the product works.

6. If possible, show the demonstration from beginning to end. Don’t cut away unless necessary. Cuts may create doubts in the viewer’s mind and draw attention from the sales message. If you must cut away—for example, to suggest passage of time—tell the viewer what you’re doing. Don’t make the viewer guess about your use of the cutaway.

7. Keep your message simple and direct. A complicated message and a complicated demonstration won’t be remembered.

8. Be certain the product name is displayed prominently. Use the demonstration to show the benefits the viewer might realize from using the product.

9. Prove that the claims for the product are true. Use the demonstration to show the product doing what you’ve promised.

The Heat ‘n Strip spot in Figure 11.2 both shows and tells the audience what the demonstration will do. Note that the visual portion alone is strong enough that it could carry the spot by itself. Extreme closeup shots are used to show the product at work. A concluding shot offers proof that the product works by showing a beautifully restored mantle. The product name is clearly established at the beginning and end of the spot.

The Rubbermaid spot in Figure 11.3 is a somewhat different demonstration. This spot, appropriately titled the “Torture Test,” demonstrates the durability of Rubbermaid products. Even with the abuse the product takes, it bounces back into shape. Notice here that the camera shots are wider than in the Heat ‘n Strip spot because it was necessary to show a bigger product and more pronounced action.

The Situation Approach

The situation commercial tells a story that establishes a reason for the presence of the product. The story, sometimes called a slice of life, must have a simple plot that can be easily understood. For example, boy meets girl in laundry room. They share a washer and use her detergent because his leaves ring-around-the-collar. The detergent solves that problem. Boy asks girl for date. She declines.

A carefully developed story can gain attention and involve the viewer in the situation. If viewers find the story believable, they will probably feel that the product will work as well for them as it did for the characters in the story. Here are some guidelines for writing situation commercials:

1. Develop a situation that is logical, believable, and easy to follow. Zany, unrealistic situations aren’t appropriate. Even though almost anything goes on TV, the situation must be plausible. You’ll have less than a minute to develop the situation, so you must keep it simple. The situation is the key to the spot. Present the product subtly.

2. Use the opening of your story to attract attention and involve viewers. The opening sets the stage for the rest of the spot, often by introducing a problem.

3. Use the middle of your story to elaborate on the situation, usually by introducing the product as a solution to the problem.

4. In the final stage, have the product solve the problem. The situation concludes with the characters displaying the satisfaction they’ve achieved from the product.

5. Be sure to develop the situation logically. Each step must relate to the one that precedes it and the one that follows it.

6. Present the product in a way that promises a beneficial result—the viewer will be healthier, more secure, more confident, and so forth.

7. Identify the product name clearly.
**Figure 11.2** Demonstration Commercial (Courtesy Michael L. Ianzito/Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, Inc.)

Client: BLACK & DECKER  
Time: 30 SECONDS

Product: HEAT 'N STRIP  
Title: "MANTLE"  
Comml. No.: BKPT 4023

- Somewhere in this room is a beautiful antique.
- hidden under layer upon layer of paint.
- Now Black & Decker will find it with Heat 'n Strip

- the remarkable paint stripper that works with hot air, not caustic chemicals.
- Heat 'n Strip bubbles away years of paint
- with less work

- and a lot less mess.
- It makes all other ways of stripping paint antique.
- Heat 'n Strip...It's built like a Black & Decker.
The Aetna commercial in Figure 11.4 uses a believable setting. The client’s name is introduced early and logically. The situation is developed to show a happy event—the wedding—with the father of the bride displaying satisfaction because he’s used Aetna’s services.

The Spokesperson Approach

In a spokesperson commercial, an individual delivers the sales message on camera. It’s a common approach both nationally and locally (where automotive dealers seem to love it). Advertisers often use the spokesperson approach because they feel that consumers will respond to a commercial if they identify with the personality or admire the person delivering the message.

A spokesperson may be a well-known person who endorses the product or service, or a person who claims to have used the product and cites personal experience in the form of a testimonial. Most of the factors in choosing a spokesperson are the same in television as they are in radio. However, there is one difference: the television spokesperson is seen, not just heard. This factor adds a visual concern that can bear on the credibility of the spokesperson.

The spokesperson must be appropriate to the product or service and look and sound sincere. A beautiful actress may be a suitable spokesperson for a line of cosmetics, but the
30-Second Television Commercial Titled: “THE WEDDING”

FATHER OF THE BRIDE
He’s not the father of the bride. I am.

He’s my &tna Agent. I met him when my Susie was her size. And my business wasn’t much bigger.

From day one, he’s worried as much about my business as I have.

Do I have enough insurance? Or too much insurance? Do I have the right insurance?

Thanks to him, I’m free to worry about other things.

Like how I’m gonna pay for all this.

AVO: Call your &tna Agent.

FATHER: &tna, I’m glad I met ya!

FIGURE 11.4 Situation Commercial (Courtesy &tna Life and Casualty)
same person would probably be wrong in a spot for vacuum cleaners. You must decide what kind of person is appropriate for the product you’re selling, whether it is someone characterized by warmth, humor, glamour, or authority. Here are some guidelines:

1. Describe the person before you write the commercial. What do you want the person to look and sound like?
2. Prepare the copy with your spokesperson in mind. Write for his or her style of delivery. Write copy that seems extemporaneous and can be delivered conversationally.
3. Show and mention the advertiser’s name or product throughout the spot. If the name isn’t mentioned prominently, the spokesperson may upstage the product.
4. Keep the spot straightforward. Movement and shot changes should be minimal. Focus on the person and his or her presentation of the sales message.

The spokesperson commercial in Figure 11.5 is a buyer’s guide that gives consumer information. The presentation uses an anonymous actor who appears knowledgeable and serious. The spot presents information that consumers may not know. The advertiser’s name is presented prominently in both the audio and video portions of the commercial.

**The Product-as-Star Approach**

In this format, the product is the star of the commercial. The product is displayed prominently and naturally and is made to appear irresistible.

This approach works well for any product or group of products you wish to put on display. It’s a favorite for dairy products, other food items, and soft drinks. If the budget permits, the audio portion will often be a musical background. The commercial may include live-action shots of people enjoying the product. Here’s how to make the product the star:

1. Present the sales message with restraint. Hard-sell terms such as *hurry* or *buy now* are best avoided. Use the suggestive approach and build the spot around the sales theme.
2. Use realistic settings and a simple, straightforward message. The advertiser wants the product to be remembered, so the setting should not upstage it. The audio portion shouldn’t be complex either, and it should reinforce the video.
3. Use closeup and extreme closeup shots of the product to strengthen the video. Such shots give the viewer the best view of the product and enhance its appearance.
4. Show happy, satisfied people enjoying themselves as they use the product. Make the results of using the product seem rewarding.
5. Explain the characteristics of the product: Communicate its taste, feel, appearance, or other features. Show these characteristics when they appear in the audio.
6. Emphasize the name of the product.

The T.J. Cinnamons commercial in Figure 11.6 features a cinnamon bun up close and in color. A musical jingle that accompanies pictures of the product further focuses attention. Lighting, setting, and the choice of music and announcer are all important in making the cinnamon bun star of the spot.

**The Direct-Response Approach**

A direct-response spot tries to persuade the viewer to order a product directly from the advertiser, either by mailing in a coupon or calling a telephone number. Direct-response spots are very popular on both television and cable, with the telephone response (usually featuring an advertiser’s toll-free number) being the most common.
**Figure 11.5**

Spokesperson Commercial (Courtesy Eckerd Drugs)

**ECKerd**

**“PRIVATE LABEL GUARANTEE”**

**TV:30**

MAC OC: Store brands. There are hundreds of them. And they’re not all the same.

In fact there’s one that’s tested to such high quality national brand standards . . . it comes with a guarantee.

Eckerd Brand. If you’re ever dissatisfied with any Eckerd Brand product . . .

we’ll replace it with the comparable national brand tree.

With a guarantee that strong, we have to make sure Eckerd Brand is as good as you can buy. Period.

If your store brand isn’t guaranteed . . . ask yourself why? Eckerd Brand products. You’re going to like them. We guarantee it.

W.B. Doner and Company Advertising
Types of Television Commercials

**Figure 11.6** Product-as-Star Commercial (Courtesy Philip E. Cohen, Harris-Drury-Cohen)
Direct-response spots are often per-inquiry advertisements. That means the station or cablecaster is paid for each response. These spots hit hard and use every possible inducement to get the viewer to respond. They may advertise an unbelievable kitchen tool, an album of songs by a favorite singer, magazine subscriptions, or jewelry. Direct response spots are often as long as two minutes in length. Here are some guidelines for writing a direct-response spot:

1. **Remember that the video is key.** You must show the product at its best. If you’re selling records, the artist should be seen and heard. Show household or shop tools doing as many jobs as you can put into the spot. Jewelry should be made to look attractive and durable. Show the product in as many appealing settings as possible. Make the offer appear desirable.

2. **Don’t ridicule the product.** As a writer, you should be aware of the product’s limitations. For example, are some of the record cuts made from worn masters? Will the tool work only for one adept at woodwork? If you’ve accepted the job of writing such spots, you have an ethical responsibility to write a positive message for the client even if you know the shortcomings of the product. Direct-response writing is not for the squeamish or the uninitiated. Some direct-marketing companies sell products of questionable value. Others sell quality items at real savings. A few direct-marketing companies are careless about quality and provide little customer assistance. Others are ethical and make every effort to resolve problems. Writing spots for an unscrupulous direct-marketing firm will certainly test your integrity.

3. **Reach for the impulse buyer.** Direct-response spots seek the person who buys on impulse. It’s your job to make such a person grab the phone. Stress that this is a limited offer, that credit cards are welcome, that the item can’t be found in stores, and that operators are standing by. Repeat the phone number at least three times. Make the offer appear so good that viewers won’t want to pass it up.

The photo board in Figure 11.7 illustrates a direct-response spot. It presents a product that can be effectively advertised on TV.

**Variations on Six Themes**

As we noted earlier, you can devise other approaches or use variations of the six we’ve covered here. For example, humor can be injected into many approaches, such as a situation approach, a problem–solution approach, and possibly a spokesperson approach. Animation could be considered a separate approach, but it can be adapted to any of the styles we’ve discussed. Tony the Tiger, for instance, is a spokesperson for a product.

You might also use an institutional approach. An institutional commercial is designed to enhance the image of the company and to build goodwill toward it. This form of advertising, which is related to the public-service announcement, does not promote specific products or urge the viewer to go to a store or dealer. Instead, it informs viewers about the company’s achievements, standards, and activities. Institutional commercials are a favorite of the major oil companies.

The spot in Figure 11.8 is an institutional commercial used by an aerospace company. The commercial does not sell a specific product but generates goodwill for the company by illustrating a service that the company provides.

A final reminder: Before you begin writing a television spot, try to imagine what it will look like. This point cannot be stressed enough. It’s your responsibility as a copywriter to visualize what the spot will actually look like when it’s on tape or on the air. If you need help, use a storyboard sketch, or have a colleague critique your first draft.
Either way, be certain the visual elements of your spot will be appealing to the viewer. Television is a visual medium, and if the video portion of your commercial is weak, the entire spot is likely to be ineffective.

One way to give a spot visual strength is to write the visual portion before you write the audio portion. If the video portion will carry the message by itself, you’ll know that you have a good television spot. Audio can be added as needed.
FIGURE 11.8 Institutional Commercial (Courtesy John H. Boyd, Jr., Martin Marietta Aerospace)
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A spot must have a structure that involves the viewer and sells the product or service.

The problem–solution approach lets you depict a realistic problem and show someone solving it with the product.

The demonstration approach lets you show the benefits of the product in action.

A situation commercial tells a story that establishes a reason for the presence of the product.

The spokesperson approach uses either a well-known person to endorse a product or an unknown person who claims to have used the product and delivers a testimonial for it.

The product-as-star approach seeks to display the product prominently and make it appear irresistible.

A direct-response spot persuades the viewer to order something directly from the advertiser. In this type of spot, the visuals must be very strong.

An institutional approach is designed to enhance the client's image and build goodwill.
EXERCISES

Exercise 1
Write a 30-second problem-solving television spot using the following facts: Yourtown Urgent Care Clinic wants to publicize their services. They provide a walk-in clinic; appointments are not needed. Experienced physicians and nurses are on duty from 8 A.M. to 10 P.M. seven days a week. The address is 2334 North 14th St.

Appeal to working people who need the flexibility and convenience of a walk-in clinic but who still want quality treatment. Illustrate how the target audience might solve a problem by using this clinic. Be sure to show people responding to the benefits of going to the clinic and establish the business name clearly.

Prepare a storyboard that illustrates the spot to accompany your script.

Exercise 2
Grandma’s Home-Style Ice Cream has a new flavor, Butter Up. This new flavor combines butterscotch and walnut. Stress that Grandma’s ice cream is made with real cream and does not contain artificial ingredients. Grandma’s picture is on the label.

Write a 30-second product-as-star television spot for Grandma’s Butter Up Ice Cream. The product should be the star of this commercial. Devise a slogan for use in the spot.

Prepare a storyboard that illustrates your spot to accompany your script.

Exercise 3
Write a 60-second television commercial in which you compare two products. Compare a new cold remedy, Kwikure, with an established product, Cold-Eeze. Both products eliminate nasal congestion from common colds. They stop runny nose, sneezing, and watery eyes. However, Kwikure is effective for up to 14 hours. Cold-Eeze works for 4 to 6 hours.

Prepare a straightforward comparison of the features of the two products. Show that Kwikure is clearly superior.

Prepare a storyboard that illustrates your spot to accompany your script.

Exercise 4
Prepare a 30-second situational television spot for the Rapid Fire Microwave Oven. Be certain the spot tells a story with a definite plot. Don’t dwell on details. Instead, use the story to introduce the microwave oven in a believable setting. You may wish to base your situation on some of the following features of microwave ovens: They are good for preparing light meals (a portion of lasagna) or quick snacks (a hot dog) or for heating leftovers. They’re also good for defrosting frozen foods. Microwaves don’t heat up the kitchen, and they usually cook foods faster than a conventional range can. Your goal is to create a situation in which the Rapid Fire Microwave Oven is used for one or more of these reasons.

Prepare a storyboard to accompany your script.
Exercise 5

The Dynamic Corporation has produced a new battery-operated shoe shiner called the Ezeshine. It’s about the size of a hair dryer and comes with brushes of different textures. Because of its size and portability, it can be used anywhere. It operates on four “D”-size batteries.

Write a 30-second television commercial that demonstrates the shoe shiner in action. Your goal is to show what the product can do, so don’t spend time developing a situation.
Prepare a storyboard to accompany the script.

Exercise 6

Write another 30-second television spot for the Rapid Fire Microwave Oven. Choose an appropriate spokesperson to demonstrate the features of the oven. Develop a sales theme that includes the product name. Use the sales theme prominently in the spot. Use a balance of audio and video to present the sales theme.
Prepare a storyboard to accompany your script.

Exercise 7

Write a 90-second direct-response television spot to sell the following product: a Special Forces men’s wristwatch. The features of this watch are as follows:

1. Perpetual calendar displays month and date, along with hour, minute, and second, automatically.

2. Pushbutton illumination lights dial electronically.

3. Stopwatch feature for timing sports, phone calls, and so on.


5. Rugged flexible band and recessed chronoface reduce chance of scrapes and scratches.

6. The price is $49.95.

7. Watch and band are of stainless steel.

Order the watch by calling toll-free 1-800-123-4321. All credit cards accepted. No postage or handling costs on phone orders. Customers can order by mail. Include additional $6.95 for postage and handling. The address is “Wristwatch,” Box 001, Downtown, New York, 10001. Satisfaction guaranteed. If not satisfied, return within 30 days for full refund. Special offer: Customers ordering now will get a free surprise gift.
Exercise 1

STORYBOARD

Video: Video: Video:
Audio: Audio: Audio:
Video: Video: Video:
Audio: Audio: Audio:
Video: Video: Video:
Audio: Audio: Audio:
Exercise 2

STORYBOARD

Video:        Video:        Video:
Audio:        Audio:        Audio:
Video:        Video:        Video:
Audio:        Audio:        Audio:
Video:        Video:        Video:
Audio:        Audio:        Audio:
Exercise 3

STORYBOARD

Video:  Video:  Video:

Audio:  Audio:  Audio:

Video:  Video:  Video:

Audio:  Audio:  Audio:

Video:  Video:  Video:

Audio:  Audio:  Audio:
Exercise 4

STORYBOARD

Video:

Audio:

Video:

Audio:

Video:

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Video:

Audio:
Exercise 5

STORYBOARD
Exercise 6

STORYBOARD

Video:  Video:  Video:

Audio:  Audio:  Audio:

Video:  Video:  Video:

Audio:  Audio:  Audio:

Video:  Video:  Video:

Audio:  Audio:  Audio: