

17 Ways to Get Inside Your Client's Mind So You'll Always Hit Your Target Audience

By John Wood

Trash, trash, trash ...

That's how Drew Eric Whitman describes 99% of today's advertising in the preface of his book *Cashvertising*.

He calls the overwhelming bulk of advertising "dumb, boring, weak and not worth the paper it's printed on."

He reminds us that the purpose of advertising is not to make the reader sit back and say to themselves, "Wow, great ad!" but to get people to act now. More specifically, to part with their money.

He says the reason why most advertising today is lousy is simply because most people "don't know a damned thing about what makes people buy." They like to be "cutesy and clever" – to win awards for creativity to boost their egos while in turn waste thousands of dollars of their client's money.

Now if this sounds a bit harsh, he's really just echoing the words of legendary advertising man David Ogilvy.

Ogilvy once said, "Ninety-nine percent of advertising doesn't sell much of anything at all."

On the cover of *Cashvertising*, Whitman promises to reveal more than "100 Secrets of Ad-Agency Psychology to Make Big Money Selling Anything to Anyone."

Today I thought I'd take a look at 17 of those secrets Whitman says will help you get inside your reader's head – helping ensure you always write copy that hits the mark with your reader:

1.

The Fear Factor: Selling the Scare – As any [good copywriter](#) knows, fear is an excellent way to motivate your reader into taking action. Whitman references a study done by Pratkanis and Aronson in 2001 (*Age of Propaganda*), which lists four conditions required to make fear most effective:

1.

What you write scares the hell out of people.

2. You offer a specific recommendation for overcoming the fear-aroused threat.

3. The recommended action is perceived as effective for reducing the threat.
4. The message recipient believes that he or she can perform the recommended action.

All four of the above components must be present in order to make your "fear strategy" successful.

Whitman cautions not to overdo it. If you instill too much fear into people, it could end up paralyzing them into inaction.

The most important thing, of course, is your reader must believe that what you're promoting has the power to alleviate their fears.

2.

Ego Morphing: Instant Identification – Of course, as well as extinguishing one or more of our fears, we also buy to boost up our ego. It's why back when cigarette companies were allowed to advertise, the Marlboro Man was so successful. Men identified with his masculine, rugged good looks and felt by smoking that particular brand of cigarettes they would be seen as having those qualities too.

As Pratkanis and Aronson say in their *Age of Propaganda* study:

"By purchasing the 'right stuff,' we (the consumer) enhance our own egos and rationalize away our inadequacies."

The four "ego" areas of life we respond to most are physical attractiveness, intelligence, economic success and sexual prowess.

Whitman adds that "we buy products to publicize the image we hold of ourselves."

3.

Transfer: Credibility by Osmosis – Here Whitman talks about the importance of associating your product or service with one or more respected organizations (or people). By doing so, you're able to tap into the goodwill they've built up. For example, for something related to the home, having the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on your product can instantly boost its credibility.

For online marketing, displaying the Better Business Bureau logo on your site will help put people's minds at ease when it comes to dealing with you. And to make your users feel more secure, you could also display security logos such as VeriSign and McAfee Secure.

4.

The Bandwagon Effect: Give Them Something to Jump On – Human beings have a powerful psychological need to belong. Abraham Maslow says the need to belong is third only to our physiological needs (food, clothing, and shelter) and our safety needs (security, stability, and freedom from fear).

There are three primary types of groups according to psychologists:

1. Aspiration – Groups to which you'd like to belong
2. Associative – Groups that share your ideals and values
3. Dissociative – Groups to which you do not want to belong

One of the reasons using a celebrity is so effective is people see an opportunity for themselves to belong to the same group as that celebrity. What kid wouldn't want to wear the same running shoes as Michael Jordan or use the same tennis racket as Roger Federer?

An advertising campaign launched by Pepsi back in 1963 is a great example of using the bandwagon/group effect. Their Pepsi Generation campaign was aimed at the younger, hipper generation, while Coke drinkers suddenly found themselves as the older, less cool generation.

Whitman writes that if your product lends itself to our need "to belong," make an effort to tell your prospects "how buying your product makes them (inspirational), keeps them (associative), or helps them show the world that they're not part of a particular group (dissociative)."

5.

The Means-End Chain: The Critical Core – Whitman reminds us that it's important to keep in mind that your prospect buys your product for what it will do for them tomorrow. So it's your job to remind him or her of the other benefits they will get. Any copy or images should always represent the positive end results.

An example he uses is the reason why a real estate agent might buy a Lexus. They want to be viewed as being super successful so people will feel confident listing their home with them.

For copywriters, this is pretty standard stuff. It's essentially talking up not just the benefits but the deeper benefits. For example, when someone buys a Rolex watch, they're buying it to tell time, but more importantly, they're buying it to let the world know how successful they are.

6.

The Transtheoretical Model: Persuasion Step by Step – There are five stages of the Transtheoretical Model:

1. Precontemplation – At this stage, people are unfamiliar with your product.
2. Contemplation – People are aware of your product and have considered using it.
3. Preparation – People are thinking of buying your product but want more information about it.
4. Action – The person actually buys your product.
5. Maintenance – Your product or products have become a part of your customers' everyday lives.

A company's challenge is to move consumers through all five stages until, for the consumer, using a product or service becomes a habit.

Whitman says there are two ways to do this: 1) create ads that address all five stages, or 2) create a series of ads over a period of time that takes consumers through the five stages.

For copywriters, being aware of these five stages would come in handy when [writing an autoresponder series of emails](#). You simply write a series of emails that take your reader through each stage of the "transtheoretical" sales cycle.

7.

The Inoculation Theory: Make Them Prefer You for Life – Whitman calls it the "Inoculation Theory," but a more apt description might be "launching a pre-emptive strike against your competition."

Politicians do this all the time. It's often called arguing by using a "straw man". It goes along the following lines: "Some people will tell you that the only way to do this is to do that, but I'm standing in front of you here today to simply say that it's definitely not the case".

Whitman uses the example of an auto body shop who might say something like this: "Our competitors will tell you that the little dent in your fender costs over \$1,000 to fix. They'll quote you \$800 to replace your windshield because of that tiny chip in the glass. What they don't tell you is there are money "insider" secrets to our business for getting these jobs done for a fraction of the cost. For example ... "

8.

Belief Re-ranking: Change Their Reality – For most copywriters, this is pretty standard stuff. Whitman writes that the most successful way to strengthen your prospect's current beliefs is through factual evidence (statistics, reports, studies, testimonials) or by using everyday examples (success stories, case studies).

He cautions us to avoid negative reactions from our reader. For example, don't come right out and say, "Milk is healthier than soda." Instead, present images and examples regarding the health risks of soda, and contrast it to evidence that suggests the health benefits of milk. He stresses the importance that the conclusion the consumer comes to is one he came to on his own and not something forced on him.

9.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model: Adjust Their Attitude – Whitman suggests two routes to attitude change:

1.
The central route: This is where you persuade the reader, using logic, reasoning and deep thinking, using facts, stats, studies, reports and case histories; and ...
2. The peripheral route: This is where you persuade using pleasant thoughts and positive images.

Drawing a line between the two is certainly more applicable to newspaper and magazine advertising where you have limited space than to a full-blown sales letter. As copywriters, we usually use a combination of the two – with most [B2B copywriters](#) putting added emphasis on the central route.

10.

The 6 Weapons of Influence: Shortcuts to Persuasion – In his book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Robert Cialdini talks about the six cues of influence:

1.
Comparison – This is similar to #4, The Bandwagon Effect. No one wants to be left out. We all want to belong. So your goal is to make the reader think to himself, "Everybody else is doing it, why aren't I?"
2. Liking – No secret or surprise here. If you like a company or its representative, you're much more likely to buy from them. Whitman cites a study (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* by Down & Lyons [1991]) that found attractive people are perceived to be more trustworthy and likable than people who are somewhat less than attractive. He also points out that, contrary to popular belief, men are more attracted to pictures of other men, and women to pictures of other women. The reason for this is because our primary concern is ourselves; we identify more with people of our own sex.
3. Authority – If someone is a recognized authority figure such as a doctor, for example, we tend to trust them more.
4.
Reciprocation – It's been proven if you give away something for free, the person who you give it to will feel obliged to give something back to you. It could be something as simple as a compliment or a small, unexpected gift. As humans, we are compelled to want to return the favor. It's called the Law of Reciprocation.

Companies have used the Law of Reciprocity and experienced great results. For example, Les Schwab Tire Centers does over \$10 million in repairs a year for free. If you have a flat tire, pay them a visit and they'll fix it for free. Because of this dedication to meeting their customers' needs, last year their chain of 200 tire outlets did over \$1 billion in revenue.

Mad River Glen Ski Resort in Vermont offers free season passes to children under 12 with the purchase of an adult three-day (or season pass). Because of this, they won the National Ski Areas Association's "Best Program to Grow the Sport to New Participants" and revived their once dwindling base of family skiers.

5.

Commitment/Consistency – This is also known as the Four Walls technique because the idea is to box people in so they have nowhere else to go. You get people to take a stand on an issue.

Take this example from an earlier article I wrote about this technique:

"A researcher, posing as a volunteer, went door-to-door in California asking homeowners to agree to a preposterous request. The researcher asked people if they'd be willing to have an over-sized public service sign with the words 'DRIVE CAREFULLY' installed on their front yard. 83 percent refused. However, in another neighborhood, 76 percent of the people asked agreed to have the sign placed on their lawn.

"Why such a big difference?

"Two weeks earlier, a volunteer worker had come to their door and asked them to accept small three-inch square sign that said 'Be a safe driver'. Because of agreeing to comply with a small safe-driving request, over three quarters of them were willing to comply with the larger request two weeks later.

"Freedman and Fraser added another twist to the study.

"With another group of homeowners, instead of offering them a small 'Be a safe driver' sign, they went door-to-door and asked people if they'd be willing to sign a 'Keep California Beautiful' petition.

"When they went back two weeks later, approximately half of the people agreed to have the huge 'DRIVE CAREFULLY' sign installed on their front yard.

"At first Freedman and Fraser were bewildered, but then they realized that by signing the petition, people had changed their view of themselves. They now saw themselves as public-spirited citizens who acted on their civic principles.

"Two weeks later, they complied with the request to display the 'DRIVE CAREFULLY' sign in order to be consistent with their new self-image."

Whitman uses the following example of how to get people to take a stand. You start by asking them questions that they will say yes to:

"Are you afraid to walk the streets alone? Do you wish there was an easy way to protect yourself against muggers and other low-life scum who prey on innocent people? You know the ones I mean: The dirt bags who step right into your face and ask – threateningly - "you got some spare change?" Wouldn't it be great if there was a safe, effective and easy way to stop thugs cold at the push of a button? A way that gives you instant and total control over even the most savage 350-pound, drug-blitzed maniac who has the gall to try to intimidate – and possibly injure – you and your family? Introducing The Tesla Sizzler ... the world's first personal anti-mugging microwave force field."

6. Scarcity – If something is limited, we tend to want it more. Lines such as "one-day sale," "limited offer" and "only X number left" are useful in pushing people to action.

11.

Message Organization: Attaining Critical Clarity – You'd think this would be a given, but we've all seen advertisements that leave you scratching your head as to what exactly they're selling. To be effective, your message has to be communicated clearly. It must be organized in a way so it's easily and accurately understood.

12.

Examples vs. Statistics: And the Winner Is ... – Whitman asks us to read a couple of paragraphs that describe what the reader will experience when he drives a particular automobile. He then gives us a paragraph that just lists statistics about the car.

He concludes that the winner is the "experience" – because it appeals more to the reader's emotion, they relate more to reader's own experience, which means they can more easily comprehend it.

13.

Message Sideness: Dual-Role Persuasion – Whitman cites a study that found two-sided messages (ads that compare your side to a competitor's side head to head) are more effective than one-sided messages (ads that just present your side of the story) but only if you stick to the format of "defending your position while also attacking the competition (Allen, 1991)."

The key is to make it appear that your message is fair-minded and balanced. Here is the example he uses:

"Acme makes an excellent fly swatter, and they've been doing so for years. Heck, in the 1940s and '50s they were the most popular way to kill the pesky critters. And they did a darn good job back then. However, now it's the 21st century. And it's time to step up to full-scale fly-swatting automation, with our new RoboSwat Laser Powered Anti-fly Gun Turret. So easy and effective, it makes old-fashioned (and messy) swatters obsolete."

Another benefit of providing your reader with a comparison chart is that they often think to themselves the research has already been done for them. And the only thing left for them to do is buy.

14.

Repetition and Redundancy: the Familiarity Factor – Repetition is an important part of the sales process. Repeating your message can slowly turn disinterest into interest and eventually into a sale. With each repetition, your reader feels they know a little bit more about your product. This familiarity soon turns to acceptance and a greater comfort with you and your message –which turns into trust. Through repetition, small benefits can build into larger differences in the reader's mind.

But you have to use repetition wisely, says Whitman. Instead of running the same ad over again, which could cause consumer contempt, simply present the same message in different format with slightly different copy. This way the reader thinks he is being exposed to "multiple arguments from multiple sources."

15.

Rhetorical Questions: Interesting, Aren't They? – Whitman points out that rhetorical questions are statements disguised as questions. He says they allow advertisers to "make factual sounding possibly persuasive claims without having to support them with factual evidence or logical argument."

Examples he gives are Roloids and their "How do you spell relief?" question; and Dial Soap's "Aren't you glad you use Dial? Don't you wish everyone did?"

According to McCroskey (1986), rhetorical questions work because "when somebody asks us a question, it is required that we respond to it. To respond correctly requires that we understand the question."

However, not everyone agrees they work. Whitman cites studies where some say they work and some say they aren't that effective. So whether you use them really becomes a matter of personal preference.

Whitman ends by saying he feels that questions "designed to emphasize a point rather than to persuade, are likely to cause your audience to remember your message." Which, of course, is usually a good thing.

16. **Evidence: Quick! Sell Me the Facts!** – Whitman use #16 to drive home the point that your reader want to know "What's in it for me?" It's more or less the core principle behind copywriting. Tell your reader how they will benefit and back it up with facts, statistics and other evidence.

17.

Heuristics: Serving Billions of Lazy Brains Daily – Heuristics pronounced "hyu-RIS-tiks" is a derivative of a Greek word that means "to discover." Whitman says that "heuristics pertain to the process of gaining (or discovering) knowledge, not by critical thinking and reasoning, but by critical guesswork."

In 1999, researchers Stec and Bernstein defined three persuasion heuristics: 1) Length-Implies-Strength, 2) Liking-Agreement, and 3) Consensus-Implies-Correctness.

Because 2 and 3 were dealt with in Point # 10 in Robert Cialdini's six weapons of influence (liking and comparison), in Point #17 Whitman just deals with 1) Length-Implies-Strength.

The premise is that people are basically lazy and they're always looking for quick ways to arrive at a decision. So the idea presented is *more* is better than *less*. Long copy is better than short copy. Because people will draw a favorable conclusion if your copy is long. They'll say to themselves, "Wow ... look how much there is here. It must be true."

Of course, it's extremely difficult to write a great headline, lead or sale letter, etc. if you don't understand your target audience.

If you use Whitman's 17 Principles of Consumer Psychology as a checklist the next time you set out to write your next copy assignment, you can't help but have a better understanding of what makes your reader tick – and more importantly, what makes them buy.

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4 Responses to "17 Ways to Get Inside Your Client's Mind So You'll Always Hit Your Target Audience"

Wow! What a great and incredibly informative article. Just downloaded Cashvertising to my Kindle app.

Guest (Michael) – over a year ago

Lots of good juicy info here. Love your articles John, they are packed with great info and always give me ideas on how to make my writing stronger.

Guest (Cindy Cyr) – over a year ago

What a thoroughly comprehensive list. Thank you for sharing these insights. I got a little chuckle that in the middle of all that was #11 dealing simply with clarity. I find myself going over and over that teeny-tiny point! Much appreciated. I think I'm going to spend some time working on tapping the ego, sounds like something I've neglected and it could be fun! ~Susan

Guest (Susan Hamilton) – over a year ago

What superb thoughts -- I just couldn't read fast enough to see what more info there could be to help members with copy that's going to click. "Made a download copy to refer to when writing my own copy. Thanks for being part AWAI John and sharing, especially for a yours-truly newbie. This is a marvelous source of help and inspiration for writers of all ilk. Thank you ever so!

Guest (Elizabeth) – over a year ago

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