



The five truths of advertising in a membership directory

Your ad can only work if it is seen.

Is the directory the right medium for you?

BY BOB WEISS

Every year our clients are asked to advertise in printed association directories that, at first glance, appear to be perfectly targeted to referral source and clients. We think these ads are of questionable value, and do not recommend their purchase. Here's why:

- **Use of hard copy directories is in a significant decline.** Nearly all directories that are published are also available online at the association's Web site. While there are no studies we can cite regarding association directory usage, we do know that the most commonly used hard copy directories in the world, the telephone yellow and white pages, have seen their physical (but not online) use drop dramatically since the advent of the Internet. In fact, studies show that the majority of Internet searches are for phone numbers and physical addresses. The same is likely true for association directories that were once used extensively by members. Instead, members go to the association Web site or to online telephone directories, to get member numbers, e-mail links and physical addresses.

- **Your ad probably won't be seen by those using the directory.** An endemic problem with ads in hard copy, alphabetically-organized directories is that they appear in sections preceding or after the various alphabetical lists of members. If a user is looking up someone with a name beginning with **B**, how would they ever run across your firm's ad that appears after those members with a name ending in **S**? If your ad appears in the middle of the actual listings and is at the beginning or in the middle of the section of those



with names ending in **N**, unless the user is going to that section, they will never see your ad during the year.

- **Often associations organize ads to special sections tabbed into the back or front of the directory.** This makes no sense at all – it transforms a membership directory into a membership-directory-with-a-special-advertising-section attached (and which the publisher hopes members might refer to at some point.)

To every rule, of course, there are exceptions.

Two exceptions to consider with association directories are:

- **Buying an ad on the back cover – better an ad on the front cover, if it's allowed.** (Don't buy an ad on the directory's spine. We have surveyed hundreds of consumer law firms over the years, primarily firms practicing personal injury, which have spent millions of dollars for ads emblazoned on the spines of yellow and white page directories – we don't know exactly why, but ads on the spines of directories just don't generate a response.)

- **Negotiate the purchase of small billboard-like banner ads** on the top of, say, every 10th page in the directory. This means users will see a brief message about your firm as they use various alphabetical sections of the directory during the year. (This is a great idea, but eventually competitors see the value in it and want to do it, too. The coordination of placing ads at specific intervals becomes a nightmare for the publisher and leads the association to discontinue the program after a few years. But, it's worth a try if you can be first to suggest it to the association approaching you.)

Some firms will say, "Yes, but we want to support the association and view the directory ads as a contribution so we don't care that much about the return." We certainly understand your desire to support an association key to your firm's success (and we hope in which you actively participate). *But*, we recommend you buy advertising space in the association's periodical – the monthly newsletter or quarterly magazine – not in the membership directory.



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