



real-world logic vs. your ad agency: it's no contest

I knew exactly what to expect. In fact, I could have scripted the entire meeting word-for-word before we even started. I've been asked numerous times by garden center owners to play good cop/bad cop with them and their ad agency. Even after the owners finally realize they've been wasting money, losing momentum and misled by their ad agency representative, they still want someone else to do the dirty work.

Telling an agency it is no longer needed isn't that difficult. You send a letter to the CEO, and simply tell them their services are no longer required. But, for some reason, garden center owners often feel obligated to schedule a face-to-face meeting with the agency to share the bad news. Big mistake.

Retail Rules of the Road: "Never get too chummy with your ad rep. Remember, they go to work each day with the goal of increasing their paycheck and sales for their company, not yours."

Ad agencies have a way of knowing when a client is primed for change. A phone call asking for an unscheduled meeting is usually enough to raise suspicion. During that call, the retailer's rep will probably ask if it's ok to bring their "boss" to the meeting, knowing the CEO is more experienced at saving renegade clients. "Of course," says the retailer, guaranteeing a much longer-than-necessary get-together.

No one likes to lose business. Agencies are experienced at saving what they call "billings," and come prepared with arguments and offers unsuspecting retailers often find hard to resist.

The most recent instance when I played the role of bad cop with a garden center and their ad agency occurred simply because I needed compost for my garden. "Bring me a load of compost, and I'll take a look at your marketing," was the offer.

I learned of the garden center through a Google search, not because their marketing department invited me for a visit. Once the compost was delivered, a look at the marketing plan the store's ad agency created explained why.

It was the typical agency playbook approach

that can be summed up in two marketing terms: reach vs. frequency.

Reach vs. Frequency

Reach: A marketing term that measures the estimated number of potential customers who would see or hear your message at least once as a result of a specific advertising campaign.

Frequency: A marketing term that measures the estimated number of times the same potential customer sees or hears the same marketing message as a result of a specific advertising campaign.

I've spent my entire career arguing with garden center owners and their ad agency representatives on the important difference between these two words. Inexperienced marketers will bet an entire marketing budget (and company) on trying to *reach* the largest number of people possible.

On the surface, this may sound logical. Using a simple hort-inspired analogy similar to the one from Seth Godin's book *Permission Marketing: Turning Strangers Into Friends and Friends Into Customers* may help explain why this approach is often the cause of poor advertising results.

Let's say you have 100 pots of herbs desperately in need of water. Your goal is to keep as many herbs alive as possible over a one-week period. But you have a choice to make. You have just enough water to cover all the herbs once or 25 of the herbs four times. Which approach would provide the best results?

One hundred herbs watered once is *reach*. Twenty-five herbs watered four times is *frequency*. Creating a marketing campaign that actually works isn't that different from growing a successful crop of herbs. Multiple watering grows both.

I began the good cop/bad cop meeting with the garden center and their ad agency with this statement: "The first thing we need to get clear is our views regarding which is more important, *reach* or *frequency*. Based on your suggested ad schedule for this garden center, it's obvious you prefer *reach*. You have them running generic ads a few times each week on nine different radio stations. They are also paying huge costs to have six-year-old TV ads

appear a few times each week on top-rated daytime programs and network evening news. This is the perfect example of striving for *reach*, regardless of what's being heard or seen."

And their expected response: "It's obvious you're not familiar with this market [always the first attack on my credibility] or understand how important it is for this company to be in front of the largest number of people possible. They have a very short selling season, which requires getting their message out in front of the most people as quickly as possible [another huge mistake] with the limited budget we have. In my 30 years of experience [I knew this would pop-up early in the conversation], the more people who hear the offer, the better chance companies have for creating a new customer. But since I've heard you're the 'expert' [with air quotes], what would you have them do?"

"First, I wouldn't run old TV commercials on any station. You obviously believe that placing an old ad on costly programs, as long as they have the highest *reach*, is good marketing. I'd run new commercials on just one network during early morning news. It's the best way to run ads several times a week given the budget we have. The money we save by dropping those expensive programs will pay for new spots.

"Next, we should cut the number of radio stations to one or two and increase the number of spots per week. That would mean running at least 20 more ads each week on those stations than we do now. I don't care which stations - you choose."

"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard in my 30 years of experience," replies the head of the agency. "Give me one good reason why this garden center should follow your silly advice."

That's where the real-world logic comes in: "Because of the size of their parking lot. With the right message, one TV station, one radio station, a postcard and social media campaign would be plenty to keep their lot packed."

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