



The Raphel Report

**Observations on marketing,
advertising, sales and
promotions
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The Invisible Horses

It was World War II. An American general was doing an air surveillance of British artillery units. He noticed they loaded their cannons, closed the breech and then, suddenly, stepped back a few paces behind the cannons with their hands clenched away from their sides.

“Why are they doing that?” asked the general. No one knew. After a lengthy investigation they found an elderly English brigadier who explained, “Why they're simply 'olding the 'orses.”

Holding the horses? Of course. In earlier days the artillery was horse drawn. Then, when the cannon was loaded, the artillerymen took a few paces backwards just before they fired to hold the reins of the horses to keep them from running away because of the noise.

Through the years the horses were replaced by trucks. But the artillerymen continued to “old the ‘orses.”

The problem with setting up rules is that there comes a time when someone forgets why the rules were established originally. Like the Hatfields and the McCoys continuing to fight their battles when no one remembered the reasons why. They were just following the rules. Whatever they were.

Sports promoter Bill Veeck's answer to this conundrum: “The rules tell you what you can't do. This means you can anything that's not in the rules.”

Rules for advertising work much the same way. You are taught what should be done and follow the learned phrases, techniques and concepts. If someone steps forward and says, “I didn't do rule number two and it worked for me anyway,” I tell them what my Latin teacher once said: “That's the exception that proves the rule.”

But shouldn't you constantly experiment, innovate and even violate “accepted” rules?

No. And then again, yes.

No, when you ignore the “tried and true” just because it “feels” right. Because there are certain givens: Spelling the name correctly. Using the

customer's name instead of "occupant." Enclosing a response card to have the reader involved. Well, you get the idea.

However, there are some shibboleths you hear people repeat as gospel that can be overruled. Here they are...and how each rule was broken with success.

"Rule" 1. *You must tell your story quickly because readers get bored. They won't wade through paragraphs of material trying to understand what you wanted to sell them.*

But along comes brilliant wordsmith Bill Jayme writing a subscription letter for *Science* magazine. His entire first page tells the reader about the ancient way of telling time through the use of sunlight and rocks...before he mentions the product for sale.

"Rule" 2. *You must sell merchandise in season. No one wants to buy swimsuits in winter or long underwear in June.*

But along comes L.L.Bean, whose sales increased dramatically when they switched from mailing their catalogues only biannually (Spring/Summer - Fall/Winter) to four times a year, enabling the customer to buy when they wanted to buy instead of when a business told them to buy.

"Rule" 3. *You must use short copy. You must follow the KISS formula (Keep It Short & Simple).*

Not according to Merrill Lynch, which ran an ad in the *New York Times* with more than 10,000 words. Thousands of readers wrote for more information on the products and services mentioned in the ad.

And not according to Boyce Morgan, the writer responsible for many of the early direct mail successes of *The Kiplinger Letter*. He conducted tests on long vs short copy. The result: When he cut copy down to fit on one sheet of paper, it also cut down on orders.

Now, this is NOT a cry to tear up the rulebooks and plunge into uncharted waters. You must know what you are doing and why you are doing it. My Latin teacher (remember her from paragraph six?) told us, "You can break any rule you want, as long as you know what the rule is and why you are breaking it."

And so this is a call for non-traditional thinking. To examine what you are doing with a fresh look, an unjaundiced eye, a willingness to "try." While it is true that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread," it is also true that "he who hesitates is lost."

Years ago, in Russia, a Czar came upon a lone sentry standing at attention in a secluded corner of the palace gardens.

"What are you guarding?" asked the Czar.

The sentry answered, "I don't know sir. The captain ordered me to this post."

The Czar called the captain for an explanation. His answer: written regulations specified a guard was to be assigned to that area.

The Czar ordered a search to find out why. The archives gave the reason. Years before, Catherine the Great had planted a rose bush in this corner of the garden. She ordered a sentry to protect it for that evening.

One hundred years later, a sentry was still guarding the now barren spot. After all, if that's the way it was always done, shouldn't it continue to be that way?

Only if you're still “ 'olding the 'orses.”