

NINE WAYS TO IMPROVE AN AD

BY FRED MANLEY

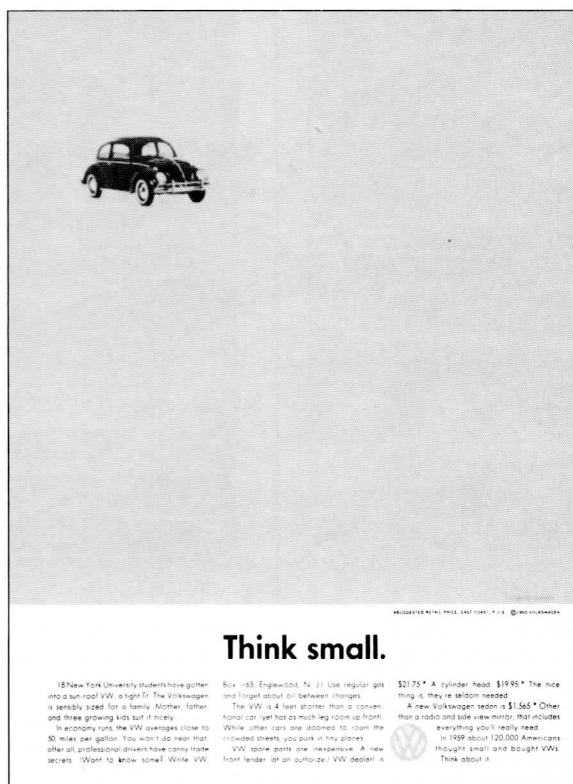
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with illustrations by
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This article first appeared in CA twenty-five years ago, in the July/August 1963 issue, and we have been receiving comments and requests for reprints ever since. The original litho film disappeared, so our reproduction of the layout sketches is not the greatest. We had to shoot it dot for dot from our original printing, and CA used uncoated paper in those early days. This is discussed further in the Editor's column, page 10.

I'm sure you've seen a certain ad for the Volkswagen car, and heard it praised, and watched it pick up prizes the length and breadth of the land.

I'd like to nominate this ad as one of the most inept, most ineffectual, most misguided efforts of recent years.



Think small.

18 New York University students have gotten into a ten-foot VW. A sign for the Volkswagen is sensibly sized for a family. Mother, father and three growing kids sit in nicely. Economy with the VW averages close to 50 miles per gallon. You won't do near that often all professional drivers have carry trade secrets. When to know when? Write VW.

Box 145, Englewood, N. J. Use regular gas and forget about oil between changes. The VW is 4 feet shorter than a conventional car yet has as much leg room as front. While other cars are doomed to roam the crowded streets, you park in tiny places.

VW, spare parts are inexpensive. A new front loader or an outboard? VW dealer is \$21.75.* A cylinder head \$19.95.* The nice thing is they're seldom needed. A new Volkswagen sedan is \$1,565.* Other than a radio and side view mirror, that includes everything you'll really need. In 1959 about 120,000 Americans thought small and bought VWs. Think about it.

Why? Because it's a perfect example of the disease that has spread throughout our business. A disease called "cleverness." Today, in some advertising quarters, cleverness is all that matters. You no longer have to have the selling idea. You no longer have to communicate that idea in clear, understandable terms. All you have to do is be witty. And amusing. And sophisticated. In short, "clever." And the more sane, sensible, tried-and-true rules you break along the way, the better.

The result, of course, is advertising like this. Advertising that titillates the precious few who work along Madison Avenue. That wins awards from ingrown groups of art directors. That makes conversation pieces at cocktail parties in Westport, Connecticut. Advertising that utterly fails to communicate with anyone who lives anywhere west of the Hudson River.

These are serious charges, I know—but I'm prepared to prove them. With your permission, I'd like to show you what this ad could have been—if only it hadn't worshipped at the shrine of cleverness. In short, with the sensitive aid of art director Hal Riney, I'd like to reconstruct it step by step, following the sensible rules that guide so much of advertising today.

9 Ways to Improve an Ad

Rule: Show the product.

Don't turn it into a postage stamp or a test of failing eyesight. Show it. Boldly. Dramatically. Excitingly. Like this:



There. See the difference already? Now, I'll admit the headline no longer makes complete sense—but that brings us to another obvious improvement.

Rule: Don't use negative headlines. "Think Small" may be very clever, very witty... but what an idea to leave in the minds of everyday readers.



"Think BIG!" Now I ask you—isn't that better? Isn't it more positive, more direct? And note, too, the interesting use of type to punch home the excitement of the idea.

Well that brings us to still another improvement—and one of the most important rules in all advertising.

Rule: Whenever possible, mention your product name in the headline.

Which the people who thought up this ad could have done so very, very easily.



See how the ad is beginning to jell? How it's really starting to come alive?

Let's see another way we can breathe some life into it—with a warming touch of humanity.

Rule: Whenever possible, show people enjoying your product.



That's more like it. A gracious mansion. A carefree band of dancers. And best of all, a proud pair of thoroughbreds.

Now for an improvement to correct a fault in the product itself. You'll note that the VW, unfortunately, is totally lacking in news. From year to year, while other cars bring out a host of exciting changes—it stays its own dowdy self.

Rule: Always feature news in your advertisement. And if you have no news, invent it. Like this:



How's that for news?

Rule: (one of the most obvious of the bunch) **Always give prominent display to your product logo.**

And I don't mean an arty jumble of initials no one can read; I mean a proud unashamed logo like this:



There. Now they know who's paying for the ad!

Rule: Avoid all unpleasant connotation about your product.

Which brings us to a somewhat delicate area: the country of origin of the Volkswagen car. Now I don't have to dwell on the subject of World War II and its attendant unpleasantness for you to grasp my meaning. Let's simply say that it might be wise to "domesticate" the car, so to speak.



VOLKSWAGEN—THE ALL-AMERICAN CAR! And in a flash, apple strudel turns into good old apple pie!

Rule: Always tell the reader where he can buy your product.
Where can you buy a Volkswagen?



"At your friendly authorized Volkswagen dealer." Note the warmth of words like "friendly." And the use of "Authorized" to make sure that prospects don't stumble into places that are unauthorized.

One rule to go. The most important rule of all.

Rule: Always localize your ads.

And mind the way you spell the dealer's names.

There you have it. No clever, precious, self-conscious waste of space like the ad we started with; but an honest hard-hitting, two-fisted ad like this that really sells.

I said "sells."