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# Michael Johnson: Logical Creative

Analysis, ideas and discussion about advertising initiatives and production -- perfect for writers, designers and managers. The goal: increase the effectiveness of advertising messages.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2012

## For a small business, it's never too late for "social" outreach (And it's crucial for new customers.)

No business owner in his or her right mind would spend money on something that didn't offer a return on investment. Yet in my research on established small-to-medium sized businesses, I am continually surprised at how many of these businesses have ignored or underused social media.

I do understand the thinking. Social media can seem so extraneous, time consuming and downright confusing. Facebook entries? Do a weekly blog? On what? And what exactly is Pinterest?



**Social/Digital advertising options: the choices are intimidating. (Business Insider.)**

For the experienced business owner who's been in his or her local market for 20 or 30 years, traditional media placements, mastery of product knowledge and a devotion to high levels of customer service have worked pretty well. Why change now?

The simple answer is that consumer behavior and attitudes change over time. Yes, most of your older, previous customers will still come back to you to shop. Maybe. And by being local, you will gain some new customers. Perhaps.

The problem is your store's bottom line can't absorb this hopeful attitude, at least not for long. Truth is, many more **new** likely customers are already accustomed to the presence and power of social media, and their buying behavior has already changed.

Today's younger affluents grew up with Google search, know they can always find a "30 percent off" coupon online, and geo-targeted web ads delivered to their home computer or laptop tells them who is really interested in them. All consumers today

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### ABOUT ME



**Michael L. Johnson**

Michael L. Johnson is a creative and communications professional with more

have grown skeptical of advertising claims, and lean much more on the opinions and customer experiences of people just like them. If they are not praising you and your products to their friends, don't expect their friends to choose you over your social-media friendly competitor.

Do you really want to miss out on the hundreds or thousands of "likely" customers every year?

At this point, I know what you're thinking. The social media landscape is still young, and what it looks like today won't be what it looks like tomorrow. Business Insider recently published a graphic showing all the "digital and social marketing" options out there. You can't do them all, and certainly some of them are a waste of time and money for your situation.

E-commerce/web search expert Jay Wilner, of Kansas City's own [Out of Bounds Communications](#), puts the new opportunities into perspective. "Social commerce is where it's at. It's a great way to build your brand. This is the new word-of-mouth. Set up Facebook, Google+ and Twitter accounts. Integrate Facebook widgets into your web site so people can share your products and your information with friends. It's like a cocktail party."

But the purpose of this blog is to get more of your current customers spending more money with you, and new customers coming to you for what they need. So let me throw out a few general ideas that will do just that.

- If you don't have web site that you have a personal stake in developing, do it now. About 50 percent of all shoppers do web searches before they make a purchase.
- Start a Facebook site. It's free and the potential for it to grow exponentially is too good a prospect to ignore.
- At least once a quarter, post a short "how to" video on YouTube.
- Once or twice a year, send out a zip code based direct-to-the-neighborhood postcard or web ad to show the range of services and products you have, and to publicize your web site for later reference.
- If you use traditional advertising (print/radio/TV/direct mail), take a percentage out of that and put it toward a web search effort that puts you on the first page of a Google search.
- Reach out to another retail company across the street and come up with a co-marketing deal, allowing their customers to spend a few more minutes shopping with you. (Example: you're a hardware store, and across the street is a custom-cut meat store that grills brats and hamburgers outdoors on weekends. You have their coupon and they have yours.

To miss out on the promise of social media via a re-balancing of your promotions thinking is akin to the 1940s comment of IBM CEO Thomas Watson, Sr.: "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."

Seems pretty silly now, right?

Posted by [Michael L. Johnson](#) at 4:43 PM    No comments:



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than 25 years experience in ad agency and corporate communications, with specific accomplishments in writing and editing, creative conceiving and implementation, guiding creative execution, and inventing advertising and marketing that is as attention-getting as it is on-target strategically. More info at: [www.michaeljohnsoncreativecompany.com](http://www.michaeljohnsoncreativecompany.com)

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 11, 2012

## Passion + Knowledge + Execution = Smarter Marketing

As a lifelong advertising creative (writer/producer and creative services manager), I know there is a fine line between product success and failure. For success, one has to know the need and develop an approach that reaches its full potential with its target audience.

So it's a bit of a cliché to boil it all down to a formula, but allow me some latitude to introduce one that makes sense: Passion + Knowledge + Execution = Smarter Marketing.



Recently, I discovered a solid example. It's a very small company addressing a "found" need for a very specific niche audience. The company is **Main Street Dream Makers, LLC**, created by Gordon Wolfgang, a life-long musician with a B.S. in Industrial Engineering and long executive career with British Telecom and Electronic Data

Systems.

The product is the **Wolfgang TELEMONITOR**. It's an elegantly simple solution to a problem faced by club and professional musicians around the world: during an on-stage performance, how do you ensure a non-flub set when you have an extensive song catalog?

Sure, the easy answer is full memorization of all chords and lyrics. But as Gordon explains, "When the crowd knows your song, and you don't, that's a problem."

The problem accelerates as people age. *Healthy Living* reports that between the ages of 30 and 70, "the brain produces 15 to 20 percent of the chemicals that send messages between neurons. This combination brings on normal memory lapses such as the misplaced handbag." Or for a performer, a long-remembered lyric just disappears. So for a musician on stage, it's human physiology in its most naked form.

How big is the problem? Big. In a February article from *The Washington Post* it's revealed that even Bruce Springsteen uses a little prompting help on-stage. In an article in *Modern Acoustic*, writer Paul Farhi reveals that Paul McCartney has a prompter built into his piano.

Meanwhile, leave it to Gordon Wolfgang to realize that out of his *passion* (musician/lyricist) and *knowledge* (Industrial Engineering and Information Technology Delivery), there ought to be a much more elegant solution to a clean on-stage performance than music stands and custom-manufactured solutions. After all, the thrust of Gordon's degree and work experience as a Delivery Executive with British Telecom and Electronic Data Systems over 30 years, centered on delivering effective business solutions. Why not apply those talents and interests to this problem?



**The Wolfgang Telemonitor**

Like all entrepreneurs, Gordon's vision for the eventual product was clear, even if the product was yet to be. With his engineering talents and awareness of musician needs and wants, Gordon created a prototype that not only displayed lyrics, chords and set lists but did it in an on-stage cabinet (with the perfect 38-degree viewing angle for the monitor) that looked precisely like an audio monitor. Control pedals (just like guitar effects pedals) allow performers to make selections on-the-fly. Because of its design, the unit's presence never gets in the way of the performance.

Anyone could have come up with the basic idea, but it took a musician at heart to design it. "If I wouldn't use it on stage, I don't use it in the Wolfgang TELEMONITOR," Gordon says.

Also unique, and important, in the product development process was the use of many widely available components, such as **ACER** monitors, and sourcing out a local cabinet maker for the cases, all of which kept costs down.

"I cobbled one together in November 1999, and then made some improvements in several prototypes over the next 10 years" Gordon says. "Then I got serious and built one with an eye to commercial distribution. I built three and posted advertisements for them on E-Bay." Within three months, Gordon had sold two through E-Bay and another through a referral. Demonstrating his product at musician conferences such as NAMM (National Association of Music Manufacturers) a year later also proved the interest in his "elegant" solution was in line with reality.

In early 2010 he launched his corporate web site, developed product materials, and engaged in online keyword search advertising. He also began to get referrals from satisfied customers. From there, the Wolfgang TELEMONITOR gained sales speed. By February 2012, more than 100 of the units could now be found (discreetly) on stage.

The best news, though, is that the need smartly extends to today's well-known classic rockers. There, Gordon's big idea and unique execution is on the mark.

Because of confidentiality agreements, we can't reveal them here. But think "I Write the Songs," Hot Blooded," and "Lucky Man," among others ... and you get the

picture of just who is purchasing the Wolfgang TELEMONTOR.

Gordon Wolfgang has done more than create a new product that satisfies a need. His story offers a constructive case history for true success in business: passion + knowledge + execution = smarter marketing.

And who wouldn't want a testimonial like this?

*"When I first started exploring the idea of a teleprompter, I went online shopping through literally 20-30 sites including Amazon and Ebay. I just didn't like the idea of people seeing I was using a teleprompter and all of them looked like a teleprompter. Awkward and in your face, as well as the audiences. So when I landed on the Wolfgang TELEMONTOR site I was very surprised to see that I was instantly looking at what I saw in my head that I needed. A teleprompter that didn't look like a teleprompter. I can program basically any song, or script I use on this thing and see it from anywhere on stage during the show. Even my band members are using it for back-up vocals."*

Joseph Alexander Wraith

Professional Rocker

Phoenix, AZ

Michael Johnson Creative Company

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Posted by Michael L. Johnson at 9:00 PM No comments:



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SUNDAY, MARCH 18, 2012

## Fed Ex Office vs. UPS: Who'll win the "Print Here" War?

First, thanks to all of you who commented on my exploration of the insurance coverage battle. I noted that the so-called "cut-rate" car insurance carriers like Geico and Progressive had forced traditional insurance companies like Allstate, Farmers and American Family to discover new approaches to getting customers.

In looking at the marketing and media action steps, I concluded Allstate, with its personification of "mayhem happens," best hit the mark. Check out **Allstate: "Lawn Mayhem."** In 2012, new commercials following the same theme have hit the TV market.

Leaving that market segment alone for now, there's a new battle brewing. Are you ready for the "printing services" battle between co-behemoths the **UPS Store** (a division of UPS) and **Federal Express Office** (a division of Fed Ex)?



If you haven't noticed, the economic downturn since 2008, combined

**The UPS Store** 

with costs associated with having in-house communications and printing, have led corporate America to turn to

specialists like the UPS Store (franchise stores) and Federal Express Office (corporate centers) for printing, copying and signage services.

So now the game is on, literally. Since the start of the 2012 NCAA basketball tournament, the UPS store has been touting its familiar "We are logistics" theme (more comment on that, later), and combining this umbrella thrust with a targeted,

product appeal centered around 25-cent color copies.

Clearly, the impetus here is to capture more of the growing outsourced printing market.



From the UPS Store



From Fed Ex Office

The UPS Store in 2011 ran commercials during the NCAA basketball tournament offering discounted printing and copying. No doubt counting on

the high viewership (especially males) during this period, The UPS Store is again pushing the “use us” concept and providing an incentive to do that. For review, check out [UPS: "Logistics"](#), and [UPS: "How Do I Do That?"](#).

Last fall and winter, FedEx Office set the scene for a positioning battle via a series of national TV commercials, too. FedEx Office plays off its reputation as an efficient shipper in one TV spot and adds awareness of its expanding number of services to businesses in [FedEx Office: "Witness Protection."](#) Also check out [FedEx Office: "All Nighter"](#) and [FedEx Office: "Half Pipe"](#). The emphasis is that Fed Ex delivers solutions in every service sector in which it is involved.

Fed Ex took over the Kinkos locations in 2004 and re-branded its Fed Ex Kinkos locations as Fed Ex Office centers in 2008, and since then has made progress in its move for increased market share. Check out 2007's [FedEx Kinkos: "Office Meeting."](#) That's a good spot. But for a lot of reasons beyond creative execution, the the public has not yet fully connected "FedEx Office" as the top-of-mind successor to the entrenched "Kinkos" brand, even though the overall Fed Ex brand is as strong as they come.

My advertising and marketing intuition, backed by 25 years of experience in advertising agency and corporate communications, tells me the Fed Ex Office approach of depicting its 1,800 centers as places to get “business solutions” is reaching the right “need it now” mind set of today’s business customers. The commercials convey a serious message, but deliver the right mix of whimsy at the same time – much the same as the Allstate insurance commercials did.

Now, back to my earlier comment about the UPS Store approach. I continue to be puzzled by The UPS Store’s leaning toward its broad theme of “We are Logistics.” Logistics? I can’t imagine a higher yawn factor for business execs who are so focused on cutting costs and finding more faster and more efficient delivery of services these days.

Sure, one *can* extrapolate that better logistics translates into more effective delivery and a better understanding of today’s business needs, but why tout a “feature,” when you can illustrate it faster and clearer with direct examples of speed and competency? That, I believe, is the degree of difference between the UPS Store approach (logistics) and the FedEx Office execution (business solutions.)

Rumor also has it that FedEx Office is upping the ante in this entire conversation by testing out an awareness campaign with steep discounts for walk-in copying and signage and banner products. FedEx Office will be promoting 29-cent color copies in several regions, starting in late March. So check out your local FedEx Office center over the next few weeks – you just may find some of the best “business



**In Kansas City, FedEx Office went public  
with its 29 cent color copies promotion  
March 19.**

Posted by Michael L. Johnson at 3:09 PM    No comments:



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solutions" deals of the year.

Opinions aside, the marketplace will judge the marketing executions of FedEx Office and The UPS Store.

For you, which one wins the war?

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2011**

## Trust the Power of Subtraction

Thank the Midwest's blizzard of this week to give me this latest topic. You know, for getting the best possible creative work from your team regarding advertising, marketing and communications, the list of available topics is nearly endless.

So there I am shoveling 8.5" of snow from driveway and surveying the seemingly miles of pavement to go before I nap, and it hit me. Often, it's the discipline to keep on digging until you finally hit solid concrete that yields the "that's it" moment. One can do the bare minimum and suffer the slushy, sliding, and refreezing results. Or one can keep scooping until you get to the essence: "clean pavement and sure traction" in the case of a driveway, and "convincing, memorable messaging" in the case of an advertising and marketing initiatives.

It's slow, messy work. But what a difference removal of extraneous material can make.

As a young "know-it-all" copywriter, I first learned this lesson on a print ad concept I was working on. I came up with great Headline/Copy, only to be confronted by the art director's admonition that I had to trim the headline down by four words. I was indignant. "What? The headline is perfect! I can't possibly improve it by shortening it! Thankfully, I kept subtracting, even when I was sure I already had the answer. And guess what? I kept digging for until I finally hit the concrete of the "that's it" moment. No one was more surprised than me. (Thanks, **John Kuefler of Admark, Inc.** which is now **Callahan Creek Advertising** in Lawrence, Kan.)

So 30 years later, the power of subtraction continues to be a tenant I insist on in my own work, and a lesson that I continually convey to young advertising and marketing professionals. In copywriting, as well as art and concept, it's easy to be clever; it's much more difficult to be clear, concise and instantly understood. Blaise

Pascal, in 1657, wrote in a letter to a friend, noting that "...I have made this letter longer than usual because I lack the time to make it shorter."

A profound concept, when you stop to think about it.



One personal example is the initial campaign for "**Metro Rate**" at the **University of Missouri-Kansas City** – the extension of in-state tuition to residents of Kansas counties bordering Kansas City, Mo. Coming up with compelling headlines was easy enough, and some of the earlier ones probably could have worked. Still, none seemed to quite boil down the message to its most powerful message. As Director of Creative Services, I kept digging, hoping for less words and a more pointed message. Finally, communicating the message of saving money on education within one's own backyard was

reduced to the powerful and succinct: "Live Here? Save Here." Four words. The accompanying art was equally terse.

The result: the campaign paid for itself that first year in new students. Since then, the UMKC "Metro Rate" has continued to draw more and more students from Kansas over the years. The "Live Here? Save Here." messaging continues to this day, more than a decade later.

So my advice to all young-and-know-it-all creatives out there – and to those of you who manage them – is to follow a two-step process. 1. Give them room for those overly clever and often too-long copy and ornate artistic concepts. 2. Follow that up with the courage and discipline to keep the distillation process going. For the creative, effective solution you seek, the power of subtraction really adds up.

**Contact Michael Johnson @ [Michaelj1974@sbcglobal.net](mailto:Michaelj1974@sbcglobal.net). And if you, too, love pithy quotes, check out the books at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com))**

Posted by Michael L. Johnson at 2:06 PM No comments:



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TUESDAY, JANUARY 18, 2011

## Michael Johnson: Look Who's Winning the TV Insurance War

Just a few years ago, who'd have thought we might be pointing to insurance commercials as some of the most interesting and compelling spots around?

Back in the old days (1970s), insurance commercials spoke in somber tones, reminding people that catastrophic accidents weren't just something that happened to someone else. But then came US General, GEICO and a host of other upstart companies that wanted a piece that fear, going to war with the big names. The goal, of course was to paint insurance coverage as just another necessary evil and one company was just as good as another. Just imagine John Belushi's "**Animal House**" character Bluto as an insurance pitchman: "It just doesn't matter!"

So then we got the GEICO executions, first with the Cave Man motif, then morphing into an actual gecko as the personification of insurance. Surely the big names in the industry thought *that* wouldn't work, and I can hear bald-headed

boards of directors all over the country continue to expound that their brand-smart arguments would win the day.

Apparently not.

Suddenly, in the last few years, [Allstate](#) was on TV with the booming voice of [Dennis Haysbert](#), pointing out the Allstate product advantages over “cut rate” insurers. Could it be that insurance had become a commodity ... that the majority of the public really had come to the conclusion that who they chose “just didn’t matter?”

That’s a longer discussion for another time, however, because this blog is about advertising and marketing creativity: how it’s born, regardless of industry, and who’s doing it well.

Few commercials, and most insurance commercials, certainly fail on the creativity front. They may communicate brand, but they don’t get people talking to their friends about it.



But some ad guy for Allstate must be a helluva pitchman, because these “mayhem” commercials are as groundbreaking and loved by the public as the iconic Joe Sedelmaier commercials were in the “Where’s the beef” spots for [Wendy’s Restaurants](#).

As an ad guy, I loved the spots from the beginning, believing [Allstate](#) had launched a home run idea. The one I first heard people talking about was Allstate’s “lawn mayhem” commercial, combining personification of mayhem with a wicked slice-of-life truth. Take a look: [Allstate Lawn Mayhem](#). I can imagine fathers all over the country hollering “crap, that’s how my son thinks,” and diving off the recliner for the phone while wondering if they really were as ready for disaster as they thought.

Obviously, the commercials must have tested well, because the mayhem series spawned many more: Teenage Girl Mayhem, Storm Damage Mayhem and Satellite Dish Mayhem.

Suddenly, the race for funny insurance commercials among the big names was on. Not content to sit on the sidelines, Farmers Insurance embarked on their own brand of insurance zaniness, coming up with an umbrella theme of their own – University of Farmers – complete with wry humor and special effects. Check out one of them: [University of Farmers](#).

Good try. But the difference between the Farmers TV spots and the Allstate spots is huge. For Allstate, perfectly cast personification of mayhem not only gets to the point, it hits the funny bone of the American psyche. And that gets people talking.

The Farmers commercial tries too hard. It tries to communicate brand difference with the undercurrent of humor, and the result is underwhelming. You don’t do enough to sell the brand and you complicate the humor element by being so overblown. The Farmers idea is a sound one, and I imagine it was a whole lot funnier in the storyboard stage. No one is talking about the Farmers commercial around the office the next day.

Meanwhile, the Allstate commercials elevate the clever idea through their strikingly simple executions. The series continues to generate momentum, and most likely, more calls to All State insurance agents. Best of all, from a creativity point of view, the Allstate executions entertain and inform in fresh ways. Anyone else come up with a laugh-out-loud spot about a team flag? [Allstate Flag Mayhem](#)

Way to go, Allstate. To borrow a phrase from [Larry the Cable Guy](#): "Now that's funny, I don't care who you are."

As a result, I just may give my local Allstate guy a call.

*Michael Johnson @ [Michaelj1974@sbcglobal.net](mailto:Michaelj1974@sbcglobal.net)*

Posted by [Michael L. Johnson](#) at 5:47 PM    No comments:



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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2010

## Michael Johnson: Logical Creative: The 11.5 Irrefutable Laws of Creative Leadership

[Michael Johnson: Logical Creative: The 11.5 Irrefutable Laws of Creative Leadership](#): "OK, so you've landed your job as director or manager of a creative services unit within a corporate environment. That means you've successfu..."

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### The 11.5 Irrefutable Laws of Creative Leadership

OK, so you've landed your job as director or manager of a creative services unit within a corporate environment. That means you've successfully shown you have an inherent understanding of the company's strategic objectives as well as the knowledge and methodologies of delivering communications and marketing products.

Now comes the hard part: developing products in a real-world environment, one full of nearly impossible deadlines and a belief by many within the corporate structure that doing what your department does is as easy as someone sitting down at a Mac and pressing the "easy" button. (Someone with a request may even want to "watch you" come up with a wonderfully creative and strategically on-target idea and final form in the next hour, but that's a topic that deserves another blog examination.)

No, the subject here is delivering creative leadership, defined for this column as satisfying the VP of the department who is accountable for the project *and* continually ensuring you're getting the best ideas and end-products from your in-house writers and designers.

And in the spirit of John Maxwell's "21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership," allow me to present "The 11.5 Irrefutable Laws of Creative Leadership." [More info: John Maxwell, via Amazon.com](#)

**1. Establish parameters**

A good creative work plan – a scope of work – is essential. It gives your writers and designers a barometer for expectations: purpose, audience, tone, “must haves,” and due dates.

**2. Don't set up a 12-foot concrete barrier**

But asking for a 24-page capabilities brochure without approved copy and under a 48-hour “gotta have it” deadline is at best disrespectful. Ask what's doable within the time frame and according to department work load, and negotiate and prioritize resources from there.

**3. Get the right people involved.**

You may work easily with certain team members, and it's tempting to go back to them for all your needs. For the best possible products, however, think through who has the right background or understanding, and add them to the team mix. It may take a bit more time to create momentum, but the results will be worth it in the end.

**4. Allow time for creative pursuit.**

You will want the perfect answer on the first try – after all “you” know what you want. More often than not, it's the second or third version that will really deliver the right form and tone. The best creative ideas, for the most part, aren't generated in brainstorming meetings around a conference table.

**5. Don't buy in to the “I'll have it when I have it” statement.**

Sometimes the creative group or person will resist the “needed by” dates, seeking an open-ended process. Don't buy in to this – professionals will give you their best in the time provided.

**6. Be able to describe the mindset of the target audience.**

In the end, a communications product is a sales presentation. The art and copy work together to eliminate arguments against your product or service. To do that, the best creatives will want to imagine they are talking to a specific member of the target audience.

**7. Don't insist that you already know the mindset of the target audience.**

You may think you do know what aspects of the product or service the customer wants to hear. But different people respond to different kinds of appeals. Take the time to carefully consider the approaches provided to you. They may find the irresistible argument that works for the greatest majority of people.

**8. The first idea just may have a nugget of truth.**

Sure, the first idea may be off target, but often there is brilliance in the approach that just may need some polishing.

**9. Some ideas hit the “creative” mark, but just aren't worth pursuing.**

Good creatives will naturally give you a number of ideas. Not all will be exceptional options for the long term goals. Work carefully through these at an early stage, and weed out the weaker ones.

**10. A good creative person will be receptive to critique.**

In the professional ranks, a strong creative person will consider your critiques of the approach, engage you in thoughtful discussion, and be able to adjust accordingly.

**11. A good creative person will have already considered potential problems.**

When the creative team presents its approaches, respect the time and analysis provided. If you don't see the relevance of the solution, asking how they got to that end product will give you additional information that just may be right on target.

### 11.5 Respect creative ability as much as you respect your own talents and skills.

The great sportswriter Red Smith once said that "writing is easy ... you just sit down and open a vein." Remember that good creatives are not just giving you their talents, they're going deep into their soul to deliver for you.

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