

# Rules Made to be Broken

BY BERNIE TRUEBLOOD



Every year at the PRO Awards luncheon, after the deals go down and the lights go up, there is a moment of truth. It

occurs when one colleague approaches another and inquires: “whadja think?” Well it is time you took a stance — with something more profound than: “Bitchin’ production” or “Is that Kerry kewl or what?”

Wouldn’t it be nice to have a solid frame of reference from which to make small talk? Well now you can. Try this: Pick any promotion and critique it against one of the “Rules of Promotion.” You can make these up if you want.

We do. This column often invokes “rules” which, truth be known, we make up as we go along. Having gone along so long, however, it turns out that our rules file is actually bulging with good advice.

As a convenience then, dear reader, we impart herein a set of rules you can use as your personal judging criteria. An aid, if you will, to post-luncheon dialog.

Rule No. 1 is, of course, Make Your Own Rules. Promotion is about breaking new ground, cutting through the clutter, finding a competitive edge. It is not just about breaking for breaking’s sake. It’s about stretching beyond the limits of the expected. So, while playing by the rules is good practice, it does not guarantee you a win. You might, in fact, consider the following “rules” to be mere suggestions:

2. Treat the Offer as King
3. Hone It Until You Own It
4. Call for Action
5. Go for Outrageous
6. Promote the Promotion
7. Reward, Don’t Bribe
8. Avoid Cheap Thrills
9. Ask Questions, Take Names, Talk Back
10. Be a Picky Partner Picker

Let us examine a few of these:  
**Treat the Offer as King:** The offer is the stimulus that triggers behavior change, which is what promotion is all about. Without an offer, it’s just advertising. So above all, make sure your prospect “gets it.” Put your offer in the headline. Make it succinct, telegraphic.

Consider this year’s entry from LifeSavers. Even if it’s not on your list of winners, you must admit that the offer is clear.



LifeSavers’ offer is loud and clear.

**Hone It Until You Own It:** A great promotion is one which is brand proprietary. Anyone can do a road show, for example, but only the U.S. Postal Service can decorate a train to look like canceled mail. Are you just running a sweepstakes, or are you getting consumers to pay their own way to Camp Jeep? Custom-designed incentives not only reinforce brand equity, they can have higher perceived value — because they transcend traditional frames of reference.

**Call for Action:** Face it, promotion isn’t passive. You are looking for action, and research proves that you’re most likely to get it when you ask for it! A call to action usually starts with a verb. (Drink Pepsi. Get Stuff.) It contains, or implies, the most consumer-appealing word in our arsenal, “you.” (“Enter and (You’ll) Win!”) Finally a C2A often ends

## Outrageous:

The Zipatoni agency is famous for over-the-edge creative. That is no accident, because it is imbedded in their culture — to the point that even their approach to putting callers on hold is totally unique. To experience it for yourself, just dial 314-231-2400 and ask the operator to put you on hold.

with an urgency. (“Order now, before it’s too late.”)

Go for Outrageous: Enough of “politically correct” already. Polite promotion gets sucked into the clutter of everyday media. “Promotionally correct” is big, loud, bad-ass, superlative and, yes, even buckeye. Look at Nabisco’s entry for its film release tie-in. There is nothing pretty about Austin Powers or the Cornnuts graphics — but they sure will be noticed.



Cornnuts understands standout-layout

That’s the truth for now. We’ll explore rules six through 10 another time. In the meantime, the rule in Chicago is to have fun. ○

*As a rule, you can share your opinion with Bernie Trueblood at [btrue@promoprimer.com](mailto:btrue@promoprimer.com).*