

Advertising in the Russian Media

The U.S. Information Agency and the Russian group Okno-Reklamaheld a meeting at an international conference, whose aim was instruction and exchange of experience. The problems were merely outlined — and it is clear that most publications face a similar set of such problems.

In Russian periodicals, as Prof. Obermeyer of the United States pointed out, line ads, or personal announcements, are almost non-existent. By contrast, newspapers in the United States earn up to 50 percent of their proceeds from line advertising. The "expulsion" of private advertisers from our newspapers started quite a while ago, in the days of financial pyramids, when it was far more profitable for a paper to print ads from Khopyor Invest, MMM, and similar bubbles. There was no room in the papers for ads from private individuals who could not afford to pay for them. Khopyor and others of the same ilk vanished in the end, but the private advertiser never returned to the general political newspaper, having got used to special advertising weeklies like "Iz Ruk v Ruki" ("From Hand to Hand"). Not because announcement can be placed there free of charge, but because the private individual knows that many more people are likely to see his announcement in an advertising tabloid than in a serious paper.

Serious papers, however, do not have the knack of working with big-time advertisers, who help many of them to survive, either. The advertiser tends to get cross when there are no phone calls from readers of the paper in which he has placed his ad. The trouble is that the newspaper has a good designer, but lacks a good copywriter, as he is known in the West, that is, a professional who brings home the ad's message, making it psychologically palatable.

How do matters stand with Russian newspapers? If the advertiser is Russian, the paper will painstakingly reproduce the ad's original text to the last comma. If he is a foreigner, the paper will make a primitive word-for-word translation of his ad, like this one: "Our shampoo is for healthy hair." Does this imply that it is unsuitable for unhealthy hair? Wouldn't it be better to write "This shampoo will make your hair healthy"?

Actually, most of newspapers' and periodicals' advertising-related problems stem from copywriters' lack of professional skills. The common belief is that no special training is needed here — you can pick up the necessary skills as you go along. Here is a real-life example: One ad leaflet dropped in private mail boxes reads: "Poverty-stricken students will take up any kind of work — railroad car unloading, rubbish disposal, entrance hall cleaning, ad campaign organizing."

While a newspaper can afford to send its advertising agents somewhere for training, who is expected to teach the editors to take seriously their ad service? A blank wall still exists between the editorial staff and the advertising agents. Editors scold copywriters, blaming them for the failure to attract advertisers. The copywriters retort: "They don't come because you don't make a good job of the paper. What you print is not interesting."

If such discussions were face-to-face, there might have been some positive results. But what we have is behind-the-back attacks. Simply Russian newspaper editors are not in the habit of discussing the paper's creative concept with its ad service. It is only right and proper that such impressive conferences should teach people who already work as copywriters how to put ads together. But they would also do well to teach others, so that the paper might be widely read and the ads pay off.

Exercise: Translate the word combinations mentioned in the text for future using:

To hold a meeting; exchange of experience; to outline the problem; to face a problem; Russian periodicals; by contrast; line advertising; quite a while ago, to get used to; free of charge; serious papers; word-for-word translation; the common belief; the editorial staff; to make a good job; creative concept; to do well