

Say It Again: Messages Are More Effective When Repeated
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Research proves messages are more effective when repeated. Yet marketers abandon their ads, slogans, and brands too soon and much too often.

Have you heard the following expressions?

- **Got milk?** (*used for 21 years, starting in 1993*)
- **Just do it.** (*used for over 26 years, starting in 1988*)
- **What happens here, stays here.** (*used for 10 over years, starting in 2004*)
- **Help, I've fallen and I can't get up.**
- **Tastes great, less filling.** (*used since the 1970s*)
- **Where's the beef?**
- **Good to the last drop.** (*used for over 97 years, starting in 1917*)
- **Melts in your mouth, not in your hands.** (*used for over 60 years, since 1954*)
- **Breakfast of Champions.** (*used for over 87 years, starting in 1927*)
- **Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is.** (*used for over 43 years, starting in 1971*)
- **The nighttime, sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching head, fever so you can get rest medicine.**
- **Head On. Apply directly to the forehead.**
- **Don't Leave Home Without It.**
- **15 minutes could save 15% or more on car insurance.**

Depending on your age, most of those advertising catchphrases should sound familiar. You can probably name the company/product associated with every slogan in the list. Some you may have heard hundreds if not thousands of times. The companies behind these marketing messages had to sustain multi-million-dollar investments for years and sometimes decades to make them stick in consumers' brains.

In advertising, the term "effective frequency" is used to describe the number of times a consumer must be exposed to an advertising message before the marketer gets the desired response, whether that be buying a product, or something as simple as remembering a message.

Marketing experts like to debate the "right ways" to calculate effective frequency. Some say repeating a message three times will work, while many believe the "**Rule of 7**" applies. There was a study from Microsoft investigating the optimal number of exposures required for audio messages. They concluded between 6 and 20 was best.

Thomas Smith, in his book *Successful Advertising*, makes the following reflection on effective frequency:

The 1st time people look at ad, they don't see it.

The 2nd time, they don't notice it.

The 3rd time, they are aware that it is there.

The 4th time, they have a fleeting sense that they've seen it before.

The 5th time, they actually read the ad.

The 6th time, they thumb their nose at it.

The 7th time, they get a little irritated with it.

The 8th time, they think, “Here’s that confounded ad again.”
The 9th time, they wonder if they’re missing out on something.
The 10th time, they ask their friends or neighbors if they’ve tried it.
The 11th time, they wonder how the company is paying for all these ads.
The 12th time, they start to think that it must be a good product.
The 13th time, they start to feel the product has value.
The 14th time, they start to feel like they’ve wanted a product like this for a long time.
The 15th time, they start to yearn for it because they can’t afford to buy it.
The 16th time, they accept the fact that they will buy it sometime in the future.
The 17th time, they make a commitment to buy the product.
The 18th time, they curse their poverty because they can’t buy this terrific product.
The 19th time, they count their money very carefully.
The 20th time prospects see the ad, they buy what it is offering.

Now consider this: Mr. Smith penned this witty insight back in 1885 — *over 130 years ago!* Advertising was still in its infancy, but savvy marketers like Smith quickly figured out that “more frequency = more effective.” So, you still want to know how many times do you need to run your next home loan ad? The truth is: there is no single “right” answer.

“‘Effective frequency’ might mean that a single advertising exposure is able to influence the purchase of a brand,” says John Philip Jones, a noted author on advertising and marketing. “But the phrase was really coined to communicate the idea that there must be enough concentration of media weight to cross a certain threshold — that there has to be enough of it *before the consumer buy a product* to influence their choice.”

There is one thing everyone generally agrees on though: messages are more effective when repeated. And they are more believable, too.

Repeat It, Believe It

Fact: This sentence will become more and more truthful every time you read it.

Studies suggest that repeated statements are perceived as more truthful than statements made less frequently, “presumably because repetition imbues the statement with familiarity.” In simple terms: frequency breeds familiarity, and familiarity breed trust.

Similarly, studies show that repeated exposure to an opinion makes people believe the opinion is more prevalent, even if the source of that opinion is only a single person. So not only do consumers *remember* a statement that gets repeated, but they are also more likely to *believe* it, and think it is the *popular* opinion.

Fewer Messages, More Often

You should limit the number of messages you try to communicate through marketing. If repetition fosters both awareness and trust, you’ll do better working with a shorter list of messages communicated more frequently than the long laundry list of messages many marketers try to work with.

Beware of Boredom

If you're doing it right — saying the same thing over and over — you will get bored of hearing yourself speak long before your message sinks in with consumers. In fact, institutions frequently pull the plug on their marketing messages prematurely. Whenever a company gets a new head of marketing, a new strategy and set of messages follow shortly thereafter. Same thing when companies change ad agencies; the new agency almost always abandons the work of their predecessor(s).

Stick to Your Script

You'll have to fight your boredom (or your ad agency's), because the temptation to do something new and different will always be great. You may try to convince yourself that "the audience has already heard what we have to say — they know this already." Don't fool yourself. It takes years for some messages to connect with consumers, and even longer if you're trying to reshape perceptions consumers have held for years.

Rethink How You Spend Your Media Dollars

Would you rather get your marketing message in front of 30,000 people one time, or 10,000 people three times? Instead of targeting your entire customer/prospect base with the same message all at once, you'll find greater success if you segment your audience. The process of segmentation will, in turn, force you to use better data/analytics when choosing the right groups to target (i.e., *which* 10,000 consumers should you hit three times?), which also allows you to tailor messages with greater relevancy/specificity for your audience.