The settled mistakes playbook

Nine principles from *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, and a way to sort your own marketing decisions into what is known and what is worth testing.

Principle 1 / Knowledge

Know what is settled before you test

> *"the discipline of knowledge to the anarchy of ignorance" - David Ogilvy*

A rule is compressed experience. Ogilvy answers the objection that rules make dull work by pointing to the sonnet and the sonata. Both are strict forms that produced great art.

Knowing what fails is a fence. Much of marketing still needs exploring. Some of it is already known not to work, and knowing which leaves more room for the exploring.

The name changes. Rules became frameworks, then playbooks, and now skills in AI tools. What matters is whether evidence sits behind the name.

Takeaway:

Learn what is already known first, so your tests go to questions that are still open.

Principle 2 / Testing

Test what is still open, one variable at a time

> *"The most important word in the vocabulary of advertising is TEST." - David Ogilvy*

Ogilvy's list of what to test: the promise, the media, headlines and illustrations, ad size, frequency, spend and commercials.

Most teams change five things at once. With pressure to do more with less, results get blended, and nobody can say which change moved them.

Test markets put failure in a small place. Holdout groups and small submarkets are the modern version, and few teams use them.

Takeaway:

Change one variable per test, and run it where a failure is cheap.

Principle 3 / Volume

More activity is not more results

> *"Bad advertising can unsell a product." - David Ogilvy*

Spend was the wrong variable. Ogilvy's statistician treated spend as the only factor, and missed that effective advertising at one-tenth the budget can outsell ineffective advertising.

Some activity does harm. Repeated cold calls to the same accounts left a bad impression that lasted, and those prospects told others. Distasteful ads and negative talk about competitors work the same way.

Incentives steer the advice. An agency paid on media spend leans toward advising more spend. Inside a company, attribution models do the same: people orient to whatever earns the credit.

Takeaway:

Before adding volume, ask what the next unit is worth, and what the people who recommend it are paid to do.

Principle 4 / Promise

Lead with the outcome, and test which promise buyers choose

> *"promise, large promise, is the soul of an advertisement" - Dr. Johnson, quoted by Ogilvy*

Ogilvy tested promises directly. He put different promises on the package, asked buyers to rank cards, and built a series of ads around one promise each, then counted orders for each.

A feature describes the product. A promise describes what the buyer gets, and buyers choose between promises.

Show the result and let buyers draw the conclusion. Apple's Shot on iPhone campaign showed photos and left the specifications for later.

Takeaway:

Write several candidate promises before you write the copy, and put at least two in front of buyers.

Principle 5 / Facts

Specifics are believable and set you apart

> *"Collecting facts is hard work." - David Ogilvy*

Believability. An oddly specific claim reads as true. "The best" reads as noise.

Differentiation. If every competitor says "the best," the one that says how stands out. Ogilvy advertised facts that Shell and KLM shared with their rivals but that no rival mentioned.

Expertise. In crowded markets, buyers want to know whether you can help them later. Specific detail shows you did the research.

Takeaway:

Replace one superlative on your homepage with a fact only you can state.

Principle 6 / Compounding

Keep what works running, and build what compounds

> *"never give up a campaign just because you've grown tired of it" - David Ogilvy*

You see the campaign far more than your audience does. After three weeks you are tired of it, and most of your audience has not seen it yet.

Keep winners in their own campaign. Pull the top-performing ads from each campaign into an evergreen one, so they keep running and stack up.

Keep the next campaign in the ice box. When one is approved, start the next and hold it in reserve, so a flop does not cost a quarter.

Brand lowers the cost of everything else. Price-off deals and lead generation aimed at this quarter's number fill the top of the funnel at the expense of later years. When I called an account, the reaction depended on whether they knew the company, not on the time of day or the script.

Takeaway:

Run winners longer than feels comfortable, and keep the next campaign built.

Principle 7 / Proof

Earn belief with proof from other people

> *"the puffery of an anonymous copywriter" - David Ogilvy*

Nobody believes "number one in our category." Logo reels add some validation. Case studies add more when they name the company, the job title and the outcome.

Buyers arrive asking "Are you for me?" They mean their role, their industry and their problem. Answer all three near the top of the page.

People buy from people. Ogilvy advised showing the client's face and not the factory. Today that means a visible point of view and a named person behind the company.

Takeaway:

Put a named customer result and a person's face where a visitor first lands.

Principle 8 / Medium

Make the work fit where it appears

> *"no need for advertisements to look like advertisements" - David Ogilvy*

Judge the layout where it will run. Ogilvy's version was to see it pasted into the publication. Ours is to see it in the feed or in search results.

One ad on every platform ignores the audience. People scroll LinkedIn, Reddit and YouTube in different frames of mind, so a result on one does not carry to the others.

Look like what people came to read. Ogilvy found ads styled as editorial pages drew about 50% more readers. Factual case studies written as native posts and video testimonials are the current form.

Give video a shape. In Gallup's data, commercials that set up a problem, showed the product solving it, then proved it sold to four times as many people as ones that only preached.

Takeaway:

Before you publish, look at the asset where it will appear.

Principle 9 / Judgment

Judge work by results, and use data for light

> *"as a drunkard uses a lamppost for support rather than illumination" - David Ogilvy*

Awards say little about results. Ogilvy noted that juries rarely see sales results, so they go by taste. Even inside a company it can be hard to learn whether a campaign worked.

Data can be cover. Reports get used to support a decision already made. Judgment still has to decide what the data cannot, such as what image to build.

Experts can say why. Ask why copy fails in reverse type. A real answer involves legibility and accessibility, and someone repeating a rule they heard cannot give it.

Take rules with a grain of salt, and keep the reason. Ogilvy found photographs outsell drawings. With AI images everywhere, a drawing can now signal a human behind the work. The surface rule aged, and the psychology under it still holds.

Takeaway:

Treat a rule as a hypothesis with a reason attached, and keep the reason when the rule ages.

The audit

Pick your last five assets: an ad, a landing page, an email, a case study, a video. Answer each question for each asset with Y, N or ?, then count the Ns and ?s. Each N or ? marks a decision worth a second look.

PRINCIPLE	QUESTION	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5
1 Knowledge	Did we check what is already known about this format before we debated it?					
2 Testing	If we tested it, did the test change one variable, in a small market or against a holdout?					
3 Volume	Did we judge it on the quality of the result and not on volume or spend?					
4 Promise	Does it lead with an outcome, chosen over at least one alternative?					
5 Facts	Does it carry a specific fact that a competitor could not state?					
6 Compounding	Is a winner still running, and is the next campaign ready?					
7 Proof	Does it carry proof from a named person or company?					
8 Medium	Did we review it in the place where it appears?					
9 Judgment	Do we know the result, and can we say why it worked?					

Decision rule: apply it or test it

1. **The evidence can be checked** (a study you can read, a test of your own, results data): apply it.
2. **The evidence is only authority** (a famous name, a book): treat it as a hypothesis, and test it when being wrong is cheap.
3. **The rule rests on a psychological dynamic** such as belief, curiosity or trust: keep the dynamic and adjust the surface rule to today's medium.
4. **No evidence either way**: the question is open. Test it, one variable at a time.

Ogilvy's figures come from research of his era, as he reports it. Check any number against a current source before you rely on it.

Applied today

1. **The evergreen campaign (Principles 2 and 6).** I pull the top-performing ads from each campaign into one campaign I call the top performers. It runs as evergreen, so good ads keep serving and stack on each other, and I stop cycling through everything hoping the next campaign is a hit.

2. **The case study as a native ad (Principles 7 and 8).** Factual case studies written to read like a post in the LinkedIn feed, or a video testimonial placed where people already watch, are less disruptive than a standard ad. I have seen strong results, and they also build a pool of engaged viewers to retarget.

Keep the conversation going

Know what is already settled, test what is still open, and keep the reason when a rule ages.

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Book: *Confessions of an Advertising Man* by David Ogilvy: Amazon

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