

Sellers for the sellers:

by Gregory Niemesh

Advertisements are all around us. From traditional venues, such as print publications and the radio, to more modern ones, such as video games and the Internet, the possibilities for ad placement seem limitless. We know that advertisers want us to buy their products or services. But who sells advertisers the space that helps them sell to us?

Selling advertising space is the job of advertising sales agents, who are often called account executives or advertising sales representatives. Most of these agents work for television and radio broadcasters, print and Internet publishers, and cable program distributors. Other agents work for direct-mail advertisers or for display and outdoor advertisers, such as those that create billboards and signs. Because advertising brings in most of the revenue for magazines, newspapers, directories, and broadcasts, advertising sales agents have an important role in their employers' success.

This article describes the occupation of advertising sales agents: what they do, where they work, what they like and dislike about their jobs, what their employment and outlook are, and how they prepare for and advance in the occupation. Suggestions for finding more information are provided at the end.

What they do

The job duties of advertising sales agents vary somewhat, depending on the type of sales calls they make. Their jobs may also differ based on the advertising space they sell, which may include graphic art, custom-made signs, or television and radio advertising time. But most agents follow similar procedures in conducting business with clients.

The first order of business for nearly all sales workers, including advertising sales agents, is to create and maintain a client base. "Outside" sales agents visit established and prospective clients at the clients' offices. The agents might set up an appointment, or they might arrive without an appointment. "Inside" sales agents work on their employers' premises and sell directly to walk-in

clients. Some inside sales agents also work on the telephone: calling clients, selling a firm's advertising space or time, and arranging appointments between clients and other sales agents.

Advertising sales agents sometimes work with a client on a single project, but most sales agents—and many clients, too—prefer to develop longstanding business relationships. For this reason, advertising sales agents try to build a good rapport with their clients.

During the first contact with a client, an advertising sales agent gathers background information and explains which types of advertising will best promote the client's products or services. Because of consolidation in media industries, sales often include a mix of ad placements in



Your

Gregory Niemesh is an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS, (202) 691-5728.

Advertising sales agents

print, on the Internet, and in a radio or television broadcast.

Next, the sales agent prepares an advertising proposal for the client. This entails recommending the advertising media to use, creating and presenting sample advertisements, and providing clients with cost estimates of the proposal. After the sales agent and the client agree on the details of the proposal, they sign a contract that spells out the terms of their business arrangement.

The advertising sales agent then serves as the main contact between the client and the agent's employer—for example, a newspaper publisher—as the advertising project is carried out. The agent communicates with the client on behalf of the publisher and works with the client on

developing additional sample advertisements, answering questions, and mediating any problems that may develop. If necessary, the agent also arranges for commercial taping sessions and may accompany clients to the sessions. Sales agents usually work with numerous clients and projects simultaneously.

Advertising sales agents have other duties as well. They analyze sales statistics, prepare reports, and study literature about new and existing products or services. They monitor the sales, prices, and products of their competitors. Many advertising sales agents also handle the billing for their clients' accounts.

Where they work

Advertising sales agents generally work for two types of employers: Firms that sell advertising space for a variety of media and organizations that sell ad space locally for their own media product.

Media representative firms. Media representative firms sell advertising space for numerous media owners, such as print and Internet publishers, radio and television stations, and cable distributors. Advertising sales agents in these firms sell ad space or time for clients seeking to advertise outside their local markets, perhaps nationally. Instead of working with clients directly, however, these sales agents work exclusively with the executives at advertising agencies, called media buyers. As a result, advertising sales agents in media representative firms often spend less time establishing a client base than do other sales agents.

Local sales employers. Local publications, radio and television stations, and cable program distributors hire advertising sales agents to sell ad space directly to local advertisers for their own publications or for radio or television programs. For local advertising sales agents, obtaining new accounts is an important part of the job. These sales agents may spend much of their time traveling to visit prospective advertisers and established clients. During sales calls, sales agents discuss clients' advertising needs and suggest how their products and services meet those needs. To find out as much information as possible about the clients and their products, sales agents ask about current and prospective customers and the geographic area of the target market.



Their job likes and dislikes

As with any occupation, there are advantages and disadvantages to working as an advertising sales agent. One of the biggest benefits is earnings, especially the potential for successful agents to earn more as they increase their sales. Agents also like having independence and interacting with clients. But higher earnings and autonomy require long, sometimes stressful, hours on the job. To avoid job burnout, advertising sales agents need to balance these challenges.

Advantages. Most employers pay an advertising sales agent using a combination of salary, commissions, and bonuses. Salary varies by geographic location but is generally no more than half of a sales agent's total compensation. Commissions are usually based on a percentage of the agent's sales. Bonuses are lump-sum financial awards

based on individual performance, on the performance of all sales agents in a group or district, or on the firm's performance.

Commissions directly link income with success, giving sales agents control over their earnings. Many agents enjoy having this control. For agents covering multiple areas or regions, commissions may also be based on the difficulty in making a sale in a particular area. But because sales revenue is affected by economic conditions in the industries that advertise, earnings from commissions are likely to be high when these industries are doing well and low when they are not.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), median annual earnings for all advertising sales agents were \$38,640 in May 2003, including commissions and bonuses. The lowest paid 10 percent earned less than \$19,920, and the highest paid 10 percent earned more than \$87,360 per year. In addition to earnings, advertising sales agents usually get reimbursed for expenses associated with making sales visits, such as transportation costs and meals. These sales agents often receive other benefits, including health and life insurance, a pension plan, paid vacation and sick leave, and personal use of a car. Some companies also offer incentives—for example, gifts or all-expenses-paid vacation trips—to outstanding sales agents.

Advertising sales agents cite nonmonetary advantages to the job as well. Like many other sales workers, advertising sales agents must work independently, and many prefer this autonomy when determining and responding to clients' advertising needs. Successful sales agents also enjoy the challenges of the work, such as deciding how to reach monthly sales quotas or solving clients' advertising problems. And many sales agents find that the ongoing client relationships they develop as sales agents are more rewarding than the brief interactions with clients that other sales workers may have.

Disadvantages. Selling can be stressful because income and job security depend on sales agents' ability to maintain and expand their clientele. The monthly sales quotas set by firms place considerable pressure on advertising



sales agents. The continual possibility of rejection is also stressful.

Many advertising sales agents work more than 40 hours per week, and their workdays are long and often irregular. The Internet and other electronic tools, including e-mail, allow agents to do more work from home or while on the road. They can send messages and documents to clients and coworkers, keep up with industry news, and access databases of client information.

Use of e-mail, in particular, has considerably shortened the time it takes to negotiate a sale and place an ad, allowing sales agents to accomplish more in less time. As a result, however, many sales agents find that work intrudes more easily on leisure time now than in the past. Still, advertising sales agents generally like being able to set their own schedules—and many agents point out that they choose to work long hours.

Their employment and outlook

BLS data show that advertising sales agents held about 141,300 wage-and-salary jobs in May 2003. Overall, a relatively small number of advertising sales agents were self-employed. Workers were concentrated in three industries: About 34 percent of all wage-and-salary jobs were with newspaper, periodical, book, and directory publishers; 27 percent were in advertising and related services; and 20 percent were in radio and television broadcasting. A relatively small number of jobs were in printing and related support activities and in specialized design services. Advertising sales agents were employed throughout the country, but jobs with larger, better known publications or radio and television stations were concentrated in big cities. Media representative firms were also concentrated in large cities.

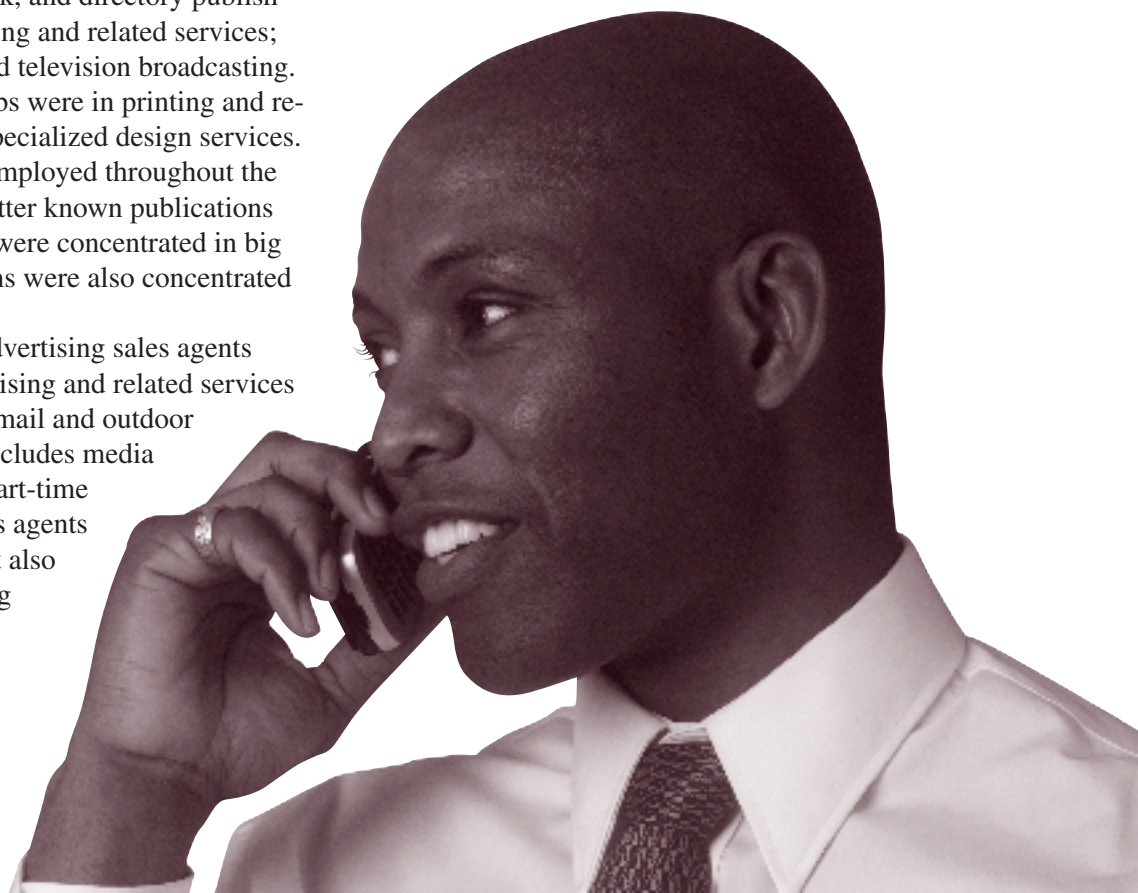
Part-time employment of advertising sales agents was most common in the advertising and related services industry, which includes direct mail and outdoor advertisers; that industry also includes media representative firms, in which part-time employment of advertising sales agents was rare. Part-time employment also was less common for advertising sales agents who work for local media employers, such as radio and television broadcasting and publishing organizations.

Employment of advertising sales agents is expected to have average growth between 2002 and 2012, due to increasing population and advertising revenue. Rising demand for advertising sales agents also is expected to stem from fast growth in cable systems and expansion of firms into growing niche markets.

There has been extensive consolidation in the industries employing advertising sales agents in recent years, and that trend is expected to continue, although at a slower pace. Consolidation is not expected to affect employment of advertising sales agents significantly because clients will still require sales agents to create and demonstrate advertising proposals.

Technology has allowed advertising sales agents to take on additional duties and increase their productivity. But because technology also has improved the quality of their services, agents' overall employment is not expected to diminish. Improvements in agents' accounting, proposal creation, and customer service have increased demand.

In addition to the job openings generated by employment growth, openings are expected to occur each year from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force permanently. Many advertising sales agents leave the occupation because they are unable to earn enough money. As a result, job





opportunities should be good, especially for those who have a 4-year degree or a proven sales record.

Still, opportunities for advertising sales agents fluctuate with the business cycle. The primary reason for this is that companies often spend less on advertising and ad campaigns during economic downturns.

How they prepare and advance

Training for advertising sales agents takes place mainly on the job. And like workers in many sales occupations, advertising sales agents rely on their sales ability more than their academic credentials when seeking to advance in the occupation.

Personality traits are especially important for advertising sales agents. Because they represent their employers and interact with executives of client organizations, advertising sales agents must have excellent interpersonal and written communication skills. Employers seek applicants who are pleasant and honest and who maintain a neat, professional appearance. Advertising sales agents set their own schedules and must perform their duties with little supervision. Therefore, employers prefer applicants who demonstrate leadership and who are self-motivated, organized, persistent, independent, and able to multitask.

For entry-level positions, especially those that involve

meeting with clients, some employers prefer to hire applicants who have a 4-year degree. College courses in marketing, communication, business, and advertising are helpful. A high school diploma may be sufficient for agents who sell over the telephone. In general, smaller companies are more willing to hire unproven sales agents.

Beyond entry level in the occupation, successful sales experience is more important than education when looking for a position. In most cases, newly hired advertising sales agents train with an experienced sales manager who instructs and observes the new agent in making sales calls and contacting clients. New agents then receive guidance on the portions of the sales process in which they need to improve. To provide more specialized training—for example, for agents who concentrate on sales to real estate

professionals or to automotive dealers—the employer might bring in a consultant.

Sales agents advance by gradually taking on bigger, more important clients. Those who have proven leadership ability and a strong sales record might advance to supervisory and managerial positions, such as sales supervisor, sales manager, or vice president of sales. Frequent contact with managers of other departments within the firm and with people in other firms may enhance opportunities by providing sales agents with leads about job openings.

Potential for advancement may also depend on the size of the firm in which an advertising sales agent works. In small firms, the number of supervisory and management positions is limited; as a result, advancement may come slowly. In large firms, promotion may occur more quickly.

For more information

To learn more about advertising sales agents, visit your local library or career counseling office. Look for resources about some of the industries in which advertising sales agents are employed as well as for information about the occupation itself.

Also consider researching similar occupations. Work-

ers who, like advertising sales agents, need sales ability and knowledge of their clients' desires and businesses include advertising, marketing, promotions, public relations, and sales managers; insurance sales agents; real estate brokers and sales agents; and sales engineers.

Among the resources at many libraries and career counseling offices are two BLS publications, the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and the *Career Guide to Industries*. The *Handbook* describes the job duties, working conditions, training, earnings, employment, job outlook, and more for nearly 300 occupations. The *Career Guide* is arranged similarly to describe more than 40 industries, including advertising. Both are also available online: the *Handbook* at www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm and the *Career Guide* at www.bls.gov/oco/cg/home.htm.

For detailed BLS employment and wage data about advertising sales agents, including national estimates and industry, State, and metropolitan area profiles, see the

occupational profile online at www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes413011.htm.

No single trade association provides career information about all advertising sales agents. For general information about the advertising industry, contact:

Advertising Educational Foundation
220 E. 42nd St., Suite 3300
New York, NY 10017-5806
(212) 986-8060
www.aef.com

For information about sales careers in newspaper publishing, contact:

Newspaper Association of America
1921 Gallows Rd., Suite 600
Vienna, VA 22182-3900
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