

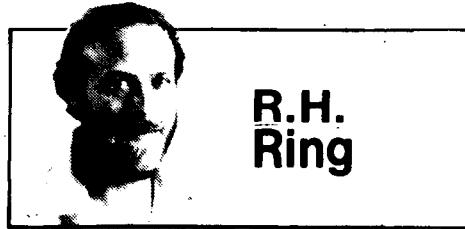
R.H. Ring: a major ad, coming soon to a newspaper truck near you

I can only blame this newspaper and the business in general. All I want to do is sit here and eke out enough prose to fill a space around the tanning-salon and pet-hotel ads. But suddenly I may be an ad, too.

The paper launched a promotion campaign last year. You've seen the results. The TV spots with the paper thunking down on average front porches everywhere. The dynamic newsroom panorama with editors striding purposely. They even dusted off the oldest one in the book, the presses rolling, rolling, rolling.

Then the faces behind the news came out. Sports writers stood shoulder to shoulder, jaws set firmly, gazing off at the horizon — plastered in posters on a fleet of delivery trucks and hundreds of newspaper racks and Hearst knows what else.

Then more spots were scheduled on the radio, with upbeat slogans sandwiched



Commentary

around a blurb for some columnist or feature you'd been trying to ignore every morning for years.

Backing up all these pitches were some penetrating demographic studies of our readers — who they are, what they like in the paper, how much they can take.

I'll never forget — it's a highlight of my

career — that an early study showed my column ranking behind "Ask Al" in popularity. "Ask Al" is a Lifestyle section column written by an ex-alcoholic who answers letters from those with an imbibing problem. I had never even heard of "Ask Al." I had to ask. A large number of readers were flipping right by me and the tanning ads to get to Al. It was a sobering thought.

Despite those findings, and after promoting everything from the comic page to the TV supplement, the hucksters eventually got around to me. A platoon from our public-relations agency marched into the office a few weeks ago. We had, as they say, a meeting.

The hucksters wanted to whip up some cream about this column and spoon it into the radio spots. Being "Ask Al" fans, they

knew little of me and my work. So they posed what they thought were a few simple questions: R.H., what are you trying to do with your writing? How do you see your role in the community?

They might as well have asked me who Al was. I didn't have the faintest. Like most of us, my self-image revolves around trying not to trip over my feet in public. But given a deadline, I promised to come up with something. Such are the demands and the skills of occupying the spaces around the ads.

Now the deadline has arrived. There's a pink message slip on my desk. But I'm stuck. It's not easy to sum up yourself in a sentence or two and be honest about it:

My role in the community? All I can come up with is this, accented as much as possible by dramatic narration and whis-

pering cymbals: "R.H. Ring . . . He rises every morning . . . drives to the office . . . has beans for lunch . . . drives home in the evening . . . and flips on the cable TV . . . Yours in The Arizona Daily Star."

Doesn't grab you, eh?

As for the purpose of my writing, you know as well as I do what they are looking for: Ahem. "R.H. Ring . . . He shakes up the power-brokers . . . lays the ridicule where it belongs . . . tries not to trip over himself . . . and slaps the shoulder of the Joe on the street. Have a snort every morning with Ring in the Star."

No way I'd allow something like that on the air. This business is shameless. It's enough to make you firm your jaw and gaze off at the horizon. If they want more than that, they're going to have to ask Al.