

50 *Great* Marketing Tips

Sure-Fire Ways

to Dazzle

your Clients

Market *for* Your Customer; not *from* Your Company

With the amount of resources that our business world devotes to marketing, it's not surprising to wander into a growing company today - any company - and find a fleet of human beings who are racing to yet another marketing meeting.

If you're fortunate, you'll merely be grazed by the onslaught of strategic marketers driving passionately to the boardroom. If you're unlucky, you could end up with long term physical and emotional scarring; the *Trampled By Marketing Managers* wing at your local hospital could be where you end up if you don't keep your head up.

Are they so intoxicated with the aura of the "next big marketing idea"? Are they, in effect, drunk with the pleasure of a revenue-filled future?

Are they so certain that their next marketing strategy is a guaranteed winner?

It is possible that there is a slight detail that they may be overlooking; a minor element that could throw a tiny wrench in their sales-filled future. What do customers think of the marketing strategy?

What does it ultimately matter if your colleagues, your friends, family, neighbors, and third cousin on your mother's side think if it doesn't resonate with your customer?

The number of companies that unconsciously travel on the blurred landscape of marketing groupthink is startling (would anyone like a "new" Coke™, by the way? How about a head cleaner for your Beta™ VCR? Anyone? I'll take orders at the end of the article...).

Yes, it's important that the people on your team support the marketing initiative. Yet even if you get everyone on your team rowing in the right direction, it's your customers' opinion that truly matters. They're the ones that need to be moved into action. They're the ones who need to be inspired by what you have to say, and the way you say it.

One way to ensure that your customers respond favorably to your marketing strategy is to conduct pre-implementation focus groups, as part of your market research commitment. It doesn't have to be fancy; just a simple questionnaire or few blank lines inviting customers to share their impressions and ideas.

Remember, too, that your marketing commitment does not stop once the ads hit the air, or the paper goes to press. Your commitment must be ongoing, and your systems must have mechanisms in place to capture ongoing feedback; you'll need to increase what works, and edit out what doesn't.

The rewards of catering your marketing strategy to your customer will be increases in marketing impact, brand awareness, and what ultimately matters: more sales. The punishment for *not* catering your marketing strategy to your customer... uhh...so how many New Coke's™ can I put you down for?

Focus, Focus, Focus!

We all know someone who we pleasantly describe as being *all things to all people*. You know the type: very helpful, always willing to sacrifice for a friend in need.

The kind of person that the world should recognize and reward, somehow. Maybe with a medal, or a parade, or a kind of sandwich named after them.

Now think about this *all things to all people* person that you know. Really recall them in your mind: recall a situation where they stretched themselves inhumanely thin to make sure everyone was happy. Enjoy the tingle you feel as you remember this person with deep affection and appreciation. Indeed, wouldn't the world just be a lovelier place if there were more of this kind of person out there? Couldn't, in fact, you use a coffee or maybe a donut right about now? Wouldn't this person get one for you if they were around?

Shouldn't the whole world be like this?

Now, with those tingles still pulsating through your body like you just swallowed a bottle of Mexican Jumping Beans, imagine that this person was at the head of your company, responsible for making a series of very hard decisions as to where the company should head, and how it should navigate through competitive waters.

Isn't it funny how those tingles can go away just as quickly as they came?

Yes, as your mind instinctively leaps to where you keep your special resume-drafting pen, you come face to face with the fact that these people might be pure, unmitigated, and unforgivably *disastrous* business leaders that get *a lot* of people fired or laid off, because they want to be all things to all people.

They're better off, as is the world itself, when they don't have to make cold and calculated business decisions.

Now think of your marketing message. Is it, by any chance, also trying to be *all things to all people*? You're not alone: an excessively larger number of companies, even those who are filled with people would never be accused of being *all things to all people*, have a marketing message that is stretched too thin. The result of this is the worst possible thing that can happen to your customers: *confusion*.

Your customers are looking to your company to fill a specific need; to provide them with a specific solution or benefit. You need a message focused on that need. You don't gain anything by diluting your marketing message, by being a *if you need it, we can do it* operation; that simply makes you look unfocused and perhaps desperate for business; a nuance that customers can pick up on with alarming accuracy.

Instead of being all things to all people, focus on what you offer, and craft your marketing message around that offering. Make it easy for your customers to make a buying decision.

Feelings (whoa whoa whoa) Feelings

There may have been a time, long, long ago, where the ideal marketing message conveyed to buyers the nuts and bolts of the good or service that was on the table for sale. One can possibly imagine an ad for, say, a moat in the 7th century going something like this:

For Sale: 1 Moat.

Will Hold Dragons and Other Deterrents.

You Will Buy It.

Serious Inquiries Only.

And it's not inconceivable to guess that an ad like this created such a demand, that there was a veritable *run* on moats. After all, a moat is what it is, and what more could someone want from an ad than this kind of functionality?

A lot!

A few centuries later, marketing science has evolved to cater to a more sophisticated customer base; one that not merely wants a moat, but wants to know how the moat is going to make them feel. Will it make them feel safe? Regal? Fairy Tale-ish? Today's sophisticated moat makers know that what you sell is not merely about the moat; it's about how your customer *feels* once they buy the moat

Customers, quite rightfully, expect to *buy* an experience; something that's going to solve a problem for them, help them achieve something, lead to something else, or be a relevant part of their personal bigger picture. Without question, whether your customer wants to buy a chocolate bar or an island, the underlying dynamic remains the same: your customer is buying more than the product that you're selling them; they're buying the *feeling* that goes with it.

This may seem rather flaky; as if a new age army had somehow taken over Madison Avenue and now everyone was buying and selling feelings. It's enough to make one trade in their Michael Bolton CD (for what, though, is outside the scope of this tip...thankfully).

Really though, there is nothing flaky here. Companies have been selling feelings to customers for decades. That feeling may be convenience (e.g. fast food), or positive thinking (e.g. self-help books), or achievement (e.g. premium cars). Examples are everywhere, from soft drinks to political campaigns. Therefore, marketing savvy companies need to focus upon what feelings they sell; or perhaps what feelings their customers demand, and how they meet that demand.

Once you are able to articulate the feeling that you sell *on top of* the good or service, you'll be able to craft your marketing message to get results.

Yes, but a Journey to Somewhere Very, Very Bad Starts with a Single Step, too...

We've all heard the expression, perhaps more times than we deserve to, that a *journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step*.

Okey dokey.

This makes sense, and we can all reflect upon our past successes or, um, the opposite, and see that, yes, our ascent towards achievement or descent to malfunction did indeed start with a single step.

There's no difference with marketing. The first step is to have a marketing plan, or else you will probably end up implementing its inseparable cosmic opposite: the anti-marketing plan.

There's another cliché that seems appropriate here. It goes: *If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail*. This is, like most clichés, annoying and true. And as a result of this universal principle, many companies with the best of intentions do not have a marketing plan, but rather, a marketing *intention*; an intention that goes: I'd like to sell my stuff to customers.

This may be the world's first and most fundamental marketing objective, but it is not enough; not *nearly* enough.

The reality is, if you don't have a plan, then you won't know where you're going; and when you don't know where you're going, then chances are that you'll end up where you don't want to be.

The way to avoid this potential pitfall? Have a marketing plan! This is easier said than done, of course, because creating a marketing plan involves a lot of hard work and commitment. Yet if you don't have a plan, you'll spend time,

money, and effort trying to shift your wayward marketing ship towards a safe harbor, and away from icebergs.

A solid marketing plan provides you with a clear mission and vision for your marketing initiative, milestones along the way to get your bearings, an evolving list of resources that you've used, are using, and will need to use, and a series of sub-plans and sub-projects that influence your marketing plan.

It might not be easy to develop a marketing plan, and it certainly won't come into existence overnight. Yet at the risk of getting a ticket for exceeding the 2 cliché maximum, it's a time to take risks and be bold, so here is cliché #3: *an hour of planning saves you a week of correction*. In few places is this truth as accurate as in the marketing field.

Perhaps we should introduce some more clichés while we're on a roll? Did you know *that a bird in the hand is worth two*—hey, do you hear that siren?

This Little Advantage Went to Market...

Whether you're selling the proverbial better mousetrap, widget, or Next Big Thing, you're already aware that focusing your marketing message is critical.

Doubtlessly, you don't need ivory-tower advice to inform you (or remind you) that your marketing efforts stand an infinitely better chance of long term survival with a focused message. After all, you don't merely want to tap into your customer's need or want, but you want to make sure that you bring them to *your* company; not to a competitor.

Despite this seemingly obvious rule, it's surprising to note the number of well-intentioned companies that neglect this kernel of wisdom. Far too many companies do not focus on the advantages that they offer customers.

Unless you enjoy the joys and thrills of having a clearly visible monopoly, natural or otherwise, you compete in a marketplace where your customers may have a difficult time distinguishing what your company sells, from your competitor's offerings.

Now, obviously, you are intimately aware of the entire suite of intangible, abstract, and *value added services* that you provide your customers on a daily basis. Perhaps it is the level of personal touch that you integrate into every transaction. Maybe it's the way you volunteer to handle all of the tedious paperwork for your clients. Or possibly it's the tutorials and presentations to customers on how to obtain the maximum value out of the new thing that they bought from you.

Again: you are certainly aware of these *little things* that your company does. However, you need to ask yourself a large, and possibly scary question: *are your customers aware of this, too?* If the answer is no, then don't be upset or

ashamed: there are so many companies in the same boat as you, that you could stick a Ledo Deck, Isaac the Bartender, 24-hour shuffleboard, and an entire civilization of television stars circa 1970 on this boat, and you'd still have room left for everyone who has not merely appeared on the Love Boat, but probably watched it, too (yes, it's okay, we all watched it; it's time to come clean!).

The strategy that you need to employ here; the lifeboat, as it were, that will allow you to escape this giant boat (hopefully not to the shores of Fantasy Island), is ensuring that you promote the *advantages* that you provide customers.

From where you sit, the differences between you and your competitors may be obvious and well-known; but only to insiders like yourself. Your customers, however, need to be informed of the solutions and benefits that you provide *over and above* the product and service. They need to know why they should buy the better mousetrap, widget, or Next Big Thing from *you*, and not the next listing in the phone book. The best and most effective way you can ensure that they know this is by making it a part of your marketing message.

Lead by Following

Achieving a leadership position in the market is the ideal goal, and the *nirvana* of every marketing professional. As such, a great deal of focus - and associated resources - is poured into achieving a leadership position in any of the popular marketing metrics out there: market share, brand loyalty, price, and so on.

Still, even if a company is not a leader of any of these measurements, or not yet a leader, the concept of *leading* a customer is a critical note to hit in any marketing message. Essentially, you want your marketing to tap into your customer's need, demand, or expectation, and *lead* her or him to a solution that your company, *conveniently*, is poised to provide.

Yes, absolutely, customers should be led, through marketing, to the solution that you provide. This isn't in any way contradictory to the concept of *putting customers first* or having *customer-centric* marketing. Certainly, the effectiveness of your marketing will depend on the degree to which you are catering to your target customer. You will want to put your customer as the center circle in whiteboard model that you're drawing in your strategic marketing meetings.

However, there is a very potent element of this effort to lead customers through marketing that many companies at best, do not appreciate, and at worst, are wholly ignorant of. It's the kind of marketing that takes place *after* the sale takes place.

Once a sale is made, your customer becomes an unmatched source of information that your company *needs* to access in order to ensure that a second, third, fourth, and twentieth sale is made to that customer, or by a chain of referrals that has been instigated by that customer.

You need to have processes in place to *follow* your customer once she or he has made a purchase, so that you can continue to dialogue and keep the relationship intact. Never think that your marketing work is done, or that your marketing efforts have totally succeeded, once a sale is made. Yes, sales numbers are a good measure of success, but it is just one part; you need to market to existing customers as rigorously as you do to potential customers; this is the only way to turn a first-time customer into a valued, loyal customer who not only buys more from you, but happily serves as a cost-free de facto marketing agent for your company in their community, and in their place of work.

An Emotional Marketing Poem in 5 Syllables: *Free Publicity*

Readers who have a marketing background are probably weeping at the splendid elegance of the poem in the title. For them, Shakespeare is really good, too, I suppose, but seriously: shall I compare thee to *free publicity* is infinitely more inspiring than *a summer's day*, is it not?

Well, perhaps not. The point here is not to debate the finer points of poetry. Rather, it's to highlight the stunning ROI factor of *free publicity*!

There are many ways to obtain free publicity. Websites across the globe have popped up and are in need of content; content such as an article documenting intelligent advice from your experience in the field.

Or what about your local business papers? They, too, are searching for quality content, and for stories that convey useful information aligned with the mandate of the paper.

There are still more ideas. How about a newsletter that you send out to your client database? They might straddle the line between information and advertisement, but as long as they aren't one dimensional thinly veiled attempts to sell, then people will read them in order to become more informed about a subject or a sector through your newsletter.

Or what about creating an online library of articles, tools, or other kinds of information? There is a great deal of public domain information available on the Internet, but the hard part of finding it in less than 6 or 7 years of Internet surfing. If your site became a clearinghouse for useful information, then that would certainly give your company something to boast about in a public relations capacity. Heck, it might even be worthy of a press release!

So, regardless of your feelings on poetry, the words *free publicity* can be universally seen as an inspiring phrase, which opens the door for your company to tout its unique solutions and advantages through a variety of free (ah, what a lovely word!) channels.

Zen Meets Marketing: Customer Service *is* Customer Service

Your team has gone through a small forest of flipchart paper to try and figure out why your customers -- current and potential -- are not responding to your marketing initiatives.

It can't be your price because all four of the Competitive Analysis reports that you've commissioned have told you that you're among the most competitive out there (though you won't be if you keep spending this kind of money on competitive analysis reports). And it can't be the quality of your product, because the quality people keep showing you those graphs where the dots fall within the lines -- which is evidently where they are supposed to be when everything is going very well.

So what's the problem? Why aren't customers flocking to your store, or your site, like everyone had expected that they would?

These are tough questions to answer. Let's try and ask a simpler one instead: have you promoted your customer service systems?

Many companies overlook their customer service as a marketing tool, and studies show that companies that have effectively used this tool conduct more business, and retain more customers, than their less competent counterparts.

For those with the ability to do this, however, the rewards are measurable: more sales, more customer loyalty, and more success; all because of the ability to exploit an excellent customer service record as part of a marketing strategy.

Identifying and promoting your customer service processes as part of a marketing message is not complex; in most cases, the data is available, and the task is to particular what is being offered to customers. Perhaps it is a more

intuitive site design that easily guides customers through their eCommerce experience. Or it might be providing in-store customers with the opportunity to try merchandise before they buy it, or to sample fully working demonstration units before they commit to purchase.

Whatever the element that may be in place to enhance customer service, this should be proudly, and loudly, conveyed.

Polishing up Your Marketing Thumbprint

It may be a surprise to learn that there was indeed a time, long ago, before ATM machines and DVD players, before 100+ channels and gas stations where you could do your grocery shopping, when the Internet was little more than a text-based communication system that ostensibly provided scientists with a mechanism to exchange information across time and space (of course, we know in reality that it was primarily used to debate the merits of Star Trek).

And in this pre-World Wide Web era, companies developed a tremendous understanding of, and appreciation for, printed marketing material. They realized that many customers were very open to receiving a real piece of paper in their hands, which promoted a good or service. Truly, there was something quite intimate about the connection that was made when a customer held, in their own hands, a marketing document that contained a company's strategy, tactics, objectives and key messages.

This connection has not changed, and all of the Internet advertising in the world will not erode this seemingly eternal human preference: out of all the sense that we use to guide us, touch is still the most *trusted* of them all. So a company that continues to incorporate paper-based marketing materials continues to enjoy added value, regardless of the success of their Web-based marketing.

Ironically, thanks to the number of choices available and profound advancements in paper and printing technology, it's become very difficult for companies to select the paper-based marketing options that are most appropriate for their unique marketing message.

That doesn't mean that all of the decisions are tough ones. For example, if you're marketing a solemn and dignified burial service, there's a strong chance

that you won't go with that red glossy paper with the flame borders. Or if you're putting together a flyer about your security firm, you're typically not going to opt for the sky blue with clouds and fluffy bunny stationery.

Other choices are, as you can imagine, more subtle and complex. The key to unraveling this potential knot before it starts is to consult the advice of experts who know all about the choices that lay before you, and can *objectively* share with you the pro's and con's of different options, including the impact that some choices will have on your budget.

Don't neglect paper-based sales tools! In an age where marketing is traveling at the speed of thought, crossing distances of time and space through an astonishingly interesting information superhighway, it is somehow comforting to note that despite how advanced our business world has become, there are indeed some things that, thankfully, never change.

Company, Market Thyself

There's an old expression that writers often use when they try and convince their customers or bosses about why it actually *matters* that they have something to write about, before anyone can expect a writing product to be created. The expression that writers use in these mostly hopeless situations is: *content is king*.

Simply, it means that while a writer might have a crafty or well designed way to say something, if the *content* itself is weak or vague, then there's only so much that the words can do. It's like having really nice wrapping paper (the writing), and a mediocre gift (the content). The ultimate result is a spoiled birthday party, no thank you letter, and no invitation to next year's bash.

Why is this such a massive problem? Because marketing, like many other important jobs in life, is often practiced by people who should not be practicing, whatsoever, in the industry. And these people, sadly, are often the biggest violators of the Content is King axiom, and oblige all of us to remain vigilant so as to constantly ward off its evil influence.

It's critical, therefore, for you to ensure that your marketing message is content-rich; that it actually *knows* what it wants to say, and the information is competent and well researched. It doesn't matter if you're building a presentation to deliver at Comdex™, or if you're putting together a brochure to sell your dog washing services. The strength of your marketing message relies on its content.

So how do you increase the content of your marketing message? The answer lies in discovering the depths of your company, and its marketing dynamic. You need to know how a marketing message fits within your marketing plan, and how you're positioned in the market relative to your competitors on such measurements as price, service and product quality.

The useful information that you derive from this self-exploration will help you craft a highly content-rich marketing message that both serves you, and indeed, serves your customer by helping them become more informed about the solution that you are ready to provide; and ultimately, helps you sell more.

Build a *Webscene*, not a Website

Somewhere between 7 and 10 billion web pages exist on the Internet right now, and growing. That's more than 1 web page per person.

So, for a moment, think of all the people you've ever known. You can stay in the business world if you want, but feel free to plunge into personal life as well. While you may, admirably, hold the view that all people are equal, is it not fair to say that, really, some of them are just more interesting than others? Aren't there some of them that you would prefer to be stuck in an elevator with? Aren't there some that you wish would wear a bell, so that you could hear them coming at a reasonable distance, and hide beneath your house until they pass?

Yes. Now let's go back to web pages. Some are more interesting than others. Why? Because they aren't web sites; they are *web scenes*. They don't merely convey factual information, such as hours of operation or contact phone numbers. Webscenes tell a story; they entertain as well as inform. They craft an emotional message, or many emotional messages, within what would otherwise be a fairly passive experience. Webscenes have the ability to draw visitors into the company; into its paradigm of how it views the world, and what problems it solves for customers. While there might be 10 billion web pages on the Internet, there probably aren't more than a few thousand webscenes.

Creating a webscene doesn't necessarily require a significant capital investment. Yet the real profitable investment to make here is old-fashioned *time*. Spend quality time brainstorming different webscene ideas. Approach them from the perspective of existing customers, and new ones. Decide what story your company wants to tell, and use text, colours, and design to convey it on a variety of levels to visitors. Spend some time surfing to websites that

have made a connection with you. Study them and see how they've developed their webscene. Pay attention to the colors, the layout, the text, the graphics, and the overall emotional richness of the site.

Remember, your website (or webscene) might be the only interface a potential client will have with your company. You don't have the luxury of talking with them and establishing an appropriate emotional connection; your website will have to do that for you. Yes, this is asking a lot of technology, but if you diligently do your pre-work, you will discover that it is indeed possible, and profitable, too.

Thank You for Leaving?

The Human Resource world is credited for a number of useful innovations, from the flex-day, to Casual Friday (that's usually the day after Casual Monday through Casual Thursday). Included in this list of human resource accomplishments is, of course, the *exit survey* to find out why employees have decided to become former employees. Such information is then used to (hopefully) increase retention, and reduce turnover.

The same applies to customers. Make a determined effort to find out why customers are leaving. The word *determined* is used deliberately in this context, because this may be a new concept for most people, for a few reasons.

1) Things may be going quite well; perhaps only a handful of customers are not being retained.

2) Perhaps there isn't a CRM tracking system in place - or the people to keep it updated if it does exist -- to even determine if customers are leaving, since there is no awareness of customer buying patterns (i.e. if Al the Chimp Trainer bought bananas from your store every week for a year last year, but hasn't stopped by for a few months, chances are you've lost him to Big Stan's Banana Emporium across town).

3) You might think that you're already aware of why customers are leaving. Maybe it's obvious: Big Stan sells bananas .50 cents cheaper than you do. Yet a Customer Exit Survey can dig deeper to find out if this really is the reason; or whether it's *enough* of a reason for customers to leave. Perhaps Al the Chimp Trainer would stay loyal, despite your higher prices, if you had carry-out service, and if you were open an hour earlier during the week. An exit survey will help you gasp the depth of this useful information.

Unless customers have left you because they are outright dissatisfied with what you're selling, they will not mind letting you know why they left. In fact, some of them may even appreciate the opportunity to be a part of your planning process; that their *2 cents* might lead to a change in how you do business. Whether it's through a telephone call, a mail survey (make sure to enclose a postage paid return envelope or you're not getting these back), or even an in-person discussion with some of your larger former customers, a Customer Exit Survey can help you retain more business in the long run.

Instigate Activity with Your Direct Mail; Inspire Activity with Your Advertising

The marketing world, like many other professional worlds, is experiencing fascinating change as a result of knowledge and technology advancements. The Internet, especially, continues to change the way marketing work is done: through websites, interactive “anytime, anywhere” product demonstrations, and other, well, really cool things.

One thing that is not changing, however, and will almost certainly never change, is the concept of direct mail. Whether it is conveyed through the postal system, an email server, or a brochure handed out at an event, direct mail is going to outlive every change that the 21st century and beyond throws its way.

The reason for this is simple: good direct mail works. This has been proved over and over. Just say the words *direct mail* to any successful copywriter, and watch their face glaze over with a kind of mystical contentment. Just say the same words to anyone who has successfully sold their product through direct mail, and the reaction can range from tears of joy, to speechless awe. (It’s probably a good idea to smile, nod, and back away slowly at this point.)

So if direct mail is so potent, why do so many direct mail campaigns fail? The number one reason is rather staggering: it wasn’t direct. Instead, it was advertising.

Direct mail *directs* a potential customer to do something. Direct mail does *not* stop at making customers more aware of what you’re selling; which is what advertising aims for. Direct mail is designed to *instigate* activity; to have a customer contact you and place an order (or “get free information and a no-obligation quote”, and so on). Advertising is meant to *inspire* activity; to plant

an idea in your mind and let it cultivate, so that you opt to choose one company over another. Direct mail can be measured by increased quotes or sales (which is why it is such a fan favourite, because it is rather easy to measure). Advertising is more subtle and long-term, and it is harder to determine if a customer made their buying choice because of your advertisement (though this is getting easier as more companies ask these questions).

Both direct mail and advertising can co-exist harmoniously within any marketing plan. They're cousins, and are born with different talents and ambitions. Yet if your company wants to *instigate activity*, then go with direct mail. If your company wants to *inspire activity*, go with advertising. Then stir, add water, and measure appropriately.

Know What You Don't Know

One of the more often forgotten features of the business world is that any company, no matter how big or historically enduring is only steps away from the brink of disaster; and should anything affect their success, there is a competitor company poised on the sidelines, doing some calf stretches, waiting to run onto the field and take over.

There are reasons, however, why some companies endure and grow, while others fade away. Some of these reasons can indeed be out of one's control; the price of energy, or a changing political policy can adversely change the fortunes of many companies, especially big ones that aren't as agile as they once were. However, a key success factor for surviving companies is that they are competent. They know things; and they know how to apply the things they know to succeed. Yet this isn't the whole story.

Smart, successful companies that survive *know what they don't know*. It's Socrates Meets Cubicle, and it's hard edge wisdom in the 21st century business world.

Knowing what you don't know is perhaps most needed in marketing. This is because most companies do not actually understand what marketing is, other than a vague process that generates a sale. Even longtime sales professionals, who may understand the *art of the deal* better than anyone, will sometimes not know what marketing is. Unfortunately, for a lot of companies that are on their way down, this may mean lost sales and general downward momentum. Tragically, in most cases, it wasn't that the people behind ineffective marketing decisions were lazy, negligent, or didn't appreciate the importance of marketing. Rather, it was that they basically didn't know what marketing was; and as such, made bad decisions. Unlike Socrates, they didn't know what they didn't know.

Admitting that you may not sincerely understand marketing, other than through some osmosis experienced during sales and what is read in business magazines, can be uncomfortable; after all, advertising one's ignorance is not something that our business climate seems to appreciate. Yet, if you think about it long term, accepting that you might not know all you need to know about marketing is not ignorance; it is courageous wisdom in action. It is looking at a situation honestly, and taking steps to address it. Cast in this light, admitting that you need some marketing help could be the most intelligent marketing decision you ever make; because it could be the pivotal one that keeps your company alive and growing for the long term.

Be Trendy

Did you hear the one about the guy who was on his way to the half-caf double latte shop while walking his electronic puppy and punching a wireless email to his low carb support group? He trended himself out of existence (which was a very trendy thing to do at the time).

Now, you don't have to follow the same fate, or put in that kind of work, to be trendy. You don't have to get rid of your cubicles (although they are pretty evil ideas, aren't they?), and you don't have to offer a Feng Shui assessment as part of your extended group benefits coverage. You don't even have to learn how to speak emoticon ;)!

All you need is to invest quality time in researching your industry, and identifying the trends that are shaping it on an ongoing basis. Make time to read industry magazines, newspapers, and web clearinghouses. Keep your finger on the pulse of what is happening in your industry on a global, national, regional, and local scale.

Too busy? Then delegate this important task to someone who can scan the information, summarize it, and present it to the group. This is what some forward-thinking companies are doing: assigning various team members to review various sources of information, and then deliver a quick presentation at a weekly team meeting. Everyone gets caught up on the trends, and has the opportunity to comment on how your company might want to take advantage of the new information.

Again, to be trendy, you don't need to install a cappuccino machine in your lunch room, or spend thousands of dollars to figure out what to rename your lunch room, since not everyone eats lunch in there. All you need is a focused effort on staying aware of the trends in your industry, a system to capture that

information, and a means to convey it to the larger decision-making group. If you succeed, you'll be part of another really awesome trend that so many businesses strive to achieve: increased sales and long term success.

I Can't Believe Someone Said That It's Not Butter

If you search your memory banks (the ones in your head, not in your computer) and reflect upon some of the most memorable marketing messages that have ever been created, you'll notice that a lot the really great ones didn't derive from Shakespearian content. Really, "he likes it, hey Mikey!"[©], is not what Ophelia said after Hamlet took a surprising second spoonful of Life Cereal[™], and "I can't believe it's not butter"[©] is not what Caesar uttered as Brutus returned his dagger to the margarine plate. Yet these quotes are probably responsible for selling more Life Cereal[™] and quasi-butter than anything else their respective manufacturers have ever done.

What's the genius here? It's not the content: it's the *testimonial*. It's the notion that someone *said* these phrases to someone else; which, instantly, gave it credibility -- the kind of credibility that a lot of people don't wish to give to marketing people, but will give to their next-door-neighbour without hesitation.

The testimonial is therefore one of the most highly potent marketing instruments at your disposal. You can capture this information on a one-to-one basis if your customer base is small enough, or you can offer a print-based or web-based survey that allows satisfied customers to provide narrative feedback. Let customers, put in their own words, the reasons that they are satisfied, and why they'll do business with you again. Some testimonials will be glowing, and say inspirational things like "I was 100% satisfied and cannot think of doing business with another company!". Other feedback will be more sober, and say things like "the word was of good value and good quality". This latter kind of nuts and bolts, blue-collar feedback is *just as important* as the former, motivational seminar-quality feedback, because some customers will not respond to what they might perceive to be exaggerated claims. For these people - and there are a lot of them - they'd much prefer to hear that *I can*

believe it's not butter, but I'm impressed nonetheless and recommend this product.

Additionally, try to credit all of your testimonials to actual human beings, preferably those in a decision-making capacity. Make sure that you ask permission before using someone's name, and if they are reluctant for any reason to advertise their identity, ask if you can just use their company name. Just make sure that the testimonial has an owner, or else it may not be perceived to be real.

“This is the finest marketing tip in history of marketing tips. If only the entire universe were made out of the same fabric as this advice...wars would end. Cats and dogs would play together in the streets. WHEN WILL THE WORLD APPRECIATE THE WISDOM OF THIS ADVICE??”

- Anonymous

Er...*cough*. Shall we move on?

Solutions For Sale... Get Yer Red Hot Solutions...

There is no shadow of pessimism on the fact that every single customer who has ever bought anything, from anyone, had a problem. They wanted, or needed, something that they didn't already have. In essence, they had a problem, and needed a solution, which was provided by a seller.

It's true. Whether a business in the dark ages sold leeches to help get the anger out of blood, or sells communication satellites in the 21st century, they were, essentially, selling a solution to a customer who had a problem: too much angry blood, or a fuzzy reception on channels 800 through 900 on a television set.

Businesses who market their products or services successfully market their *solutions*, of which their product or service is the means; not the end. The end is solving a customer's problem, and taking that particular problem away. They may have other problems afterwards (that communication satellite takes 11,000 "D" batteries, and you know how hard *those* are to find in quantity...). Yet meeting current problems is the goal of every marketing strategy, and the objective of every sale.

Crafting your marketing message around this fact is a 2-step process.

First, do some research and find out what problem your product/service is solving. There may be more than one, and the answers here may not be obvious; there may be major solutions, and sub-solutions. Some of the solutions may be tangible, such solving your customer's need for a really good cup of coffee. Other solutions may be abstract, such as solving your customer's need to enjoy a good cup of coffee quickly and conveniently. All of these need to be drawn out (not unlike angry blood) and documented.

Second, after you've gathered your solution information, map it out against your existing marketing program. Are you fully catering to the solutions that you provide? Are there marketing messages that you're missing out on? Would adding the words "quickly and conveniently" enhance that coffee ad that you have on that billboard? After all, if these are solutions that you are providing, then just a handful of words can add immense depth to your message, and further distinguish you from your competition.

Remember, every customer, everywhere, has a problem and is looking for a solution. Tap into this way of looking at things to increase the impact of your marketing message and to, ultimately, increase sales.

Level the Playing Field (Somewhat)

I once knew a used car salesman who was an extremely honest person. He was also a successful used car salesman, despite the fact that on the list of the untrustworthy occupations, used car salesman is always at the top, no matter how short or long the list is.

The problem, my friend described to me, was in what he called asymmetrical information. Basically, people who came to him poised to buy a used car were very aware that he knew more about the used car than they did; which tilted the tables in his favour. And in most cases, unless he was dealing with a mechanical wizard, the perception was true: he *did* know more about the used car than its next prospective owner. This wasn't *his* fault, he lamented to me, it was just the nature of the business.

Although remedying this problem was not possible -- some customers would need years of instruction to learn about the inner world of car mechanics -- my friend did do his best to mitigate the lopsided relationship by providing as much quality information to his potential customers as possible. This included inspection reports, third-party articles on the car in question, and even letting potential new customers call some of his existing customers (with their approval, of course), for a testimonial that: *This Used Car Salesman Was Not One Of Those Used Car Salesmen.*

And this selling strategy worked, because my friend understood that customers want to buy things on a level playing field; or at least one that is comfortable level. The people who bought used cars from my friend didn't have as much knowledge about cars as he did; but they *did* learn information that was useful to them; information that gave them the confidence that they needed to make the purchase.

The moral of the story? Educate your customers. Level the playing field as much as is reasonable, and remember that a confident customer will feel *good* about their purchase; and their next purchase, and the one after that... you get the picture.

Speak Up!

There is a line - sometimes not all that fine - between speaking plainly with your customer, and being unforgivably patronizing. To avoid this insult on your customer's intelligence, remember two words: *Speak Up*.

That doesn't mean YELL (though it might if your customer is hard of hearing and asks you to SPEAK UP, SONNY). What it means is that you should not talk to your customer like an infant who cannot grasp the complexity of what you want to say. Frankly, unless you are strictly inside sales and your customers are highly informed and appreciate technical lingo, if you cannot break down what you're trying to sell to suit the average person on the street, then the improvement needs to come from your selling technique -- not from your customer's ability to understand.

There's nothing wrong with, of course, being polite, and occasionally asking your customers if they would like you to explain something further. It's also important for you to watch body language to determine if your customer is still on the same page - or if you're patronizing them with your approach.

Respect the potential for your customer to grasp what you are trying to say, and accept the responsibility for making sure that the message is conveyed clearly. If it isn't, then try again: but from a different *angle*, not from a different *level*. Body language and tone convey a massive amount of information, and if you are speaking *down* to your customer, they'll know. They may not actually understand what you're saying in some cases, but they'll know; just as sure as they'll know *not* to do business with your company.

So speak UP!

Outreach: When Reaching Out Isn't Good Enough

Products and services aren't the only things that are innovated; words enjoy a little innovation treatment from time to time, too. Truly, who can imagine a day going by without *nuking* food in a microwave, or someone doing a good thing at work that might end up in the hall of fame for good things at work: *best practices*. Another item that has to fall on the list of really clever, innovated terms is *outreach*.

Nobody is certain as to where this term was born, but the nonprofit community development world in particular world seems to have taken a shine to it; especially since the term *outreach* really captures the kind of work that they have to do: they literally have to *outreach* into the world in order to be heard, to spread their message, and to generate support (financial or otherwise). They cannot merely *reach out*; that is not enough. They have to *outreach* - go beyond a typical reaching out - in order to capture their audience.

Business marketing can learn a great deal from the nonprofit world's *outreach* concept. Perhaps 20 years ago, it was enough to offer standard marketing fare - advertisements here and there, word of mouth - and stay in businesses. The last decade has shown us that this is not nearly enough; new business must be developed through marketing on a continuous basis. Now, things have gone into an even higher gear: developing new business through reaching out is *not enough*. Businesses must *outreach* to new customers; they must assert themselves within their own marketplace, but potential other marketplaces as well. Outreach means that marketing must be viewed as a pivotal business function with the space to take risks -- *not* as a limited input to, or an extension of, sales.

Let the term *outreach*, and all of its layered meanings, become a part of your corporate vocabulary. Let it drive you to go beyond the traditional marketing

boundaries and introduce your product or service to new markets. A little motivational rule for highly successful entrepreneurs is to make at least two cold calls every day in new territory; not just to hopefully bring on a new customer, but to try and glean information about what it takes to sell to customers in a different segment.

So, make two cold calls per day as part of your outreach; it may not give you overnight success, but it will keep you always looking out beyond the borders of your sales limits. And who knows? You must just *outreach* yourself into a brand new customer base.

Marketing as an Investment, not as an Expense

There are some highly accomplished business people out there that think marketing is, more or less, selling products or services to customers. This traditional (and very, very wrong) definition of marketing typically further limits itself by presuming that most of the promotional activity involves advertising, such as through newspapers, magazines, television, or brochures.

Indeed, there may have been a time where this definition of marketing was good enough; back when companies could set up permanent camp in a sector and never fear competition from national or international players. However, the world has become much more interesting since that time, and more companies are appreciating that marketing is an incredibly rich and rather fascinating exploration of customer wants, needs, and problem solving. There are substantial elements of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and even in some respects, spirituality all integrating within the concept of marketing.

This idea isn't designed to inspire people to choose a career in marketing (though it is quite fun - although we might be a little bit biased). Rather, it's to convince people to look at marketing under this wider lens: marketing is an investment in your company's future, as valid an investment as an injection of venture capital.

Why? Because when you invest in marketing, you are fueling your businesses ability to achieve its primary financial goal: to achieve revenues. You may have a myriad of other goals that can certainly include non-financial goals, such as being socially responsible and promoting an idea, but your ultimate financial goal is to sell your product or service. Marketing is therefore not merely a tool to achieve this goal; this has been the erroneous view of marketing that we want to change. Marketing is, in fact, the driving force that underlies and provides the foundation upon which this goal is achieved.

Stated this way, marketing literally *leaps* up the corporate agenda and takes up residence where it must always be: at the top two or three. It must be focused upon at every planning session and in every team meeting. Why? Because marketing is not merely a *nice-to-have* that business can spend on when the budget money is there (usually a few weeks before the fiscal year end). Marketing is the pillar upon which your business will exist. It's as important to your business as the cash that investors (be they stockholders or you, personally) put into the company.

Marketing is an investment, not an Expense. Emblazon this sentence in your mind and in the minds of your colleagues, and you'll reap growth and profits far into your profitable future.

Every Customer is an Un-Secret Agent

One of the interesting, yet perhaps scary things about word of mouth advertising is that it reflects the overall mental health of the society in which those words and mouths exist. For example, a society that is very focused on safety will tend to convey this aspect of a good or service through their word of mouth communication. Or a society that is focused on the number of gadgets something has will tend to speak the language of *gadgetese* to each other.

This is interesting, yes, but this isn't the scary thing. The scary thing is a society will also reflect, in its word of mouth advertising, whether it is more willing to promote a good news or a bad news story.

Take a 10-second scan of a newspaper the next time you get a chance, catch the first 10 minutes of any newscast, or overhear the first conversation that most co-workers have in the morning.

It's usually about something bad or lamentable.

Our society, for reasons that are still being discovered by researchers, is much more willing to convey and receive bad information, than good. For businesses of all kinds, this is just plain scary: in terms of impact, an unhappy customer can do more damage than the good that 10 happy customers can achieve.

This is just how our society operates and successful businesses accept this reality by treating each customer as a potential un-secret agent. In other words, each customer is quite capable of being an agent of your business *out there* in the real world.

This capability, strangely, becomes almost an absolute certainty as the customer experience becomes worse. In other words: if you give a customer

the best sales experience they ever had, they might (but probably won't) mention it to a neighbour, a colleague, or a friend. However, offend a customer - even slightly - and it will make the rounds through society's underground communication channel faster than if carried by fiber optic cable.

Your strategy is to approach each customer as if they are, quite literally, an agent of your business; an agent who has the microcosmic power to improve, or imperil, your future sales.

This awareness alone should give salespeople the patience that they need when dealing with customers who may not be acting reasonable or rationally; or who are being just plain nasty. Remember: there's more at stake here than the individual customer interface; your businesses reputation may be on the line.

So take a deep breath, and just keep repeating to yourself: every customer is an un-secret agent, every customer is an un-secret, every customer is an un-secret... and that should get you through most situations without causing long term damage.

And if that doesn't work, you can always tell your colleagues tomorrow morning about that awful customer you had the day before... you know how people *love* negative stories...

Analyzing the Competition

You know your product, and your service. You know your customers, and your business model. You know everything there is to know about your business.

Perhaps. Yet do need to know what the marketing strategy of your competition is?

Knowing the marketing strategies, and characteristics, of your competitors will prevent you from reacting to events in your market; instead, you'll accurately predict your competitor's moves -- and sometimes pro-actively position yourself to exploit that adjustment. Sometimes you will implement action steps that protect you from your competitor's marketing plans. Other times, you will exploit an opportunity to realize more market share before your competitors achieve that objective. In still other situations, you'll intentionally do nothing; but with the confidence that comes from deliberate action, not breath-holding hope for a positive outcome.

Understanding the marketing strategy of your competitors is an element of a competitive analysis. It includes accurate and relevant information that you can use to steer your marketing ship. The most comprehensive competitive analyses will include not just qualitative information, such as who is doing what, but quantitative information as well: when are they doing it, and for how long. A useful competitive analysis will also include pragmatic recommendations, along with realistic cost and time estimates, for implementing action based on the findings. While it is rare for any business to act on every recommendation in these types of reports, even one move can mean the difference between your marketing success and failure.

Listen to Employees

Businesses are often referred to as families; not because they are dysfunctional and someone always forgets to put the garbage out, but because families are typically comprised of various personalities that respond to situations in different ways. (Trying to figure out where to go on family vacations is one of the most entertaining expressions of this diversity.)

So, since many businesses reflect diversity of personality styles and types, why do so many business leaders neglect to tap into this incredibly cost effective source of marketing information?

Answering this question might require an entire book; and we'd still be where we started, because we wouldn't know how to solve this problem. So let's leave the book for another day, and go straight to the solution.

As you may have started to guess, the solution is not nearly as complicated as the problem: consult with your employees. Run your marketing ideas by them. Don't unfairly put employees on the spot by asking loaded questions such as *is this marketing technique effective?*, because the job security fairy will whisper in many of these employees' ears and tell them to say *yes*, regardless. Instead, ask questions such as: *did you have an emotional reaction to this marketing technique? Can you please summarize it in a few words?* As them how they think customers will respond. Ensure that they look at things from their experience with customers.

Aside from being extremely cost-effective, by running your marketing ideas by your employees, you will be inviting opinion from a wide cross-section of people. Avoid groupthink, and involve all departments, and levels. Yes, this can create some interesting dialogue; especially when marketing meets finance (sparks can fly). But the more people who provide feedback, the wider understanding you'll have of how your marketing message is coming across.

You shouldn't base your marketing strategy solely on this internal feedback, of course; you will want to look externally as well. But you shouldn't neglect internal resources, either, as so many businesses do.

Be Needy

A sale provides a solution for a customer's wants or needs. That will never change. What will change - indeed, what *has* changed - is the complexity of this seemingly simple and self-evident maxim.

It is no longer reliable (assuming it ever really was) to expect customers to articulate all of their wants and needs. In the past, it was understood that neglecting to meet a customer want or need meant a lost sale; that there was a market out there of potential customers that wasn't being effectively tapped.

For example, let's say you sold hot dogs outside of a baseball stadium, and business was pretty good. Yet someone mentioned to you that you could sell upwards of 100 veggie hot dogs a night if you added them to your menu. Logically then, by adding veggie dogs, you began to meet the wants/needs of a new customer group: vegetarians. The result: more sales, more customers, and more profits.

Yet as noted above, things have become more complex than this. Now, business must not simply meet the wants and needs of new customers (such as vegetarians in the above example). Business must anticipate the unarticulated needs of *existing customers* in order to deliver customer satisfaction.

So let's go back to the hot dog stand, before the veggie hot dog era. You are selling 200 hot dogs a night, but you are asking each customer how you can improve business. A large number of customers tell you that they'd appreciate it you would stock bottled water, instead of just soft drinks.

The next night you do just that, and sell 200 hot dogs, just like the night before. Yet things have changed: your customers are happier; you are meeting a want/need that, unless you dug up, would remain undiscovered.

And why do you want happy customers? Because happy customers are good for repeat business, and great for referrals. Happy customers are the lifeblood of any successful business, whether one sells hot dogs, veggie dogs, bottled water, or anything else. Any cost effective means of increasing customer happiness - including discovering and meeting their unarticulated wants/needs - is a strategy that can only lead to increased sales success.

Develop Strategic Alliances

If you've ever played Monopoly™, you're familiar with the ways in which you can win the game (or the ways in which you can lose). A lot of it depends on shrewd purchases, and some luck too -- particularly when you hold your breath and make that horrific run through an opponent-owned and well-proprieted Boardwalk and Park Place. If you're playing with more than one opponent, winning Monopoly™ also depends on building strategic alliance, on crafting relationships that serve both parties and offer them protection against competition, market forces, and just plain bad luck.

Business can learn an enormous amount from Monopoly™; and not just that behind every Community Chest card is the possibility that you've won second place in a beauty contest. Business can learn the value of strategic alliance as it relates to sales and marketing success.

There will be times when you decide to add a product or service line to your existing portfolio, so that you can provide customers with *one-stop-shopping*. For example, a long time ago, many gas stations used to sell, well, just gas, and maybe some car-related products like oil. Now, you can do anything from withdraw money to do your grocery shopping at some gas stations.

However, the more you grow, the incremental additions to product or service lines become ineffective for cost and quality; after all, it just won't be possible to continuously add products and services when you realize your customer would buy them from you. Even the gas station people will reluctantly say *sorry, no can do* to a customer who, in addition to some gas and a loaf of bread, would also like a full body massage.

The way through this situation, and to deliver as many solutions to customers as possible, is through strategic alliance. Develop an inner-circle of partners

who, like you, will share referrals. When a satisfied customer of yours voices a need for another want or need -- or if they respond favorably to your suggestion that they add some more value to their purchase - route them to one of your strategic partners. Depending on the closeness of the relationship, you may even stock your partner's material (i.e. brochures and things) in your store, or on your website.

In this way, you are leveraging what you offer customers by plugging in someone else's business. While you may not share in the profits from these sales (though commission agreements are common), the most important will be meeting wants and needs. This increases customer satisfaction, which is the only key to customer retention and positive referrals.

Pardon Me Mr. Earthworm, Are Your Bait Needs Being Met?

We've heard of the proverbial umbrella salesman in the desert, or the air conditioner repair shop in the Arctic Circle. That is, we've all heard of how important it is to monitor and target your demographics.

You may be selling a highly useful or desirable item or service, but if you aren't selling it to the right people in the right place, you might as well be selling Twinkies™ at a weight loss camp. (Hey...?)

Many businesses are aware of the importance of monitoring and targeting the right demographic; yet that doesn't necessarily mean that they are actually doing an effective job of it.

The reason for this is that creating systems that track and target demographic information requires focus. In other words, tracking and targeting demographic information is a *program* that should co-exist along with the sales and marketing function. Many businesses neglect to do this; they don't devote the necessary resources to gather and monitor this information.

Tracking and targeting demographic information requires a concerted, program-based effort to determine **who** you are selling to today; **who** you sold to yesterday; **who** you might sell to tomorrow; and then **analyzing** the trends that emerge. It's easier said than done, which is why it requires a program focus; it must become an everyday part of your business operations.

This sounds like a lot of work - particularly for businesses whose idea of tracking and targeting demographics is to track responses to a direct marketing ad or hits to a website - but, in the long run, it's not a lot of work at all; and certainly less work, and more profitable, than the inefficient guesswork that is taking place in many businesses.

So integrate demographic monitoring and analyzing systems into your operations, and get to know your customers on a much deeper level. Knowing them - who they were yesterday, who they are now, and who they'll be tomorrow - is a key competence that sets successful businesses apart from the crowd.

For a Limited Time: Aristotle. Act Now!

Aristotle, who has provided insight for a number of things in life, is a particular favourite among marketing professionals because of his position that *you cannot manage what you cannot measure*. (The popularity of this statement among marketing types is only just ahead of his other, less well-known but equally sage pronouncement: *let's take a look at this over a nice three hour lunch*.)

For decades, “measuring your marketing” meant figuring out how many sales were generated by an advertisement or marketing campaign. Still, even this seemingly simple calculation was often ambiguous, because it was usually a “guestimate” to determine how many people bought something because of an advertisement they saw, or a radio jingle that they heard.

Measuring marketing investments is now more accurate and more interesting (which is also very good news; marketing people, as a breed, have a very low threshold for boredom).

Easy to use software can accurately determine the number of inquiries, leads, and sales generated by a single piece of direct mail. At the same time, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software allows marketing professionals to assess the impact of marketing investments over time, and to more accurately determine (through surveys and other feedback mechanisms) which marketing campaigns have the highest ROI over the short, medium, and even the long-term.

This is especially important for those who sell big ticket items. Why? Because, for example, planting marketing seeds in 2004 might not lead to a sale until 2007; and without a way to measure the marketing campaign, the 2007 campaign - which may be very different than the 2004 campaign -- may be

erroneously credited with cultivating the sale. Guess what happens when a fundamentally weak 2007 campaign - which everyone is cheering because it is “causing” 2007 sales - gets renewed for 2008 and beyond? Yes, you guessed it: lower sales. Why? Because it wasn’t the 2007 campaign that got through to the customer; it was the 2004 (run by the guy who was fired in 2005 because of the poor 2003 campaign).

So make sure that you develop marketing strategies that you can measure, and just as importantly, make sure that you’re *measuring the right thing*. Neglecting to do both of these things can, and does, undermine the potential of any marketing plan, including some of the great ones.

The Price of Perception

We've all heard the phrase *perception is everything*. Maybe we've heard it so often, and in so different many contexts, that it's on the edge of becoming a cliché (if not already).

That *perception is everything* in marketing, which is often the laboratory within which mad marketing scientists brew new and exciting perceptions, is not news at all; yet what has escaped a lot of notice, from both marketing and sales professionals alike, is that price, too, is subject to perception. That is, the price of a product or service is not a black and white number; it is a way to communicate the right message to your customer.

What is the right message? Value, of course!

You need to ensure that your customer is aware that he/she is getting a *great deal* from you. To do this, you need to understand how both your products, and your prices, differ from your competitors. Remember, your competitors may claim to sell the same thing that you do, yet at half the price.

Is this possible? No; in most cases, it isn't.

What is often possible, though, is that your competitor is not selling the same thing you are; either what they offer doesn't have all of the features, or doesn't provide all of the benefits. While you may not wish to engage in a marketing campaign where you actually refer to your competitor/their product and compare it with yours, you can accomplish a great deal by separating yourself from "the others" by telling your customer that while you're selling healthy apples, your competitor is selling rotten oranges (or perhaps even lemons).

Yes, the bottom line price of an item does mean something to your customer. It's money that they'll no longer have once they do business with you. But remember, inasmuch as the price matters, the message that is conveyed *through* that price is the task of marketing and sales professionals. Make sure that it is the right message- that your customer always feels that they are getting exceptional value from you, and *only* you.

Seller, Risk Thyself

The world of potential customers is populated with many risk-seeking people, ranging from everyday lottery ticket buyers to *let it all ride on red* Las Vegas thrill seekers.

However, while risk seekers may be everywhere - even on your website right now, or browsing in your showroom - this doesn't mean that they necessarily want to accept *any* risk by doing business with you. On the contrary, even if you sell skydive parachutes or bungee jump cords, you should expect that your customer would prefer to have absolutely zero risk in the process. Or to put it the other way: they'd like you to assume as much risk as possible.

How do you assume more risk? Through your guarantee!

Make sure that you convey your risk-mitigating *guarantee* in your marketing. It doesn't have to be right at the top (though it can, if you sell items in a marketplace that is rife with risk adverse customers, such as used car sales). You do not have to absorb all of the risk through a 100% money-back guarantee (though you may have to; especially if a leading competitor has set that standard). Yet you can do a number of things to mitigate the risk for your potential customer; to give them that gentle *nudge* that they need to pick up the phone, surf to the site, or drive to your store.

The money-back guarantee is one option. But perhaps even a partial guarantee would suffice. This is often what magazine publishers offer clients (i.e. "simply cancel anytime and do not pay the un-mailed portion of your subscription"). Or, if you don't want to absorb the purchase cash price risk, then what about your service? Offering customers a time-honoured warranty, ranging from a month to several years (or even lifetime, for some things), can go a long way towards shifting the risk *from* your reluctant customer, *to* your

business; and thus clearing the way to another sale, and of course, another long-term satisfied customer.

Just make a point of incurring some risk from your customer.

Go Below the Surface

Those smart people who study consumer behaviour will tell you, often at the least bit of provocation, just how *interesting* people are when they buy things.

And they're right: people are fascinating, especially when they buy things. So much comes into play during the buying/selling transaction experience: elements of culture, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and all kinds of other *ology's*. And while you may not have the time, or the need, to learn about all of the weird and wonderful not-so-obvious things about consumer behaviour, you should know something about price.

For most purchases, price emerges as the primary discussion topic. Even if you sell products/services that have a fixed price, the sticker price itself - and the relatively different sticker prices of the other products/services you sell - serve as a kind of topic for discussion (e.g. "if you're looking for a more economical model that offers you many of the benefits of this model we're looking at here..."). In fact, price can become such a dominant topic of discussion, that marketing and sales professionals can be lulled into thinking that this is all that customers care about. This is where your consumer behaviour expert friend would clear his/her throat and say: WRONG!

Price is just *one part* of the customer decision-making process; yet because it typically dominates most conversations between buyers and sellers, it can seem like the *only* part. It's safe to say that 95% of what people buy are things that they *want*, rather than what they *need*. It's also safe to say that 95% of purchases are made based on how they make customers *feel*.

95% is a lot! That means that even if your customer is focusing on price, you must be aware that beneath that surface dialogue - and not even all that deep

below the surface - is a complex world of feelings and desires; and it's your job to tap into that underworld without irritating your customer.

How do you do this? By skillfully emphasizing service and benefits along with price. You don't want to outright remove price from the discussion; that will, in most cases, actually backfire, since your customer may feel that they are about to embark on yet another irrational buying decision (the kind they made in the past, for that sports car they couldn't afford or that cruise vacation, and now regret doing so). So keep price as part of the discussion, but carefully add that the customer is getting *more* than just the product/service that will appear on the invoice.

Talk about value added services, after-sales service, and anything else that adds depth to the dialogue with your customer. If you don't offer a warranty - perhaps you sell perishable goods - then talk about your long list of satisfied customers, or how important it is that you build a long-term relationship with all of your customers.

Referring to these things may not seem like a big deal, especially if your customer is ostensibly focused on price. Yet, as the consumer behaviorists would want to passionately point out: it's almost always about *more* than price, even if that remains the "reason" that the purchase was made.

Keep Your Website Breathing

It's remarkable to observe just how much money some businesses spend on creating their website. Yet once it's up, they never touch it again.

The logic behind this neglect is that businesses feel their website is like a storefront or a catalogue, and since those things don't change regularly, then their website doesn't need to either.

This is very flawed logic!

The reason that storefronts and catalogues don't change on a regular basis isn't that they *shouldn't*, it's because they *can't*! It is simply too time consuming and costly to update a building with new paint and furniture every six months, as it is to layout a new catalogue. But a website is not limited in these ways. A website is *code*. Code can be changed.

Some websites might not be cost effective to update the entire interface. But what about the text? That can, and should, be changed frequently; every month or more is not unreasonable.

Why should you change your site? Because it gives your existing customers the clear impression that your business is *changing*; it isn't some stale piece of real estate on the web that has weeds growing on the front lawn and garbage piling up on the porch.

How much of the text should you change? Not as much as you think. You don't have to go through a rewrite; which could take weeks and cost thousands. The content is already there. You don't have to spend a cent researching it. You just need someone - perhaps you, or perhaps a writer - to reiterate it. To give it a slightly different spin; maybe referring to a recent event, if applicable.

You don't need to give your website a facelift in order to stay fresh. But you do need to mix it up a bit. You can even have a cycle of different web texts that you simply copy and paste every few months. This will give your customers the impression that you are an adapting, changing business, and not an abandoned warehouse on the web, gathering cyber dust.

In Jargon We Trust

One of the best marketing pieces I've ever read was a direct mail letter for a magazine about sport fishing. In the letter, the writer masterfully inserted about 30 terms that *only* serious sport fishermen would understand. These were terms that I had simply never even seen before, yet I could tell they were intrinsically linked to the world of the sport fisherman.

When I read the letter, my first thought was this: what a mistake! They're alienating so much of their potential target audience! And then, within a few minutes, a second, more intelligent thought emerged: yessssss, of course! The letter is building a trust between the magazine publisher and the customer; telling them, through the use of these esoteric terms, that they are both on the *same team*. That they speak the same jargon.

They were trying to build credibility. And it worked! The letter was a huge success.

Why did it work? Not because it used jargon that only insiders would understand; but because it understood, from the beginning, that it had a better shot of success - that is, more people would buy the magazine -- if it took this narrow path to the real hard core sport fisherman, then if it sent out a general letter to those who are interested/may be interested in sport fishing.

The person who wrote the letter obviously knew that specialists in *any* field love to use jargon. It's one of the non-financial rewards of becoming an expert; the ability to identify and embrace those who *know* from those who *don't*.

Take care to build credibility by knowing the industry you are selling to and maximizing your rapport with customers in this area through ‘knowledge exchange’.

However, if you aren’t an expert yourself in what you’re selling, you must get some outside help to make sure that the terms you’re using are the ones that those “in the know” will accept. Otherwise, they will immediately spot you as a “wannabe imposter”, and reject your message.

Kind of like when you were a kid and your school principle said that the school science fair would be *cool*. Didn’t he know that saying that things were *cool* stopped being cool ages ago? What he should have said was that the school science fair would *not suck*. Then everyone would have expected it to be cool.

Isn’t it obvious?

And if he had looked for some outside help, he would have learned this, instead of losing even more credibility with the students.

Cool. I mean, come on. He might as well have said that it was *radical*.

Actions Speak Louder than Donations

Donating money to a worthy cause in your community is always a wise marketing move.

However, donating money is, sometimes, not perceived as the best way to demonstrate a social responsibility commitment.

What often generates the best PR bang for your socially responsible investment buck is *time* and *effort*.

So in addition to donating money, you may get more high impact exposure if you actively involve yourself in a community event. It could be sponsoring a running team within your ranks to join in a charity 5k “fun run”. Or it could be volunteering your expertise to mentor at-risk youth, or sponsor an after-school program. Or maybe you’ll want to connect with a high school and sponsor an essay-writing contest (which you will judge) and award the winner a scholarship (or even a bit of one) towards university. The possibilities are endless.

Donating money is still an exceptional way to demonstrate community involvement, and you should do it and talk about it (e.g. on your website, in a corner of your newsletter). Yet donating money - and nothing else -- is not widely perceived by the buying public as a *commitment* to communities, in the way that investing time and effort is.

So do both, and not only will the grateful recipient of your money and time benefit from your generosity, but, hey, your positive PR buzz will increase, too.

Heads You Win, Tails You Lose

It's essential to promote the benefits of the product/service that you're selling. However, while promoting benefits is critical, it is also important to convey, somewhat more delicately, the *consequences* that the customer will face if they don't buy your product/service.

Now, this sounds rather unfriendly - as if you're threatening your customer with some kind of punishment if they don't buy! This is not what is being advocated here.

What you want to do here is *politely* and *carefully* explain to your customer that he/she could stand to *lose* something if the sale isn't made. Perhaps it will be that he/she won't solve a problem or achieve a goal.

This isn't threatening at all; it's rational.

For example, let's say that you sell tires, and live in a wintry climate. It's autumn. Your customer is unsure of whether he should buy new tires, or stick with the ones he has until next year. After spending the necessary time to convey the benefits of your great TireCo winter tires, you don't feel that your customer is ready to make the purchase; you intuitively feel that you're going to lose the sale. So you mention the possible consequences if he doesn't buy the tires. You don't make anything up, and you don't exaggerate or become dramatic. You simply tell him that he, and his family, and the other cars on the road, are at a risk because his tires are wearing thin. You tell him that tires are the only thing connecting his car to the road (which is true), and they need to be in top shape at all times. You tell him that because his car is already hoisted up, you can put the tires in right now; if he comes back next week, he'll have to pay the \$50 hoist fee (which you'll waive for him today).

This is how *fear of loss* can actually be the aspect that closes the deal.

Expectation of gain must be there also, because your customer doesn't want to feel that they are in a corner and must make the purchase - that this fellow *must* buy your tires - or else something bad will happen. Yes, something bad may indeed happen if the tires aren't bought; maybe an accident will happen in a few months. Your customer will think of this, but you don't want him to dwell on it. You want him to think about it, and then immediately think about the *benefits* of the purchase. His car will be safer. He will have a smoother ride (no more spilling coffee on his lap). His acceleration will be swifter, he'll use less gas. And so on, and so on.

Remember: the fear of loss is an important part of the sales experience, and is as useful in direct 1-on-1 sales, as it is in big picture marketing campaigns. When ad campaigns close their commercial with "limited time offer", they are catering to this fear of loss element. When spaces at a conference that will introduce the biggest and best secret to earning millions "will fill up fast", the same thing is happening.

Don't *fear monger* and start scaring your customers; even if what you sell is perfectly suited for fear mongering (e.g. health care, fire extinguishers). Use fear carefully and as a *support* to the benefits of your product/service. Let your customer know that they gain when they buy, and lose when they don't. And then stand back and watch one deal close after another!

There is Such a Thing as Bad Publicity

There are some people, perhaps out on the fringes of society and beyond, who have claimed that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Indeed, some careers have been resurrected from obscurity by doing something rather heinous. Think of some super-celebrities that have recently invaded the press with absurd stories about their failed romances or battles with family members. Think of *wardrobe malfunctions* and strategically released *unauthorized videos*. Is this worthy of actual press space? If you ask the publicist of the celebrity in question, he/she will just look at you and smile, and say: *who cares? There's no such thing as bad publicity!*

Your business is much like a person; it has a personality, an identity, a past, a future, some good habits, and maybe some bad ones. So you may be tempted to become the publicist of your business and embark down this *there is no such thing as bad publicity* path.

Please don't!

There is such a thing as bad publicity. It happens when you lose control of the spin; and it's much harder to control bad spin than it is to control good spin.

Publicists for celebrities who do ridiculous things to leap back into the spotlight by any means necessary (boxing?) understand how the media works -- especially the slightly insane celebrity media -- and have devices to control the spin. They know who to call and how to keep things from going too far. They know how to reward certain column writers with more information, and withhold it from others as a punishment. It's what they do, and it's why they get paid a lot of money.

Unless you're a veteran of these publicity battlefields, then there is every expectation that you won't be able to handle things with the same, shall we say, *deftness*, as a publicist pro. What can start out as being neutral "buzz", can devolve rapidly into condemnation.

So remember: setting yourself apart from the crowd is a lifelong goal of your business. It will never stop. Coke™ and McDonalds™ spend tens of millions of dollars advertising each year for this reason. Yet think twice, and then twice again, and then a hundred more times, before you decide that setting yourself apart requires that you generate some publicity that may wind up being bad.

Avoid the Halo Effect

You may not know the term *halo effect*, but it's almost certain that you've seen it in action. It's when someone who is very good at a previous job is given a new, more important job to do. Why? Because they were good at their previous job, it was presumed that they'd be just as good at their new job.

Yes, that clenched feeling in your chest is the memory of that extremely bright technician - the one with the people skills of a cactus - who became the worst manager you've ever had.

There are an astounding number of examples of how businesses have failed - some to outright bankruptcy - because of the halo effect. Nepotism can often be a painful expression of the halo effect, when the relative in question has no skill for the job. Forget the business world; entire countries, kingdoms, and empires have failed because of the halo effect. When we make contact with other planets, we're going to find the halo effect has doomed entire galaxies.

The halo effect can make an evil appearance in the marketing world; especially when someone who is a "great seller" is given a marketing management role. Marketing has its own skillset. For example, top notch marketing pro's - unlike sales wizards -- are often exceptional writers. Not just good writers; they need to be at the level where they could be published. Why? Because marketing people must be able to persuade others through their writing, and just as importantly, they must be able to competently assess the writing that they buy from outsourced writers. Marketing professionals must be excellent planners and schedule builders; they must be able to manage stakeholder expectations (which is a core competence in project management), and have long-range vision; today's marketing campaign may not bear fruit for a year, or more.

This isn't to say that sales professionals cannot be exceptional marketing professionals; some of them are. Nor am I concluding that the two jobs are mutually exclusive; there is obvious overlap between them, especially with respect to the ultimate goal (more sales!). Yet the top skills that marketing professionals require are often not the top skills that sales professionals need.

So if you plan on promoting your top seller to marketing head, make sure that some training takes place. Or cancel the promotion and send out that want ad.

Don't commit the error of the halo effect when it comes to putting the right professionals, in the right place, so that your marketing *and* sales objectives are met. This is the only way to ensure that the ultimate goal of more sales is achieved.

Overcoming Your Hate Affair with the Written Word

Nobody is certain where the hate began. It could have been as far back as elementary school, when you were asked - nay, *forced* -- to write about your summer vacation.

Or it could have been later in school, when you were threatened, against your will, to explain in 2000 words why the American Revolution was neither American nor a revolution.

For some, however, their visceral hate affair with the written word did not truly blossom in its full grotesque beauty until they entered the workforce, and into a world where composing memos and executive summaries (that are neither for executives nor summarize anything) rule several hours of the miserable workday.

Let's face it, most business people approach writing as a necessary evil; something that must be done to connect Point A (what you want to communicate) to Point B (the person/group that you want to reach).

I've never seen a museum full of paintings and sculptures crafted by artists who hate art. And I haven't yet come across the garden that has been tended to by someone who despises gardening.

But I have come across sheets of text written by people who hate writing; or at the very least, don't have a passion for words. Just surf the net anytime of the day, and you'll come across corporate text that has obviously been drawn out of its reluctant writer, as painfully and objectionably as the proverbial water from a stone.

The problem? Deep seeded psychological aversion to writing. The cause? Too complex to explain in here; it would take volumes.

The solution? This one's easier! Two simple steps as follows:

Step 1: Identify that you need writing help. It's essential. If you can't write like people *think* and *talk*, then you won't reach them. It's okay to accept that you need writing help. The most successful businesses in the world spend lots of money on copywriting and other writing services (e.g. proposals, training manuals, web content, and so on). In fact, the most successful North American companies have entire departments and very sizable budgets devoted to hiring writers.

Step 2: Once the need is identified, go out and get some writing help. Review samples of work so you can get a sense of how a writer will approach your project.

Outsourcing to a professional writer is a smart business option - in marketing and in everything else - because text is the most widely used means in which a business communicates with its customers. You wouldn't cut corners on the graphic design of your ad, and you wouldn't have your TV spot digitally remastered by some guy who has done some home movies of his cousin's wedding. You'd go professional, right? Do the same with your writing.

You'll spend less time hating to do a task that you don't do well, and more time increasing sales and profits; which really is the point after all, isn't it?

Let Your Customers Score

There is a costly misunderstanding that many businesses are infecting their websites with: that Internet surfers are wading aimlessly on the 'net, looking for information here and there, and in general window shopping on a nice summer afternoon.

This is not true.

Yes, okay, there are times when people do venture out into the Internet to *chill out*, or get their minds off of work. But these recreational jaunts happen far less frequently than most businesses think.

Most people who jump on the Internet have a specific goal in mind. They're not simply channel hopping or wasting time. They are trying to achieve a specific goal, and they want the Internet to help them do just that.

And they'll appreciate the *first* site that works for them.

Put yourself in your site visitors' shoes and swing by your URL. Does it solve customer goals? Yes? No? Do you even know what goals your customers have? Yes? No? No?! Then how can you expect your customers to want to do business with you?

Most companies invest their web resources in high-end graphics and big bandwidth. These are very nice-to-have things, especially if competitors are offering hi-tech sites with the latest bells and whistles. But these investments are, ultimately, misplaced if there is not an investment in designing a site so that it solves your customers' problems/achieves their goals.

So take some time and spend some money (if you have to). Find out what your customers *want* when they visit your site. If they want information, then make it easy for them to get it. If they want to be able to find out what your company does, or how it is different than the others in your marketplace, then tell them.

It sounds simple, but just spend a few minutes going through some sites of the biggest businesses out there, and you'll be amazed. Yes, the sites look great, but they are outright *dysfunctional*; customers have to wander down a few dead-end alleys before returning to the home page to figure out where the information they want is located in the *labyrinth*.

Design and function are not mutually exclusive. Have both of them integrated into your website, and help your clients do business with you

Stella! STELLAAA!!!!

Here's a riddle: It's the most pleasing word in our language, yet can change from person to person; or even in a same person if they fill out the right forms (in triplicate).

The answer? It's your *name*, of course!

Studies have shown that, on a deep psychological level, the most pleasing sound to a person's ear is his/her name.

Really try it and you'll see. The next time you get into an argument with someone at work (which you may call a debate, but is really an argument), use the other person's first name a lot. You'll see that, despite the tension that the argument can create, first name use tends to add a kind of intimacy to the situation, thereby reducing some of the frustration.

It's really quite amazing.

The same principle can be applied in the world of sales and marketing. With a few obvious exceptions (if you're communicating with, say, the Prime Minister or the Queen of England), using first names can be a great way to establish trust and build rapport with your customer. Invite the customer, of course, to call you by your first name (which usually happens anyway...), and you may find it appreciated to ask permission before using a first name (i.e. "do you mind if I call you Stella?").

The result? Perhaps not an immediate sale (that's expecting a bit too much!), but you'll make significant strides towards building a communication bridge

between yourself/your company, and your customer who is poised to make a purchase.

Welcome to Irony 101. Our Topic: Customers Hate Being Sold

There are lots of people who enjoy shopping. They like browsing through different stores, and can do it for hours on end. There are even people, certainly of both genders, who would unabashedly - even *proudly* - refer to themselves as shop-a-holics. They just love shopping. The prospect of walking out of a mall with several bags of different sizes and colours dangling off both arms is inspiring and makes them tingle.

Some people even determine their vacation destination based on where the best shopping can be found; that is, where they will enjoy the best shopping experience (which may, or may not, including getting the cheapest price; often, it is not!).

So, with all of the shop-a-holics out there, including the shy ones that you'd least suspect, sales and marketing professionals may be lulled into thinking that people love being sold new and interesting things. WRONG!

The shopping experience part - yes, they love that. The selling part, however, is disliked; even *dreaded*.

Why? People, in general, hate being sold. They don't like being talked into the sale; even if it's something that they want. There's an element of doubt that often creeps into the heads of most shoppers as they approach the sales transaction point; and this doubt often says "Am I *sure* that the salesperson isn't just yanking my chain?".

It doesn't matter at all if the salesperson is being ultra-honest and extremely friendly; what is taking place here has nothing to do with the current sales experience, but is made up of thousands of previous sales experiences - some of them bad enough to be remembered.

This poses a challenge for salespeople, because, in a sense, it makes their job *impossible*: how can they somehow make-up for a bad experience that their customer had - years ago, and with another businesses?

Ingeniously, sales and marketing professionals have successfully dealt with this challenge by changing the paradigm: instead of trying to *sell* things to their customers, they *help customers buy things*.

That is, they discuss benefits and solutions rather than focusing on just features and specifications. They provide options for customers and convey information that actually educates. In short: they help customers actively *buy* something, rather than passively be *sold* something.

The bottom line of this ingenious approach is more sales, more revenues, and of course, more profits.

Thengya, Thengya Very Mushhh Yer Beautiful...Try the Cash Bar...

There are many ways to thank your customers. You can (and obviously do) thank them for their business after the transaction. Perhaps you even send them a thank you postcard, email, or something similar, to show them that you actually are grateful for the business. Or maybe you let your actions speak louder than words, by offering exceptional after-sales service (which affords you more in-person opportunities to thank your valued customers).

All of these are great ways to say thank you. Unfortunately, all of them are probably having little to no impact.

Why? Because that's what *everyone* is doing. Everyone says thank you when the sale is made. (Almost) everyone follows up in email when they can, or provides some form of after-sales service where additional thank yous can be offered.

You want to set yourself apart. You want to show your sincere gratitude in a way that is different, yet professional.

The solution? A personal thank you card to customers, of course.

These personal thank yous don't have to be ultra fancy or costly; just a simple card will do. Get one that has a standard cover with your logo on it, and has room on the inside for a few lines of handwriting. Even if you don't consider yourself much of a writer, spend a minute dashing off a few lines that specifically thanks a specific customer for their business. Be specific with your words, or it will seem like you have just used a generic phrase. So instead of "*thanks for your business last month*", go with "*we hope you're enjoying that big screen TV!*". You don't need to go any deeper than this; just a few words

that demonstrate to your customer that they were indeed on your mind for that few minutes it took to write the card out and pop it into the Outgoing Mail bin.

Customers are, in most cases, reasonable folks and don't expect you to write a sonnet about your business relationship with them. Just a simple card, with a hand written thank you, will go a *long* way towards cementing a prosperous long-term business relationship.

Patience is a Virtue

One of the hardest things in the world of sales is to be *patient*. This isn't because sales people are necessarily impatient people. It's because of the undercurrent of fear that often exists in many sales situations; an undercurrent that hums the words: *if you don't close this sale right now, you're going to lose the customer!*

Here is where, however, marketing professionals need to steel themselves against this anxious thinking. Why? Because marketing campaigns are long term strategies, and this kind of fear and impatience can undermine a campaign before it has a chance to have an impact.

How long is long-term? It's hard to say. There are some elements of your marketing plan that can be measured in the short term; if you send out a direct mail letter in January with a postage paid return envelope, you can be pretty sure that by March you've heard from everyone you're going to hear from. But if you launch your website and start some banner advertising, or run some newspaper ads, you really are planting seeds rather than inspiring your customers to take action. And the planting seeds analogy is the best one to use, because, like plants, your marketing campaign will take time to show results.

So stick it out with your marketing campaigns. Don't refuse to change direction if your measurements point you in another direction, but don't throw up the white flag or pull the plug if things don't happen over the short-term. Remember, marketing is a long-term strategy, and as such, required long-range thinking and, the dreaded p-word: *patience*.

Know the Difference Between Benefits and Features

An axiom of marketing is to promote benefits, while mentioning features. This is not mere New Age *be positive* thinking. It is abundantly clear that people buy things based on emotion - that is, how they *feel* - and back that decision up with facts. Your benefits inspire the feelings; your features provide the common sense.

Does this mean that people are irrational or illogical? Certainly not; you won't get very far *inspiring* people to buy something that they don't want or need. That's why you need both: benefits and features.

Benefits point out how your product or service makes your customer's life easier; how it helps him/her do more, achieve a goal, enjoy an experience, or solve a problem. It is the *benefits* that will open up your customer's mind to the point where you can actually make the sale.

Features are the specifications of the product or service: how big it is, how many RPM's it has, how fast it goes. Features can overlap benefits when you convey marketing messages like "**impress your friends, depress your enemies** with the all new V6 twin cam 230 horsepower SUV from Egomotive". Here, the features are mentioned; but only after the benefit (the part in bold) creates the right *feeling*.

It's difficult to say if benefits are more important than features. It depends on the awareness of your customer. If you're selling doughnuts, then you probably don't need to waste valuable ad space talking about just how much fried dough goes into your doughnuts (in fact, it's probably wiser if you don't...).

Instead, you'll want to focus on how your doughnuts provide *a light and totally satisfying taste that will put a smile on a face for hours*. Or something like that.

If you're selling something where the average consumer is typically at a knowledge disadvantage - say, with cars or computers - then some features are important to note. Throw in those stats: 0-60 in 6.72 seconds, and 230 horsepower. Or a 20GB hard drive, and a DVD CDR-RW.

But remember, it doesn't matter if you're selling a car to Mario Andretti, or a new computer to Bill Gates: nobody *buys* anything solely because of the features.

A 230 horsepower engine means *nothing* in and of itself; that it will make a lot of cool noise and help me become a merging machine on the highway is what matters. Similarly, a 20GB hard drive, in itself, acquires meaning and emotion when you explain that it can hold 2,000,000 copies of every Star Trek script ever written, in every language that has ever been spoken (including Latin, Sanskrit, and Ancient Sumerian).

Keep in mind the distinction between benefits and features, and remember: use benefits to inspire feelings in your customers, and features to equip them with common sense. Ensuring that both are present (whether you supply them or the customer brings them to the table, as in the doughnut store example), is not important. Just make sure that they both exist, and watch your marketing message increase in power overnight.

Be Politically *Sensible*

Our part of the world does not need a reminder to be politically correct. I am not about to offer an opinion on where the line should be drawn between edgy creative marketing and, well, stupidity and degradation.

In fact, talking about political correctness was not part of the initial plan. Yet, like even the best marketing plans (which you are hopefully creating in your business!), things aren't carved in stone and, sometimes, just beg to be changed.

What inspired this change? It wasn't a voice from the sky, or a vision in a dream. It wasn't a sage bit of wisdom that I read. No. It was a remarkably horrendous piece of direct mail that I received the other day.

In this 2-page piece (front and back) direct mail copy, a consulting company is attempting to profile some of its successful participants; you know, the "I made more in one month on so-and-so's system than I did in a year working full time!". Maybe it's true. (Yeah, I know). That's not the absurd part. It's the job titles of the people who are profiled beneath their 1'x1' black and white pictures that caught my attention. Maybe it'll catch yours, too. Here they are. Get your red pen ready.

Shoe Salesman.

New Website Owner.

Latina Woman.

Excuse me?

Yes, that's right. *Latina woman*. This is, apparently, both a job, as well as a racial classification.

Who knew?

At least we've figured out how to wipe out the unemployment rate.

Since receiving this piece of copywriting idiocy, I have been unable to throw it away, as I intend to refer to it as a kind of Exhibit A when I try and get my point across: you may or may not choose to be politically correct, but please, PLEASE, *be politically sensible!*

What is being advocated here is that if you choose to toe (or outright pass) your line between creative marketing expression and political incorrectness, then fine, go ahead and do that, and naturally expect some consequences (be they positive or negative). But don't do what this utterly stupid company did by being, well, *utterly stupid*. They obviously have no clue that they're being politically vulgar.

Again: if you choose to cross into political correctness territory, whether it is hanging out at the border or going into the heartland, then that's a marketing decision that you'll live with. Maybe it'll work, maybe it won't. At least you'll be crossing the border with your head up.

These people, on the other hand, have wandered aimlessly into Political Incorrect-ville without even *knowing* it.

And they're going in alone, because if I had ever thought of participating in this company's program, then this senselessness ended that possibility.

So be as politically correct or incorrect as you wish, but *always* be politically sensible. Know what you're saying with your marketing.

Wanted: Customers. Reward Offered. Inquire Within.

Whenever you're asked for Air Miles™ or various other rewards points, you're participating in a customer loyalty program.

Yet what is really happening here?

It's not loyalty in the "my dog is the most loyal dog in the world" kind of loyalty. It's not even best-friend level loyalty. No, this kind of business loyalty is based on rewards. You are being rewarded, via points or some other device, for shopping at a specific place. If the rewards disappear, so does the loyalty.

This is a little depressing, perhaps; it also makes us re-think whether these should be called loyalty programs at all, since they don't seem to inspire much loyalty. They do, however, inspire rewards; so let's call these *Rewards Programs*.

In this light, you can certainly create your own Rewards Program, and you don't need to offer free airline travel or any other big ticket items. Yes, if you do enough business with a wide enough customer base, you may look into becoming part of a large network of customers (e.g. offering Air Miles™). But for most businesses, it's not economically feasible, or perhaps even sensible, to offer Air Miles™ (e.g. if most business is b2b or big ticket).

So the creative landscape is wide open for you to create your own unique Rewards Program. You can offer a price discount for reaching a certain purchase level in a period of time (e.g. \$1,000 in any quarter), or you can offer other incentives, such as a free DVD player to any existing customer who successfully refers a new customer.

Regardless of what type of Rewards Program you choose, remember two things. Firstly, it is *not* a loyalty program; it is a Rewards Program, and as such, make sure that your customers are being rewarded appropriately, because that is what the “loyalty” is based upon. Secondly, remember to be creative and to develop a unique Rewards Program that reflects the personality and style of your business.

Indeed, your Rewards Program may be the single most important thing that sets you apart from your competition. Enjoy the challenge!