

# Killer Copy in a Crisis



Words of wisdom from  
Herschell Gordon Lewis

Foreword by Drayton Bird

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# Introduction

## The King of Killer Copy

He was known around the world as the “Godfather of Gore”.

Herschell Gordon Lewis was one of the most extraordinary figures in the history of popular American moviemaking.

He created his cult reputation producing and directing films such as *Blood Feast*, *The Gore Gore Girls* and *A Taste of Blood* back in the '60s.

Herschell introduced the world to a new genre of unprecedented blood-thirsty ‘splatter’ movies which without doubt inspired and influenced the likes of Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino.

Over 50 years ago, Herschell understood how to fill cinemas with horror enthusiasts by having his films banned.

He introduced the power of provocative marketing to his work, decades before the advertising industry would begin using similar techniques.

His business plan was unique and very effective. Release films that guaranteed lots of blood, lots of screaming, lots of nudity – and lots of money.

But the international direct marketing community knew him better as the King of Killer Copy.

Herschell was a professor of English who made words his weapon of choice and taught marketers how to use them skilfully by ‘*poking ’em directly so they wouldn’t forget ’em.*’

A wizard of words and wisdom, Herschell published over thirty copywriting books including *Hot Appeals or Burnt Offerings* (possibly inspired by his masterpiece *Blood Feast?*), *Sales Letters That Sizzle*, and *Open Me Now*.

I got to know Herschell back in 2007. For many years he wrote a monthly column called *Copy Class* for my magazine, *Direct Marketing International*.

In 2008 he met me from Fort Lauderdale airport in his green, open-top Jaguar and drove me to a film studio. We were there to film a subscription promo for DMI magazine which Herschell wrote and starred in.

I watched the master at work as he showed people 30 years his junior, different camera angles and microphone placement. He then jumped in front of the camera to deliver his lines.

A snippet of the promo can be found later in this book. The gun was Herschell’s idea...



**“Don't get diarrhoea of the fingertips’  
with overzealous sales copy.”**

*Herschell Gordon Lewis*

Following that rather surreal day, we met for dinner once a year at the US Direct Marketing Association conference. Strolling through the trade show with him was an experience I won't forget. It was clear I was in the presence of a celebrity.

I felt the vibe of the red carpet as exhibitors and visitors shouted greetings, smiled and waved, even saluted him. I was walking with royalty; the copywriter king.

The following pages are a collection of Herschell's articles published from 2008 - 2010.

After reading them again for the first time in many years, I realised how much his advice would still resonate with marketers in 2020.

Twelve years ago, Herschell was writing about the importance of innovative marketing in a financial crisis. Not this one, the last one.

He charmed us with his views on the early days of the social media charge and warned against ‘*diarrhoea of the fingertips*’ with overzealous sales copy.

I'm biased of course, but it's an entertaining read, offering insight and



**Matt Edgar**

gravity to anyone with the word marketing in their job title.

It also brings back fond memories of time spent with such an interesting character. Herschell was always great company and enormously good fun.

**Matt Edgar**

*Publisher*

*Global Marketing Alliance*

*September 2020*



# Foreword

**Your chance to meet a most remarkable,  
funny and perceptive man**



## **Drayton Bird**

*The Chartered Institute of Marketing named Drayton one of the 50 shapers of modern marketing. During some 60 years he's worked in over 55 countries with every brand from American Express to Volkswagen ... writing copy for everything from Airbus to Peppa Pig.*  
[draytonbird.com](http://draytonbird.com)

When you read these columns you will meet a delightful, witty and wise companion.

For Herschell really knew what he was talking about, and did so with pith and wit.

But let me tell you about the man I met.

Ordinary people do not have extraordinary ideas.

Nor do they achieve ordinary things.

That's because extraordinary people think and act differently to the rest of us.

I first came across Herschell in a magazine called Direct Marketing over 40 years ago.

He wrote a monthly column. And yes, it was extraordinary.

I recall he once ran a whole series of pieces revealing 100 ways in which you could begin a piece of direct mail.

He and his wife went on safari in South Africa with my wife and I, around the time Nelson Mandela was released from prison.

They were delightful company.

But how I wish I had known him better.

For Herschell was not even remotely ordinary.

Like another well-known and brilliant marketer, Gary Halbert, he spent a little time in jail.

And if you search his name on the internet you soon realise direct marketing was by no means his only talent.

He was infinitely better known for his film making.

His nickname was the "Godfather of Gore". He specialised in making extraordinarily nasty, blood-splattered films, devoid of even the slightest tincture of good taste.

And he had many talents. He was a very shrewd businessmen – and he even wrote the music for his films.

His best-known theme is “The South Gonna Rise Ag’in” from Two Thousand Maniacs, part of his infamous blood trilogy with Blood Feast and Color Me Blood Red.

But why not meet him for yourself?

Online you can find a splendid clip of him in his eighties leading a crowd in a sing-along of that excellent composition.

But perhaps the best way to show that his thoughts in this book are more than worth your while is [HERE](#)

Read the book - and swear off being ordinary.

**Drayton Bird.**

*September 2020*



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# Where's Rosser Reeves when we need him

March 2008

Most copywriters don't know who Rosser Reeves was. Pity.

That this fellow isn't part of their historical base isn't surprising. Rosser Reeves died a quarter of a century ago.

That was before the major sophisticating factor, the world wide web, existed as a commercial medium.

Reeves would be 100 years old next year, if he were still alive. So any influence he might have wielded would be obsolete.

Right?

Wrong!

Veterans of our ongoing war to force our fair market share of whatever we're selling, not only remember Rosser Reeves but – if we're smart enough, astute enough, and savvy enough – apply a principle he codified.

Reeves headed Ted Bates, an advertising agency (long since absorbed into one of those multi-agency conglomerates).

The seminal year for his claim to immortality was 1961, the year in which he published a book titled, 'Reality in Advertising'.

In that book, he explained a philosophy of dynamic marketing he called USP – the unique selling proposition.



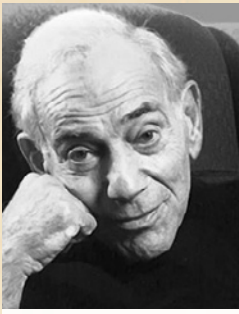
Using this technique, he fathered some timeless advertising campaigns, such as M&M candy ('Melt in your mouth, not in your hand') and Pepsodent toothpaste ('You'll wonder where the yellow went').

Eventually, the advertising world concluded that he was playing a one-string fiddle, and his approach fell into disfavour.

It's time to resuscitate, especially in our vibrant world of direct response which has posted the bans for formalising nuptials with the web.

## **What USP can offer us**

What separates USP from all those other 'Here's how to sell' advisories was and is a double-barrelled philosophy.



**“Powerful presentation of a unique selling proposition is where the top-level copywriter and the potential buyer get married”**

The first barrel, one that a majority of advertising agencies resisted then and resist now, was an approach based on the proposition that product claim is a more powerful sales weapon than brand image.

The second barrel refines the first: Find and exploit what most people, exposed to your message, will accept as a benefit unique to your product or service. That concept eliminates the too common ‘fish for it’ approach typified by laundry lists – ‘18 reasons why you should buy now’.

Powerful presentation of a unique selling proposition is where the top-level copywriter and his/her lawful prey, the unaware potential buyer, get married. The buyer is more than a buyer. He or she is an advocate, because response is to a claim competitors might have made but haven’t made.

The reaction to a USP-generated message, properly worded, parallels the reaction to a one-to-one encounter with a merchant who points out to you specific reasons why you should take advantage of the offer.

A complicated approach?

No.

Regarded as too basic by too many marketers?

Regrettably, yes.

### **Three explanatory quotes**

All of us who toil in the direct response creative dungeons can benefit from Rosser Reeves’ explanations of what he meant by benefit.

These are codified in three linked statements that have survived for almost half a century.

The first statement:

“Unless a product becomes outmoded, a great campaign will not wear itself out.”

The second statement:

“I’m not saying that charming, witty and warm copy won’t sell. I’m just saying I’ve seen thousands of charming, witty campaigns that didn’t sell.”

And the third statement:

“You must make the product interesting, not just make the ad different. And that’s what too many of the copywriters . . . don’t yet understand.”

OK?

Here’s my own statement:

Go thou and do likewise



# I never said it would be easy

April 2008

Most of us accept as standard, a 'given', a peculiarity of marketing. Some of the worst advertising, email solicitations, and web offerings are for . . . yes, you're right on: advertising and marketing experts. A numbing number of our tribe, who ask clients to pay for marketing expertise, exhibit a total lack of that expertise in their own hoopla.

A quick example is an advert in the classified section of a direct marketing publication (no, not this one). The chap is a consultant. All right, what does a consultant do? He or she consults. Oh, thanks, that's very helpful. Doesn't it make sense to word an advertising message so it generates

interest in the vendor? That's true whether we're selling apples or services.

The heading on this advert: *'Mail Order Consultant'*

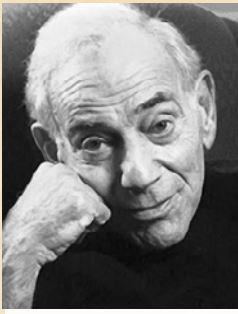
The text is bullet copy, mentioning 20 years' experience . . . catalogues, media, e-commerce. And that's it, except for name, address, and email address. Well, yes, it's accurate (I suppose). But wouldn't that same consultant advise a client to pitch benefit, rather than a sterile listing?

I'd have checked this consultant's website, but all he lists is his own email address. If I were a prospective client, I'd have zero impulse to contact him.



**Heading?**





**“A numbing number of our tribe, who ask for clients to pay for their expertise, exhibit a total lack of that expertise in their own hoopla.”**

## **‘Exposure’ doesn’t parallel salesmanship**

Here’s one for data entry. The heading is the company name, big and bold, dwarfing this single line of copy:

‘A full service data entry & processing company. We offer quality and efficiency for less.’ (Why the ampersand, a push-away? Plenty of room exists for the word ‘and’, as they proved in the second sentence.)

Am I breaking a butterfly on the rack when I ask this consultant: “If a prospect asks you why he or she should do business with you, would you answer, ‘We are a full service data entry and processing company. We offer quality and efficiency for less’? Or would you name a few competitive or comparative advantages?”

A bigger-than-most display classified has as its heading: ‘Everything you need to prepare your mailing lists’

Oh? Such as? The text is inspirational but not specific: ‘Save postage and time with the #1 selling postal automation software.’

That would be a logical introduction for postal automation software, but because this company is a letter shop and does pre-sorting and duping and barcode printing, they’re software users, not software vendors.

Once again, why doesn’t one of the honchos at that company ask the rational question of whoever generates promotional messages: “If you were on the phone with a caller who wants us to explain why we should be his or her letter shop, use whatever you’d say as wording for our advert.”

## **‘What’s in a name?’ ‘My name is Legion.’**

Whether you’re in sync with Shakespeare or the Bible, the value of a name is hog-tied to familiarity with the name. The key copy in many paid notices by creative and analytic suppliers is the individual’s name. Does that have the impact and significance of a promise of benefit?

The answer is loaded with mud, because if Bill Shakespeare offers to be your creative consultant, you (and certainly I) would make the deal even with no immediate need. If Glutz J Zilch offers to be your creative consultant, sans personal exposure to his reputation the offer would float in permanent limbo.

Enough on this point. I’m out of space and you’re out of patience. A final imperative from the outside: With exceptions too few to be a common factor, benefit brings greater response than ego.

Come to think of it, that works for interpersonal relationships too.



# Why am I contacting you, of all people

May 2008

The creeping blight of hyper-specialisation has a nasty by-product we have to avoid if we're worthy of the title Professional Communicator.

That side-effect or 'obbligato' theme or whatever we might choose to label it, is the splitting of responsibility. I write copy for you. My job is finished and I go on to the next project. She designs the advert or the mailer. Her job is finished and she goes on to the next project. They supply lists, based on what demographic they think an offer of this type might find attractive. Their job is finished and they go on to the next project. The printer finds paper stock and runs the job. The printer's job is finished, and that supplier goes on to the next job.

The mailing fails. Who takes any responsibility for the flop? Nobody.

That's quite in sync with current sociology as well as commerce – nobody is responsible.

I murder my neighbour. Hey, it isn't my fault: I had an unpleasant childhood.

You angrily drive a truck into a group of children. Hey, it isn't your fault: Your spouse spilled coffee on the carpet this morning and the coffee had cream, which means it may leave a permanent stain.

Let the sociologists (and the law) deal with those aberrations.

We're on a professional plateau, and part of professionalism – a big part of professionalism – is not only sharing responsibility but assuming responsibility.

## **It isn't all that complicated**

The copywriter who doesn't ask who the specific targets are, then aims the copy bullet-like at those targets, isn't a professional copywriter.

The production artist or designer who pleases his or her mirror instead of designing for maximum appeal to specific targets isn't a professional production artist or designer.

The list company that chooses lists because of fear they'll lose a list owner if they don't recommend this one, or because somebody in the office has a relationship with one of the companies whose list is available, isn't a professional list company.

The printer who chooses a paper because he has a pallet of that paper stock on the floor, when a different stock might better enhance the offer, isn't a professional printing source.

## **Ultimate result**

Every supplier, internal and external, contributes positively or negatively to the ultimate result.

My copy was too. . . her layouts didn't lend emphasis where emphasis should have been . . . the lists were used to death on competing offers before ours





**“Times are tough. Times are always tough but we’re supposed to be professionals.”**

popped up . . . using newsprint instead of heavy enamel would have had greater verisimilitude.

Or, my copy was on target. The layouts and illustrations matched. The lists were targeted. The recipient looked at the mailing and decided to open it instead of tossing it into the circular file.

Response may not have been optimal, but absolutely and positively it would have been greater than response to a mailing that reflected a bunch of disconnected pieces.

### **A system for all media**

I chose direct mail as an example, but that’s all it is . . . an example.

You say your webmaster wants control over the way your email and home page will look? Oh? Is your webmaster thinking of response or of showing off technical skills?

You say your advertising agency wants your adverts to be in full colour because that way they’ll stand out more, and they’re recommending a publication whose rates are formidable? Oh?

Is the periodical loaded with full-colour ads, so a two-colour ad actually might seize more eye-attention, and has the agency actually negotiated rates on your behalf?

Times are tough. In fact, times always are tough. But we’re supposed to be professionals and we should care about one factor and only that factor: maximising response. Does that conclusion seem hard-boiled, calloused, coldly analytical?

Excellent!

Let’s have more of it . . . and we’ll have more reason to claim the title Professional.





# A few more modest proposals

June 2008

**H**ave I made this suggestion to you?  
Eschew obfuscation.

If you object to that suggestion, you're dangerous on two separate levels: First, you understood that pompous imperative. Second, you don't agree with the notion.

Every one of us is a creature crudely compounded of habits and prejudices. (I'm eliminating flesh, bones, and fat, because our sacred marketing domain is cerebral, not tissue-driven.)

## Human targets

When our habits and prejudices match those of the human targets we're trying to hit with words and pictures, the wonderful word rapport rises out of the steam.

Ah, but when we take a patriarchal posture, we parallel failed artists who conclude smugly, as they starve, "The world is mad. 'I'm the only sane one.'"

## Suppress that vocabulary

The name of the aberration is Ponderous Writing Syndrome. (I can call it anything I like, and so can you, so feel free to re-title.) Pedants, who live in constant fear that their reliance on multisyllabic terminology is based on the one-string fiddle of expertise in a nondescript speciality, depend on Ponderous Writing (and for that matter, ponderous speaking) to protect their position within that narrow universe.

But no, no, not for us. We're communicators.

## Like or impress

One of our communicative weapons is vocabulary suppression.

Our charge is establishment of rapport, and test after test – even with targets whose own affiliation is within the self-proclaimed sacred territories of education and medicine – tells us 'Look how super-literate I am' text or speech diminishes response instead of enhancing response.

A simple litmus test: Pretend you're at a dinner party, sitting next to someone you want to like you.

Note the difference between someone you want to like you and someone you want to impress. The difference is the difference between equivalence and superiority.

In the antediluvian period (long ago, ending with the death of dinosaurs and naïveté around 1980), people flocked to the feet of those who claimed superiority . . . because there seemed to be the possibility of an indescribable cachet. No more.

We're in the age of scepticism, in which people look for holes in the personality-fabric.

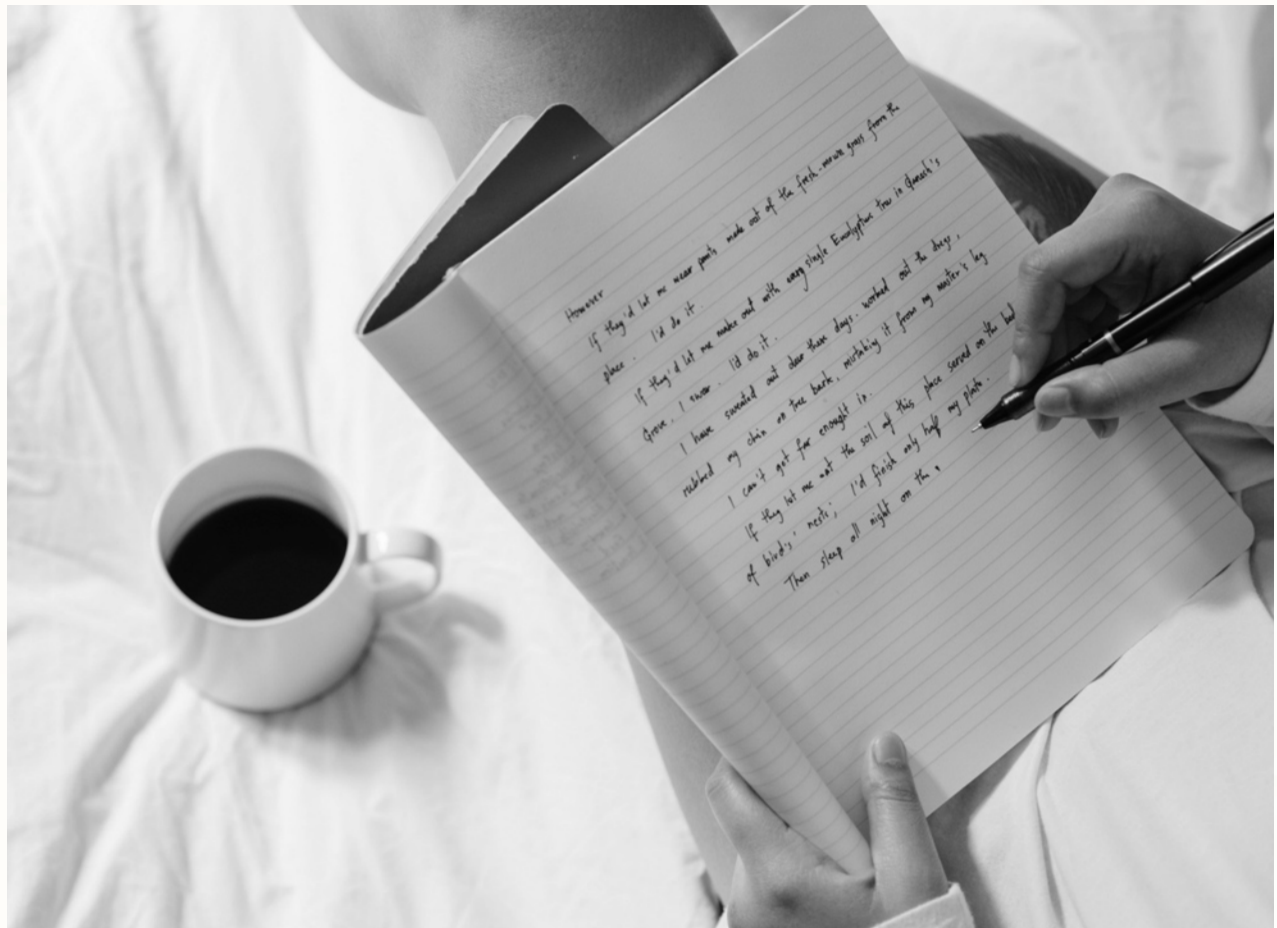
## Notice anything?

In the previous paragraph I used the word antediluvian. It's a perfectly sound Anglo-Saxon word, technically





**“Good copy should not be larded with overblown and obscure language”**



meaning ‘before the flood’. If you noticed it, understood it, and shrugged in mild disgust at what you regard as a pomposity, you understand the difference between a perfectly sound word and a sales worthy word.

### **Negatively, not positively**

In a retail situation, a vendor who tries to impress you with technical terms or verbosity impresses you negatively rather than positively. Verbal terminology and written terminology are of a piece today, thanks or no

thanks to the world wide web, which has superimposed verbalisms on written communications.

So, writing marketing text larded with big, overblown, obfuscatory words is as easy as a visit to Roget’s or right-clicking ‘synonym’ in your word processing program.

Using convivial, rapport-inducing words is as easy as pretending you’re talking as you stroll or sharing a Pinot noir.

Cheers!



# How are you keeping score?

July 2008

Some advertising agencies may not agree with the philosophy I advocate.

Most direct marketers should agree with the philosophy I advocate.

Just what is that philosophy? Whether your medium is direct mail, newspapers, magazines, television, telephone, or the world wide web, the purpose of your message should be to generate a positive response.

And what is a positive response?

It isn't a prospective customer or client saying: 'I love you.' It's a prospective customer or client saying: 'I want to marry you.'

In clearer terms, it means the message should aim itself at a valid inquiry or an order. 'Image', as such, may win the beauty contest; but as an overall criterion of success, image winds up in second place.

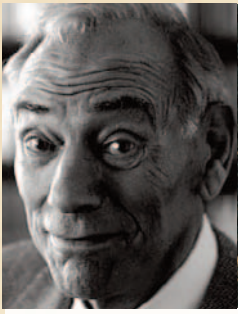
## The 'Branding' Myth

I take issue with the mantra, 'Marketers are creatively using the internet to raise awareness and affection for their brands.' No, no, not because the statement is untrue. Rather, it's because the statement glorifies an apparent waste.

If I'm sending an email on behalf of a television programme or a political candidate or a funeral director,







**“Few are willing to commit suicide because a mortician is offering a ‘special’ this week.”**

branding and image are logical rationales and copy can exalt to the heavens.

But that isn't marketing. It's retention. Tuning to a TV channel and deciding to consider voting for a politician requires some thought but no expenditure of money. And few are prepared and willing to commit suicide because a mortician is offering a 'special' this week.

The web, that insatiable science-fiction monster whose cornerstone is emphasis on comparison, is price-driven. I welcome as a competitor anyone whose copy is supposed to offer something for sale and whose copy values image over offer.

Some of the most venerable 'names' in the world of commerce are teetering on the edge of insolvency or have toppled over it.

Some of the new hotshots in the world of commerce have leapt into the foreground of their fields because their attention has been to 'Here's the deal' . . . not 'Here is who we are'.

### **Forget 1995. This is 2008**

Back in the antediluvian era – say, 1995 – web pioneers pointed with glee to their click-through rates.

At the time, that may have been a criterion carrying some validity, because the medium was still in its

experimental, embryonic phase and the hypercompetitive era hadn't yet dawned.

Ah, but that was yesterday. And, as much as we may look backward with nostalgia, we look at our computer screens today with hunger.

Click-through rates are the appetiser, not the main course. Competition in any field we can think of is brutal; and branding, a safe haven for its advocates because comparatively they don't measure response by actual and countable response, may look superb when comparing design and taglines... but not so superb when comparing bottom lines.

A 'name' brand has an implicit advantage going into the arena: People have heard of it.

For the brand to triumph in the 2008-2010 battle for (to corrupt the famed A E Housman quote) crowns and pounds and guineas, the marketer should use its reputation as a competitive weapon against the inevitable intruders . . . not as a traditional crutch.

Want to sell something to today's impatient, sceptical, internet-wise consumer or business target?

Your message should answer the inevitable final question: 'What's your deal?'



# What are they talking about?

August 2008

Reading the ‘expert’ comments of self-appointed authorities is at best amusing . . . and at worst, confusing.

Here’s a key sentence from a by-lined article about web marketing, in a trade magazine:

‘With press release optimisation, brands can proactively utilise search to distribute their message.’

I can’t quarrel with that conclusion . . . because I can’t decipher it.

Long ago, I discarded ‘utilise’ from my rhetorical tool-kit because that word – along with, incidentally, ‘proactive’ – is a symptom of pomposity, just as a chronic cough is a symbol of having smoked too many cigarettes.

‘Optimisation’ is on the border, teetering, because in a usage such as the quotation quoted here, the word is used to define itself.

## Ever hear of clarity, guys?

In the same publication (and this is current, not one from the year 1908 when all the current buzzwords and acronyms weren’t even in embryo) is this profundity:

*‘You would utilise these long-tail or ‘fusion’ keywords to formulate a multifaceted search campaign across other channels at your disposal that include SEO, SMO and video SEO.’*

OK, quickly: As fast as you can, verbally repeat ‘multifaceted search campaign’ three times. That’s a mild indicator. The word ‘utilise’ is another.

And you won’t have to dig around to find the acronyms, because I’ve checked them.

SEO means, as many know, search engine optimisation. SMO is the more arcane social media optimisation, and I admit cheerfully that even after looking this up I haven’t a clue what it means.

Maybe I’m too anti-social . . . the result of over-optimising.

## Gee, I never knew that

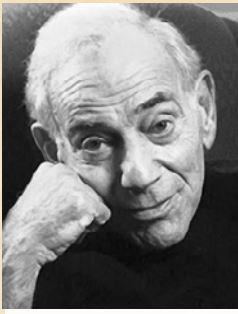
One reason I remember so well a keynote speaker’s key notes – used to start the speech and also to end it – was this deep, thoughtful superficiality: “The past is gone. The present is here. The future is yet to come.”

Now, who can quarrel with that load of fresh guano?

I thought of it again when I read these words by another by-lined expert: ‘A sound search engine strategy comes down to optimising your content, managing it and knowing where to send it.’

No wonder this chap is an expert! He’s reduced the obvious to the trivial, not





**“Long ago, I discarded ‘utilise’ from my rhetorical tool-kit.”**

an easy task especially when leaning on that ‘optimising’ crutch.

May we take a mutual pledge, one that will do much to optimise our own BSO (b.s. optimisation)?

For one whole day, just one, eschew any version of ‘optimise’ from both conversation and written communication.

If you’re feeling especially noble or courageous, add ‘utilise’. Don’t worry about ‘proactive’ because if that has settled into your lexicon like a chronic cough, you’re too far gone to hope for expiation.





# Untangling the lion's mane

September 2008

I have a sometime client who markets vitamins and supplements. (I say 'sometime' because often he prefers to write his own copy, coming to me for opinions when he can't figure out how to popularise the obfuscatory terminology a supplier attaches to a product. I'm a nut for supplements, and if a job is just tweaking a paragraph or two, the barter system may apply – words for stuff.)

Worthy of a report in the distinguished publication you're reading was his description of an over-the-counter supplement:

"Recent research shows that suppressing the formation of osteoclasts can delay or improve osteoporosis. Osteoclasts are significant in dissolving older bones, with new bone formation formed by osteoblasts, subject to hormonal guidance for proper function.

"By suppressing the activity of osteoclasts, it is possible to prevent and improve osteoporosis. The compound from, of all things, a mushroom commonly called Lion's Mane, involving hericium erinaceus, performed this function, and the compound now is available commercially."







**“The marketer was too wrapped up in what his own supplier had sent. Once we have a saleable name, we can scrap the tech-talk.”**

### **A self-answering question**

If you were interested in the potential onset of osteoporosis, would that description grab you?

The most common differential separating ‘suppliers’ from ‘marketers’ . . . and, dodgier for us, separating marketers from consumers . . . is the attitudinal gap. I’ve written about it in these pages before.

The vendor’s interest: What it is. The prospective buyer’s interest: What it will do for me. I flag you down, using any means of communication I can find, and say breathlessly: “Don’t you want some *hericium erinaceus*?”

Your logical reply: “Get lost.”

How easy – in fact, how primitive – it is to check Google or Wikipedia to get a sales worthy name. *Hericium erinaceus* is Lion’s Mane, a mushroom with a cascade of tiny tentacles that, with enough imagination, looks like a lion’s mane.

### **Choosing your weaponry**

So OK, we now have Lion’s Mane rather than the Linnaean taxonomy. A reasonably bright eight-year-old could make that transition. The marketer, too wrapped up in what his own supplier had sent, didn’t make the transition.

Once we have a saleable name, we can scrap the tech-talk and centre on the seller/sellee difference.

Ammunition pours out at us, and, through us, at our targets. The stuff combats not only osteoporosis but Alzheimer’s, the immune system, and who knows what else.

Just one more piece to this mini-puzzle. If you’re selling it to me, don’t refer to Lion’s Mane as a mushroom.

Not only does that downgrade the image, but you should know in advance: I don’t mind lions but I’m not fond of mushrooms.





# Live long and prosper

November 2008

That four-word incantation was a 'Hail and farewell' as verbalised by an actor playing the role of an off-world semi-human.

In our direct marketing on-world, with respected and well-established marketers wondering what they can do to maintain sales volume in a declining market, 'Live long and prosper' should be a heavy imperative for market-savvy innovation.

Note the qualifier. Innovation per se is always available. What we're after in these lean times is market-savvy innovation.

## Target your targets

Any generalised explanation necessarily bypasses the subtle differences between elements. So I'll offer no apology for dividing direct copy into three easy categories:

### Category 1

The individual or business at whom or at which you're aiming is deeply damaged by a faltering Economy.

If that's your target, your copy should emphasise that you're as aware of the problem as he/she/it is and that's why you're offering the solution to what otherwise is an impending crisis.

### Category 2

The individual or business at whom or at which you're aiming doesn't associate his/her/its position with outside economic forces.

If that's your target, your copy should emphasise the 'Are you aware...' or, if you're a bold marketer, 'Aren't you aware . . .' factor, followed by your offer of the solution to what otherwise, you point out logically and with a sales worthy overtone, is an impending crisis.

### Category 3

The individual or business at whom or at which you're aiming feels immune from 'tough times' economic forces.

If that's your target, you have to make your point indirectly by apparently ridiculing competitors, even those peripherally parallel, who share that view.

You'd follow that with an explanation of why those competitors are lesser-level marketers who won't have the opportunity to benefit from your offer that this knowledgeable marketer enjoys.

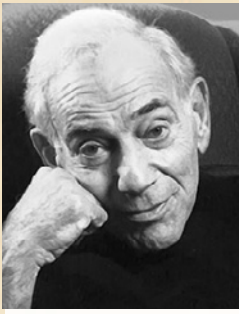
### Is it universal?

'Live long and prosper' is itself generalised enough to act as a coat of varnish over any direct marketing mailing, email, broadcast commercial, or total campaign.

But, as any professional painter will attest, a coat of varnish isn't genuine protection. It's a cover, not a rebuild.

I certainly hope you share my objection to 'consultants' and 'experts' and 'specialists' and 'advisors' who operate on a hit-and-run basis,





**“What we’re after in these lean times is market-savvy innovation.”**

dispensing oversimplified guidance that under battle conditions offers neither uniqueness nor market-savvy innovation.

Softening this vicious damnation, when you have at your elbow a consultant or expert or specialist or advisor whose operational plan (or, considerably better for you and more professional for that source, actual copy) offers the winning amalgam of uniqueness plus market-savvy

innovation, you treasure that relationship. As times get tougher, your marketing superiority becomes more pronounced.

Whew!

Oh, a final imperative: Make your contact with your target fast. That means now. Timeliness always boosts the recipient’s sense of urgency . . . and a boosted sense of urgency means a boosted percentage of response.





# Sliding into the ‘gimme’ era

December 2008

**I**n good times and bad, a primary buying motivator – usually the primary buying motivator – is greed.

In one form or another – and in every mass medium including print, broadcast and online – when we test copy approaches, a logical and readable test is application, as a selling rationale, of one of the great motivators against another. And, except for non-profit mailings to dedicated co-religionists, greed tends to win.

Just in case you haven’t updated your references lately, the great motivators are fear, exclusivity, greed, guilt, and need for approval. Two ‘soft’ motivators, convenience and pleasure, can help build credibility, impact and impulse. And, if you’re fundraising for an extremist group and are absolutely certain the list reflects comrades-in-philosophy, you can unsheathe a dangerous powerhouse – anger.

## Sales slump

So here we are, on the cusp of 2009, with marketers aghast at the lack of sales, and potential customers and clients aghast at their lack of buying power.

What safeguards might a marketer use to maintain at least a respectable sales volume in such a poisonous marketplace?

Respectable? Hah! Even in the earliest pre-holiday period, the slump in sales was so pronounced that retailers and mail order vendors were laying off staff.

The question on the table isn’t the standard, ‘How can I increase sales?’ but the more multi-worded, ‘How can I increase sales when my entire potential market has shrunk?’

In its traditional short form or in its pre-2009 length, the question has as its safest answer the old standby, greed.

Yes, yes, I know the old saw, ‘All generalisations are false, including this one’. But assuming that Greed-Über-Alles prevails 90 per cent of the time, wouldn’t you prefer being on the easy side of that equation?

## Altruism and price

Here is a ‘compound’ search engine, GoodShop. The announced purpose of the search engine is to combine eleemosynary altruism with advantageous prices.

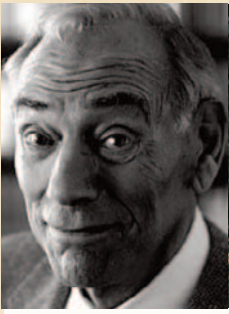
OK, let’s check out that site. A three-point checklist at the top of the home page is clear enough:

- 1) Choose your cause.
- 2) Shop online.
- 3) Donate.

The text says, ‘Up to 30 per cent of your purchase will go to your cause.’

Just a couple of problems here:





**“B2B marketers have long since recognised that ‘customer loyalty’ and ‘customer greed’ are synonyms.”**

Nowhere does it say that the donation to the ‘cause’ is identifiable from the individual; and once one chooses a cause, changing it isn’t possible. No major disaster there, but why is the impulse-choice a lock-in?

Oh, well, from their list let’s pick one – how about Hotels.com, which is an immediate discount source with or without the donation?

Ahhh . . . immediately beneath the Hotels.com listing is ‘Deals and coupons’. Click and up comes a Rebate Coupon. That’s good for greed, but how much do we save at a specific hotel and how much goes to our charity? Well, we’ll select Las Vegas just out of the cussedness extruded from the recent DMA conference there.

A ‘deluxe’ room at the venerable Flamingo, three pre-holiday nights, is ours for \$155.55 per night, total \$466.65.

Uh-oh. By checking directly with the hotel, three nights in that room are ours for US\$315.00. So, for most potential cause-donors, three sets of damages have occurred:

- 1) Hotels.com has lost its patina.
- 2) GoodShop.com has lost its patina.
- 3) The concept of combining a discount with a donation has lost its patina.

## **Troll under the bridge**

An absolute mantra for maintaining any semblance of sales pace during what’s left of the holiday shopping season, and the impending ‘Everything must go’ advertising in the post-holiday season, is awareness of the web as the troll under the marketing bridge.

Business-to-business marketers have long since recognised that ‘customer loyalty’ and ‘customer greed’ are synonyms. Catering to reality may be unpleasant . . . but it certainly is more pleasant than ignoring reality.

If you can combine potent selling copy with any evidence that ‘This is the only place and the only time you can get this deal’ – note the descriptive noun, ‘evidence’, not the noun so often linked to advertising, ‘claim’ – then enjoy your holiday season.

If you can’t, the alternative is leaning on your multi-buyers with what’s left of any vendor’s diminishing store of ammunition: “We’re in this together, my brother, and that’s why we’re making this offer to you.” Do you have the wherewithal to test those two possibilities against each other?

Every reader of this publication will be highly interested in the results each approach generates.



# Stock is schlock

January 2009

I'm looking at a space ad in an advertising publication, for a company that markets . . . what?

The ad shows a stack of poker chips. The heading:

'Are Your Customers All-In?'

The first line of text:

'Like a set of aces in the hole, a strong online brand will give your customers the confidence to go all in.'

OK, repeat – the company markets . . . what?

Adverts such as this typify a ghastly and apparently unending trend toward non-communicative self-approval. How do I give my customers the confidence to go all-in? And what is all-in?

The text continues:

'Your brand will build such value and trust that your customers will be eager to cash in.'

Huh?

Purely because of annoyance – and maybe that was the reaction this ad was gunning for – I went to the advertiser's website, a listing that was the only clear wording in the advert. On the web I had to scroll down for information, because the opening screen wasn't much help:

'Need to rejuvenate your current brand? Creating a new brand? We can help.'



Oh? How? Scrolling down provided a clue:

'A unique marketing agency offering custom web design and branding services . . . differentiating our company from traditional ad agencies, web design companies and graphic design firms through our 'marketing first' focus, which is infused into our custom website design, brand rejuvenation process and our innovative marketing strategies.'

Enough of that. I was too all-in to bother finding out more.

## Off into the jungle

Here's another advert, in another marketing magazine. The heading:

'Thirsting for deeper information on B-to-B marketing?'

The illustration is a stock photo of a man, mouth agape, holding an empty water bottle.

Yuck.



**“Illustration should agree with what we are selling, not with headline copy”**

On into the same magazine, another advertiser. Black full bleed (of course) page, all type reversed (of course).

The heading:

‘The Player.’ The picture is a stock shot of a man in a white dinner jacket. He looks grim. He holds a cigar, aimed outward weapon-like.

First line of text:

‘He is smart. He is manipulative. He has his eye on something that you have and he knows how to get it . . . his way. Play the game right and you’ll win him over.’

Another advert, in a fund raising publication. Another stock shot, this one of a man leaping into the air.

The heading:

‘Exceed your expectations.’ (I really didn’t have any expectations . . .)

Yet another, this one in a high-circulation business magazine. The illustration is a stock shot of a jellyfish.

The headline:

‘Jellyfish are mostly passive drifters.’

Text doesn’t disappoint those of us who expect nothing. It begins:

‘They can’t proactively change direction but you can’.

Yeah, I’d like to change ‘proactive’, my second least favourite word. (In

first place: ‘paradigm’.) In ancient 20th century times we called such aberrations ‘Hucksterisms’.

A headline might say:

‘We’ll stand on our heads to please you.’

The illustration would be people standing on their heads.

A headline might say:

‘It’s a piece of cake.’

The illustration? Ah, how bright you are to envision a piece of cake.

### **A necessary rule**

The Illustration Agreement Rule was valid then, and it’s super-valid in this era of shortened attention spans: Illustration should agree with what we’re selling, not with headline copy.

May I make a modest proposal for the year 2009, a year in which any logical prognostication is that attention-spans will continue to sink and obfuscation will continue to contribute to those sinkings?

Just for this one year, don’t use stock shots as your key illustration and don’t ignore the Illustration Agreement Rule.

That way, you can stay in business for the whole year, which will make it possible for us to have a lovely re-visit as we enter the year 2010.



# Avoiding the circular file

April 2009

**A**n unscientific conclusion:

About half the practitioners of direct marketing began their perilous careers before the web was a factor. About half entered what we arrogantly call a 'profession' after the web began its hypercompetitive leap to marketing prominence . . . then dominance.

We now have copywriters who 'specialise' in web copy. Is this parallel to medical doctors who specialise in a specific ailment, referring patients whose problem lies outside their orbit to other specialists?

One benefit web specialists enjoy is that they don't risk having heavily-produced messages tossed, by the hundreds or thousands, into wastebaskets. That point was driven home to me as I reached into my own wastebasket, looking for grist to feed this rhetorical mill.

## Whose fault is it?

Here's a jumbo postcard from my local Rover dealer. What's the point of this card? The face of it says:

'Bring this card in for 10% off your service.'

Yeah, I know that one, fellows. If you want to achieve ten per cent verisimilitude, offer a flat amount of pounds or euros or dollars. I'm not holding my breath.

The key line of copy requires quite a bit of breath:

'Our Land Rover factory-trained technicians have a vast amount of Land Rover experience and, along with the latest generation computers and software, we are able to offer everything from a simple safety inspection to engine replacement.'

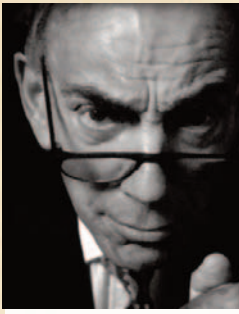
Aside from a basic problem – I traded my Range Rover for a less-exotic vehicle 11 years ago – a sentence too long to recite aloud without taking a breath, and too vague to offer a specific benefit, is a loser.

What's the online approach from this company, which calls itself 'An independent dealership'?

The home page shows a silhouetted Rover with a bunch of assumedly human whatever's sitting on the roof and the line:

'Drive your own road.'





## **“Who are these people, cluttering up our tidy, direct response universe?”**

Huh? Ah, here’s a recognisable imperative – ‘Enter’.

Entering, the awful truth emerges: This place isn’t a dealer, which explains ‘An independent dealership’ on the card. Set in green sans-serif type is a semi-headline:

‘Welcome to a world of 4-wheeled exploration, discovery and exhilaration. Welcome to a place where it is better to live life the British Rover way.’

Then, black, set in a smaller Roman face:

‘Welcome to purchasing your next pre-owned Land Rover from the newest and best used Land Rover dealer in the USA, the British Rover Company.’

The web has the edge, of course, because it has links to ‘Vehicles for sale’ and ‘Specials’ and other mild incentives.

I clicked on ‘Vehicles for sale’ and yes, here were a number of photos and descriptions of vintage Rovers, Mini-Coopers and Jaguars. Also present was a small blob touting the web designer.

So I wondered: Why didn’t the mailed card refer to the web? Might it be intramural rivalry? Maybe the service department and the sales department operate on separate planets? Might it

be that in fear of Tata, the muscular new owner of Rover and Jaguar, ancillary suppliers don’t know how to organise competitive campaigns?

### **Specificity sells**

Nothing else matters.

May I introduce a brutal truth into the sagging, staggering 2009 marketplace? Artificial inspiration is not only out of fashion, it’s out of date. The card from the ‘Independent dealership’ was just one I pulled out of a stack I had already tossed, a mini-symbol of wasted effort at a time when waste can be the quick precursor of exit.

‘Primum non nocere’ – the ancient Hippocratic ‘Above all, do no harm’ – should be primum for all of us.

A mailing from ‘Data Supermarket’ has this tribute to thin salesmanship:

‘We have Good News!’

OK, what’s the good news?

‘At MLS, we work differently on the front end, saving you money on the back end.’

Thanks. I’ll contact you the next time I have a problem with my back end.

Who are these people, cluttering up our tidy, direct response universe? The actual good news maybe that they’re our competitors.



# A (not so) fond look at ‘magalogue’s’

May 2009

Remember when magalogue – the hybrid vehicle that combines a magazine look with the hard sell of a traditional direct mail package – seemed to be the hot and powerful direction direct mail needed to compete with that upstart, the world wide web?

Golden promises.

Occasional golden results.

Magalogue’s are producing gold, when they appear . . . but usually the gold is in the coffers of the printer, not the marketer.

What has generated that nasty difference?

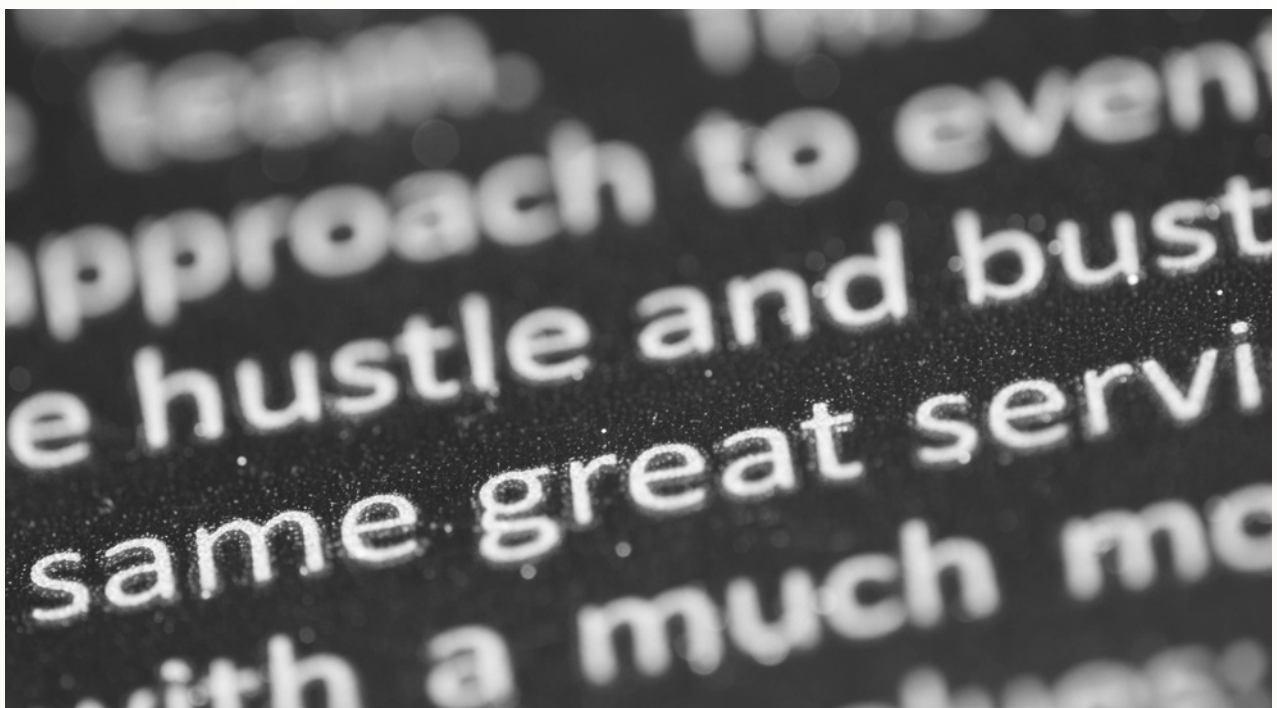
Has the direct marketplace changed that dramatically?

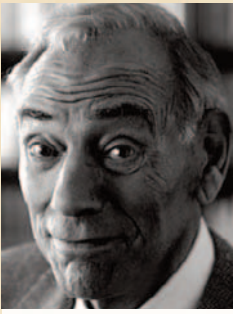
## Attitudinal and attentional shift

The ancient direct response mantra: A successful mailing converts sceptics to possibles, possibles to probables, and probables to buyers.

Do magalogue’s still have the power to jump the chasm and convert sceptics directly to buyers? As is true of so many questions that fascinate all of us in this glorious business, the answer parallels the classic story of a fellow who had a date with a pair of Siamese twins. When asked: “Did you have a good time?” he replied: “Well, yes and no.”

Magalogue’s, more than conventional direct mail, have a self-generated problem: They have to leap out at a





**“Another wicked element has entered the mix – the foreshortened attention-span foisted on us by the World Wide Web.”**

torrid pace and maintain that pace for 16, 24, or 32 pages. Unlike a segmented direct mail package, a magalogue is one mighty blow – or one flighty blowhard.

Felling scepticism is a challenge every professional marketer has faced repeatedly. That’s one reason we claim the mantle of professionalism.

But another wicked element has entered the mix – the foreshortened attention-span foisted on us as marketers and consumers as prospects by the world wide web.

Impatience is the name of the game in 2008, and with online assaults demanding: ‘Look at me! Listen to me! Me first! I know who you are! You asked for this! You need me!’ we have an attentional shift adding more treacle to the attitudinal shift.

Our prospects demand a quick fix. A magalogue can give them that fix only if the creative team has the psychological know-how and the chutzpah to deliver it with contemporary gusto.

If you’re of a mind to test a magalogue, or to re-enter that dangerous arena, I have a couple of suggestions.

Disclaimer: These ideas may work or they may fall flat. We have no guarantees. (But then, we never have

had any guarantees, have we?)

The cover has to include both dynamite and promise, without appearing copy-heavy. Now, that’s a test of the professional laying-on of hands!

Break up the text with multiple subheads.

Use this rhetorical trick: Suggest an emotional or intellectual or educational or financial circumstance you know doesn’t apply to the typical recipient and immediately add, ‘If this isn’t you, go directly to page 6’.

Parallel TV infomercials and emails with repeated inserts asking for the order.

As a close, a destination to which many will leap midway through the text or even earlier, offer a sudden spur-of-the-moment deal such as, ‘Wait a minute. Refer to this last paragraph and knock £20 off the price. Use that £20 to have us pay for your dinner tonight.’

Seamlessly and invisibly weave apparent value and sales pitch together. Note, please – that isn’t easy and it’s why so many magalogue’s failed even before the web erupted.

Will any of these work for you? Beats me. But it’s a better risk than facing Rambo without a deodorant.



# Clichés in both directions

June 2009

I can't find anyone who disagrees with the statement that email has become the dominant force-communication medium, and for the foreseeable future will continue to be the dominant force-communication medium (not that I'm looking for dissent).

The result of this much-deserved attention is predictable: We have a host of 'experts' who offer advice and opinions that, analysed by any seasoned practitioner of the communicative arts, are clichés. What's bothersome is that 'Eureka!' revelations should be revelatory, not just confirmation of what we already know.

When a marketer shares results, that's pure gold. When an observer shares truisms, that's pure brass. When a pusher pitches what he or she has to sell, representing it as help, that's pure chutzpah.

## A few examples

Here are some of the 'expert' comments that have come my way (and possibly yours, since they appeared in print and online) over the past few weeks:

"To combat overstuffed email boxes and recipient fatigue, email frequency does not necessarily need to be reduced, but relevance must be increased."

Now, that rates a solid, 'Huh?'

How about this one:

"Email segmentation is very effective and can easily increase open rates, click through's and conversion by ten to 20 per cent. But don't let the thought of segmenting your email overwhelm you if you're just starting out."

Gee, thanks for the profound advice.

In the same newsletter as the previous quote:

"Segmenting based on recency, frequency and monetary value has served the direct marketing industry well, and RFM segmentation can be applied to email, as well, with powerful impact."

We have to agree, that's startling and valuable information.

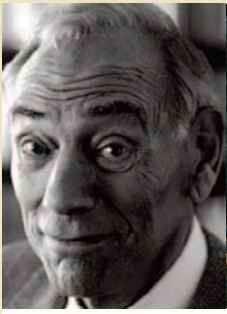
This one is my favourite of the day:

"A good salesperson pays close attention and learns about his customer, becomes familiar with them, understands their needs and, over time, develops a relationship with them."

Hey, my friend, I'll tell you what else: A good salesperson knows the difference between singular and plural and doesn't intermix 'customer' and 'them'.

An 'Ask the experts' column in a peripheral publication has this quote from the product marketing director of an email marketing company:

"It all comes down to how you can leverage email to deliver more timely



**“The most valuable advice is advice you already have in your own brain: Test, then analyse test results.”**



and relevant messages to your primary audience.”

I won't quote more from that column because every other assertion is a thinly-masked pitch on behalf of what that individual's professional organisation does.

### **So what is useful advice?**

Possibly out of chauvinism or because I know the editorial team at this publication, I can suggest that DMI is a happy oasis in the cliché-sands of an informational desert. But you need neither me nor any outsider to separate wheat from chaff.

So for starters, when – head-to-head or in mass media – you see ‘advice’ that actually is a sales pitch, publicise your rejection. (Oh, I know you won't,

and except for annoyed outbursts such as this one I seldom do, but it's a happy philosophy.)

Then, compile your own list of what works and what doesn't work and every quarter or so update that list, kicking out the chaff and fertilising the wheat.

The most valuable advice is advice you don't need because you already have it in your own brain:

Test, then analyse test results. A medium that matures with the rocket speed that typifies online marketing isn't sitting unmoving on its haunches, and neither should you.

Oops. I just blathered out a chunk of cliché-advice.



# A quick midsummer primer

July 2009

In my callow youth, I taught English literature at a minor US university.

There, I solidified my impious opinion that Wordsworth should have been considered a minor poet.

But Wordsworth had a line in his ode, 'Intimations of Immortality':

'The sunshine is a glorious birth.'

So OK, Bill, maybe you weren't all bad. Maybe. Uhhh . . . what does that line mean, anyway?

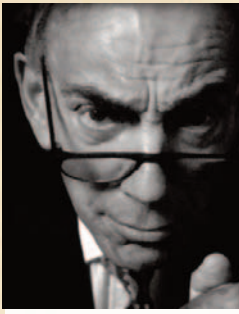
As is so often true of poetry, those six words make little sense in their

original context and make happy sense out of context.

As a parallel, here in the sunny days of midsummer we can re-examine some basic concepts of direct marketing and have them ready for use as we plan holiday mailings, emails, and arguments with associates.

So, a point: Folklore and fact aren't always in sync. Survival in our hypercompetitive world is fact driven, and theories based on personal likes and dislikes may temporarily salve the proclaimer's ego





**“A dire warning isn’t usually as effective as a positive instruction, especially now that we’re navel-deep in the Age of Scepticism”**

...and even in a short competition, eventuate into ‘What I really meant was...’

### **An example**

Worthy of exploration is the latter-day adoption of a negative as selling theory. Someone, somewhere, decided that starting an email subject line with ‘Don’t’ is a grabber.

Well, yes, just as any imperative is a better grabber than a declarative.

But a dire warning isn’t usually as effective as a positive instruction, especially now that we’re navel-deep in the Age of Scepticism.

One sees a plethora of negatives in social media. Hmm. Are social media genuine media?

I’ll cheerfully qualify as my own opinion/proclamation that social media (I detest that term) compete poorly against outright sales weaponry.

The darling of mid-2009, Twitter, joins Facebook and MySpace as ego-boosters hanging on the fence that separates salesmanship from self-image.

Depending on the periphery isn’t a professional attitude. YouTube may produce results, although reports to which I’ve been privy say the results aren’t always arrowed to the bottom line and when they are, the CPA (cost per action) is greater than the cost of properly targeted email.

Too, YouTube can bite. A marketer is a passenger who can’t control the direction of the chariot.

The easiest rule you’ll see all day . . . or all week . . . or all month . . . or all year . . . or whenever: The most effective media are those which reach and influence positively your specifically targeted prospects at the lowest per-reach cost.

(Note the key words: ‘reach and influence’, not just ‘reach’; and ‘influence positively’, not just ‘influence’.)

### **Measuring sticks**

While I’m outraging you, another point I regard as fact and you may regard as opinion: CPA is no more valid a measuring stick than was the old – if any aspect of web marketing can be considered old – adoration of CPC (cost per click). What matters is positive action, not just unmodified action. And positive action is action that either is a transaction or leads directly to a transaction.

I’ve used just about all the space to which I’m allotted, and the notions basket still is half full. I have space for just one more pointed point:

When an outsider – think ‘conventional advertising agency’ – says direct mail doesn’t work for customer acquisition, the proper four word response is, ‘Get another list company.’



# You're in the right place

September 2009

**B**e glad you're reading Direct Marketing International.

If you were reading another marketing publication, either in print or online, you'd encounter 'expert' opinions that would have you shaking your head in disgust as you conclude: 'I'm more of an expert than that.'

Here's an expert telling us how to recognise and avoid email delivery mistakes. Let's take a look at his wisdom:

'It's naïve for any marketer to think that deliverability failures couldn't happen to them. Moreover, just because your mail is getting delivered today, doesn't mean that you won't run into a problem tomorrow.'

What profundity!

Same on-line authority:

'Optimising your website to deliver a better online experience for your customers is fundamental for increasing revenues, ensuring customer satisfaction and retaining a loyal customer base. And during this economic downturn, it's now more important than ever to continually improve the customer experience of your site. By delivering a superior online customer experience when economic conditions are tight, you will not only create immediate competitive advantage, but you will also see the upside when conditions start to improve.'

I'd no more argue with that than argue against the statement that  $2+2=4$ . But, come on, do we need an authoritarian source to tell us that  $2+2=4$ ? If that equation baffles you, don't handle your own bookkeeping.

## Diarrhoea of the fingertips

A marketing magazine – yes, a printed marketing magazine, loaded with colour and bleed and production – is also loaded with rhetorical diaper-filler. An example:

'It's great to get a one-time sale from a customer, but much more financially rewarding to get customer for life who will add value to the bottom line over a longer period of time.'

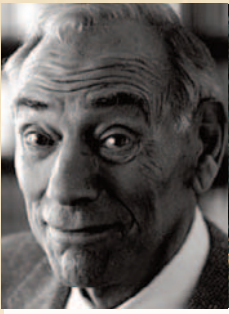
In the very next paragraph, to be sure we recognise the message as claptrap:

'Switching to a lower-cost alternative can bring down the expense side of that ROI number, so it sometimes seems more valuable. But factor in engagement, relevance and pass-along, and you may not be maximising your return.'

Same magazine, another expert naming 'Three ways to build and maintain loyal relationships when customers are running scared:

'1. Get personal ... 2. Don't make cuts ...3. Show them you care.'

How can you miss with tips as explicit as those?



**“Do we need an authoritarian source to tell us that  $2+2=4$ ?”**



Just to be sure we don't soak up any information that might be useful, a two-page column in the same publication gives us another verbal triptych.

The first tip: 'Don't cut price – add value.' Neat trick. Uhh . . . any really useful tips, such as how I might do that?

The second tip: 'Beef up your return per customer.' Obviously, no marketer ever thought of that before.

(Parenthetical comment – the following paragraph states, 'Keeping an existing customer is one-sixth the

cost of landing a new one.' My own tested average is a seven-to-one ratio, which makes me wonder why I didn't send an objection to the editor of that publication. No, it isn't.)

The third tip: 'Integrate your efforts.' To explain, the writer dips deep into the bucket of obfuscation: 'Approach outreach in a more holistic way, using more than one vehicle.'

Can you believe it? I've used up all my space and haven't included personal tips such as 'Breathe air, not water' and 'If you're driving, use a vehicle.' They'll have to wait until the next issue of DMI.



# Too many friends for intimacy

October 2009

**E**ver hear of Jonathan Abrams? Probably not. Or if you did, his name isn't a unique one, limited to one user.

Jonathan Abrams is credited with 'inventing' social media. His contribution to the dubious festival of such media was an absolute celebration of Andy Warhol's promise of '15 minutes of fame' to everybody in the universe: Friendster, heavily backed by knowledgeable business people, the first online social network.

So all those followers, from Facebook and MySpace and LinkedIn to

YouTube and Twitter and whatever, are his natural-born bastard children.

After a brief moment of glory, Friendster flopped. But Google the name Jonathan Abrams and you'll activate 672,000 entries . . . although you can't immediately tell how many are for this Jonathan Abrams.

The proliferation of social media caused Abrams, the parent, to proclaim loudly and publicly: "I invented this stuff and now I'm paying for it."





## **“Yet another distraction emerges from the boiling media hive.”**

(He was referring to the flood of communications, many of which were from people of whom he had never heard, pouring into his phone and his computer.)

The fire-horse must answer the bell. Abrams already has started up ‘Socializr’, a website that lets users invite people to parties and other events.

### **How crowded can it get?**

Just what we need . . . more social media.

This column, in this eminent publication, isn’t dedicated to the history of electronic communication. Rather, it’s dedicated to as dispassionate an analysis of communications techniques as a cranky curmudgeon can grind out.

And watching yet another distraction emerge from the boiling media hive is what we, as professional communicators, don’t need.

A point to consider: the gap between a communication that spurs a positive decision based on that communication and one that represents a bald cry for attention is a gap a great many marketers are trying to bridge.

Why?

The laws of economics are in play. For at least ten years, our best prospects

have had to sort legitimate sales messages from the chaff of counterfeit and misleading emails that clutter our online mailboxes and infect our attitude toward every announcement in every medium.

Facebook and MySpace were reasonably harmless until over-shrewd marketers grabbed them and began using them for less-than-personal purposes.

Then came Twitter, the strange phenomenon that limits a message to 140 characters. What a delightful way to eliminate literacy!

I had a recent email message from a publication with which I’d discontinued my subscription. The subject line: ‘Herschell, open up. It’s important.’

The same day, I had this intrusion on my cell phone:

‘U R inluck, yr 2 get free sub. Rep or lose it.’

You may regard my conclusion as muddy, because I didn’t renew my subscription, and for years I’ve railed against phony use of ‘important’.

But at least my rejection of the email was a mild one. My rejection of the text message was anything but mild.

Conclusion: Be warned. Oh, sorry, I forgot where we are . . . B-warnd.



# Revisiting the four great laws

November 2009

Inevitably, as a marketer sophisticates his or her communications with both existing customers or clients and prospective customers or clients, sophistication leads to self-stroking.

Just as inevitably, self stroking puts target-individuals outside the mix, instead of squarely in the centre.

The Four Great Laws may be venerable . . . but they're even more pertinent today than they were in prehistoric pre-web times, because the Internet has speeded up reaction times for all force communication media.

Pertinence and recognition aren't always in sync with each other.

A principal perpetration seeps from 'creatives' who write for their own interest groups, ignoring others, and becomes epidemic when the inevitable imitators decide: "Hey, that's clever," rather than: "Hey, that will sell."

Much water has passed under the bridge since we listed the Four Great Laws in the pages of this publication some years ago. So, in the interest of both Internet-era clarity and Internet-savvy marketing acuity, it's time to pass some more water.

## The First Great Law

Reach and influence, at the lowest possible cost, the most people who should and can respond.

Basic?  
Simple?  
Obvious.  
Glad you agree.

May all those whose marketing philosophy is the ancient notion of reaching 'the most people' whether qualified or not, and who think production out pulls message, re-think and join us in generating effective messages.

Note, please, that 'lowest possible cost' is a preventive against overproduction, not a plea for underproduction.

## The Second Great Law

In this Age of Scepticism, cleverness for the sake of cleverness may well be a liability rather than an asset.

Cleverness for the sake of salesmanship?

Oh, yes.

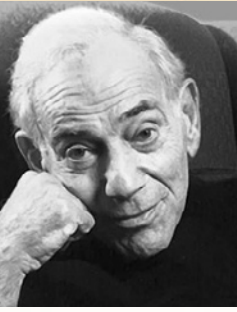
Cleverness for the sake of telling the world how clever the creative team is?

Oh, no.

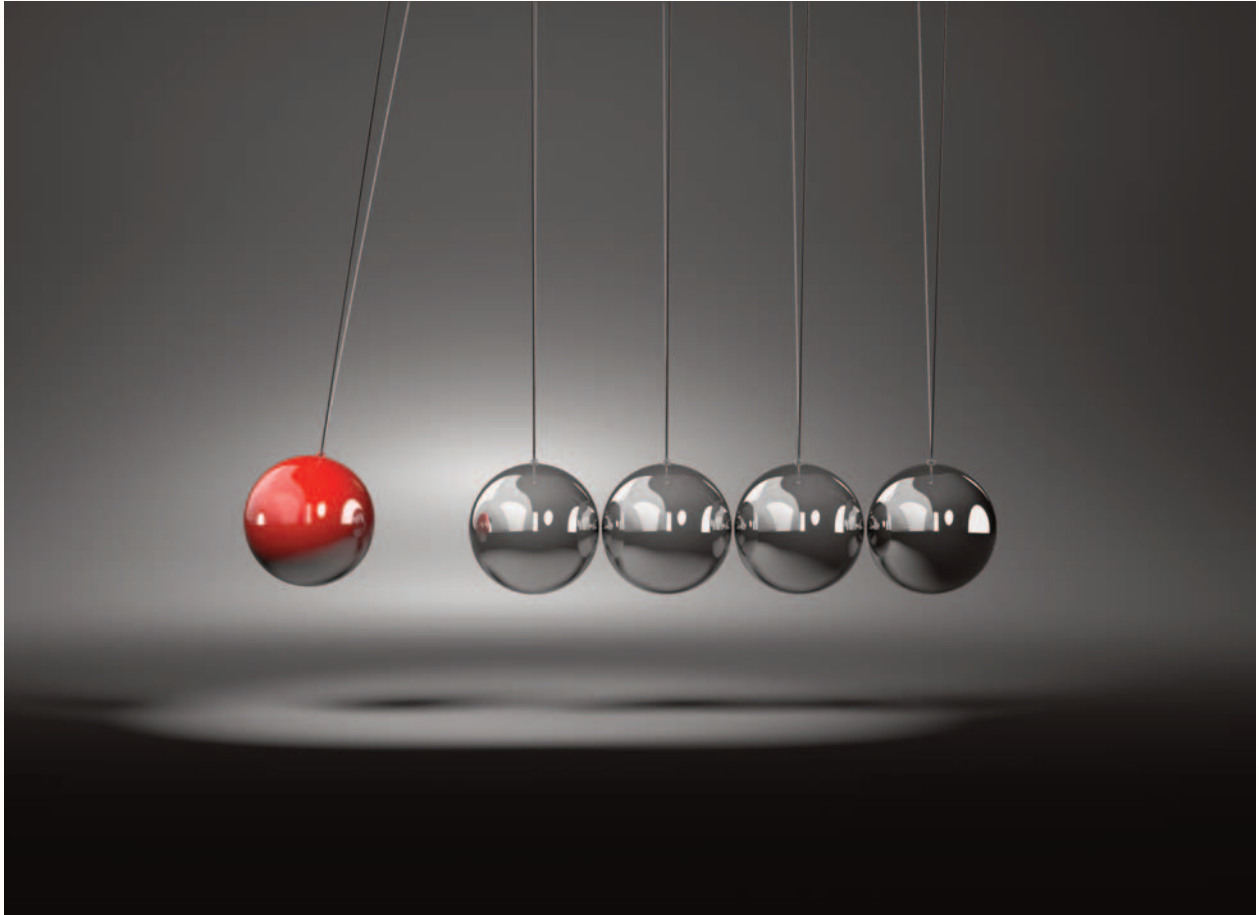
Our targets want not to believe. The web has given their natural scepticism a shot of adrenalin. Let's not feed and enhance implicit scepticism by 'Look at me!' showing off.

## The Third Great Law

E2 = 0. That's it: When you emphasise everything, you emphasise nothing. So laundry lists should give way to



**“The Internet has speeded up reaction times for all force communication media.”**



selective sales arguments.

Choose and emphasise the key points and subordinate the rest.

### **The Fourth Great Law**

Tell the reader/viewer/listener what to do.

Strange, isn't it, that this, the easiest and clearest of all Four Great Laws, is the one most frequently violated?

Don't just rhapsodise.

Imperative, regularly and rightly, out-pulls declarative. Repeat: Imperative

out-pulls declarative. Tell your targets what to do. That applies to consumer, B2B and cries in the wilderness.

You already knew all those?

Excellent.

No mystery here. We're not battling ignorance but, rather, dependence on tradition founded in itself rather than in testing and basic human psychology.

Let those who reject logic be our competitors.



# Tweet, tweet. Are we happy?

January 2010

The social medium MySpace had a good year. It lost only US\$128 million last year. That's only \$28 million more than it lost the previous year.

The owner, media mogul Rupert Murdoch, isn't happy. His pioneer social medium, once dominant, has lost ground against principal competitors Facebook and the micro-blogger Twitter. So, the announced 'rebuilding' plan for 2010 is to establish online communities structured on music, video and games. The chief operating officer of News Corp, Murdoch's corporate identity, is quoted as saying: "We're not trying to compete with Facebook or beat Twitter. We're trying to create a unique experience."

See anything here?

## **'Social' can be too social**

When email became a factor in the marketing universe, we direct marketers quickly seized the medium to our bosoms.

Smart move.

Then came Facebook and MySpace and Twitter and Plaxo and LinkedIn and we direct marketers quickly added those.

Oops – maybe not so smart.

The 'That which is announced as new equals that which is better' cult has

prevailed, ignoring the spotty history of innovations. That's the tightrope we walk: Our mantra should be, 'That which is announced as new may be that which is better'.

We might avoid being misled or hoodwinked or naïve, without totally rejecting a concept or a means of communication just because it's different from one with which we're comfortable.

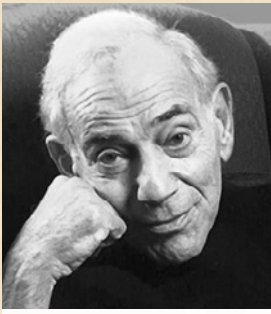
Am I anti-social media? No.

Well, partly. I favour any interpersonal communications that don't insult the recipient, even if the message is larded with stupidity. I don't favour any communications tool that enables the recipient to seize control of the message.

Even in the short lifetime of Twitter, we've seen business enterprises suffer damage at the hands – make that fingertips – of 'followers' (I detest that appellation) who, in their own ego-driven madness, attempt to organise a detestation campaign against a product or service.

We're wallowing in a populist sea and losing control of our own instruments. It's beyond our capability if such circumstance happens without our unwitting participation.

If it happens because we've opened a floodgate, culpability is ours.



**"We're wallowing in a populist sea and losing control of our own instruments"**



### **A two-edged sword**

One of the many companies offering Twitter marketing assistance uses this sales argument:

*"Once you follow these targeted users, they will come to your twitter profile page to review who you are. They will review your twitter bio, your web link and your recent 'tweets' to see what you are all about.*

*"If they like you, and you have the same interests, about 30% to 50% will follow you back. Once they follow you back, all your tweets will appear on that users twitter page for everyone to see!"*

The missing apostrophe in 'user's' and the plural/singular mismatch are theirs, not mine. We aren't involved in another marketer's missing apostrophe. We are involved in our own marketing self-traps. Opening the door for what appears on any user's Twitter page is a two edged sword.

A mild misstep can result in our having to apologise for a mistake we didn't make.

That's what can happen when we make it possible for the inmates to run the asylum.



# The little foxes that spoil the vines

March 2010

Sophisticates know ‘The Little Foxes’ as a stage play and subsequent movie based on the script by Lillian Hellman. Although on occasion small theatre companies still produce the play, the plotline is usually lost in history, because both play and movie date back about 70 years.

Reserved for us intellectuals is the basis for the phrase – Chapter 2, Verse 15 of the Song of Solomon in the King James Version of the Bible: ‘Take us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines, for our vines have tender grapes.’

What does that have to do with copy that sells, more than 70 years after the play and half a millennium after King James? Sadly, corruption on the world wide web has resulted in wild breeding of greedy little foxes that spoil our marketing vines, giving us not tender grapes but sour grapes.

## Disgustingly consistent

The history of commerce is disgustingly consistent: A medium becomes dominant. Charlatans flood in. Public enthusiasm morphs into public scepticism. The good guys are swept up in the clouds of doubt.

In our savage little world, wordsmiths grunt and heave, exacting every gram of potential benefit from the factual core, extruding (or, in too many cases, excreting) sales messages that either present speculation as fact or, worse, sales messages that conceal the

underside of a two-sided factual core.

Even the most die-hard old-timers no longer argue the point: buying online has some major advantages. A big advantage is that comparison shopping is easy. In less than a minute, anybody can check prices at three or four competing sources without travelling even one foot outside our front doors. We don’t have to dress up, we don’t have to use petrol and we don’t have to wait for a clerk to finish dealing with another customer or prospect.

Before the Internet, major marketers such as Amazon didn’t even exist. Now, they’re dominant. Many online customers not only don’t know where these vendors are located but don’t care.

So dealing online is the only way to go, right? Wrong.

For every Amazon, there seem to be a hundred phonies.

## Dollars, euros, pounds. Oh my!

Wow! Here’s an email offering a ‘Swiss’ watch for one US dollar. Too good to be true? You bet your bippy it is. Shipping is US\$3.99, but that isn’t an issue. What is an issue is a hidden notice that says you are automatically signing up for a weird deal sending you a watch every month, with US\$88.98 charged to your credit card. If you don’t accept that deal, you have to



**“Barnum was right. There’s a sucker born every minute and the Web is a fertile territory for 21st century Barnum’s.”**

return the watch. So much for the \$1 bargain.

Based on the legitimacy bestowed by eBay, bidding is an increasingly employed – and increasingly dangerous – way to buy something. A huge batch of eBay followers exploit the technique, including the inevitable phonies.

For example, here’s ‘Bidfun.com’. Buy, through your charge card, as many ‘credits’ as you think you may need.

Then you use those credits to bid on auctioned items – computers or electronics or TV sets or video games.

OK, we have US\$100 in credits. Just to bid costs us one credit. So we bid, and with only one minute to go, we’re the high bidder. Hot dog! Uhhh . . . no, dirty dog, because we now see a hidden ‘Gotcha’: Every bid extends

the deadline by 20 seconds . . . but allows just one penny increase above the previous high bidder. So with five seconds left, in come another batch of bids and suddenly, instead of one minute to go, it’s four or five minutes to go, about six pence higher. We count down, then bid again.

Oops. We’re out another dollar, because at the two-second mark another bidder drives the deadline up again. So it’s possible to use \$50 of our \$100 and wind up with nothing, which is what the site’s intention is.

Oh, yeah, Barnum was right. There’s a sucker born every minute and the web is fertile territory for 21st century Barnum’s.

We’ve all heard, many times: When a deal seems to be too good to be true, it probably is.





# Is print still breathing?

April 2010

Advance your time machines 100 years. Will a marketing historian — or an anthropologist — deliver a lecture on the ongoing developments in direct marketing and begin the discourse with: “Do you remember a substance called ‘paper’? Your grandmother may have told you about it.

“And those mouldering chunks in — what did they call it, a ‘bookcase’? — did you know you still can find some of these at antique auctions?”

Not likely.

The end is not yet.

Our dynamic world of direct response not only is surrounded by naysayers; within our ranks we have many



nouveau-experts who have dismissed any printed communication as a throwback to antediluvian times.

Inevitably, as a new medium surfaces, those who clasp that medium to their bosoms, to the exclusion of all else, predict the demise of whatever went before. In some cases — such as the broadcast human voice replacing Morse code — we can attach considerable validity to obsolescence.

But did radio cause newspapers and magazines to fold their tents?

Did television cause radio to tumble into the slough of despond?

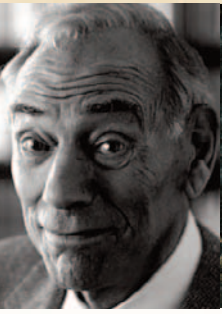
Did online media result in decaying television sets rotting away in dumpsters?

A medium becomes obsolete not when joined by a logical competitor but when replaced by a logical replacement.

The King is dead Long live the King

Oh, yes, print media is suffering and some will fold. Direct mail isn't the champion it was a generation ago. That is the inevitable result of media-glut.

Newspapers and magazines had their golden era and because the number of advertising dollars invested in toto has been split between new media and traditional media, slices of the pie are thinner. A marketer has a finite amount of money to spend.



**“Within our ranks we have many nouveau-experts who have dismissed any printed communication as a throwback to antediluvian times.”**

Suppose the budget is £100,000. In ancient days, the marketer might have spent half on direct mail; a quarter on space advertising; and a quarter on a mixture of telemarketing, personal communication and whatever.

Now — thump, thump, thump — in strides the 21st century colossus, online.

The budget is the same, but the split now includes the new kid on the block. Percentages allocated to traditional media shrink.

It's the year 2010

Hey, who are these new intruders? 'Social media'? What's social about them? Will an investment in them pay off?

There's just one way to find out: Allocate some dollars.

It's not that early in the game. All of us in this state-of-society industry have tested and have had results.

Some media have shone like the sun. Some have shown a tinge of promise. Some have sunk like the Titanic, despite the urgings of their disciples whose involvement is emotional rather than rational.

Thus has it always been.

Thus will it always be, because Homo

sapiens is an inventive beast.

Tell your great-grandchildren: Read the newspaper.

Survival never is universal.

That noun applies only to those who manipulate, squeeze, massage, manoeuvre, maximise.

Oh, yes, we'll lose some print media, probably including a number of the great ones.

Oh, yes, some force-communication houses will crumble.

But the world isn't coming to an end.

(What started this whole thought-process was an email, asking me to co-rejoice that another of the multitude of social media has given up the ghost. My reply — and, I hope yours: So what?)

When a direct mail package doesn't produce, look at the creative work.

When an advert in print media flops, check that negative result against ongoing positive results for others.

Is there a point to all this? Well, maybe. If one exists, it's . . .

Match up medium and message. That's been a valid litmus test since the days of stone tablets. (And yes, sadly, stone tablets no longer are much of a competitive medium.)



# Aww, ain't that sad!

June 2010

**A**ssumption: You're a sophisticated marketer. Parallel assumption: You aren't surprised to see junk-authoritarian statements by junk-authorities, in trade publications.

An absolute 'given' is that when a technique or a medium or a procedure or a development becomes the darling of self-proclaimed avant-garde, we can anticipate sniping as the next step. We aren't out of line to expect much of the sniping to come from yesterday's aficionados.

It's social media's turn.

In a recent issue, an online publication

touting itself as the voice of marketing trends draws conclusions the rest of us long since have gulped down and excreted as yesterday's info-meal. (Is the very term 'online publication' an oxymoron? Oh, no. This is the year 2010.)

What's annoying about the assembly of truisms . . . in this source, if you're a subscriber, or obvious, if you aren't . . . is the 'Behold!' attitude that reflects their 'We've discovered a trend no-one else has yet unearthed' conclusion.

## **Example:**

What a surprise! In March, the internal tracking system at MySpace





**“I’m out of patience with gurus who bombard us with trivia we have already digested and discarded as yesterday’s non-wisdom”**

showed that the number of active users was well below the 100 million users usually claimed – specifically, for the month ending in mid-February, MySpace had 18 million individual visitors.

For media analysis, cost-versus-response is a logical criterion. Figuring (or wild guessing) effectiveness based on total potential exposure is as useless as the ancient cost-per-click presumption early web marketers espoused in the antediluvian 1990s.

A direct quote: “Part of the reason that MySpace is hurting is because many people moved over to Facebook. Facebook, however, has other problems that don’t bode well for its future. According to ReadWriteWeb, Facebook’s population is rapidly ageing. It started as a service for college students but, by 2008, the average user’s age had already risen to 26. In early 2010, it’s up to 33 and climbing. Those older users are not as attractive to advertisers.”

Omygawd – Facebooker’s are facing Alzheimer’s and at any minute will lose both their buying power and their minds!

### **Spams, scams, and whams**

Can you believe people send fake information to MySpace and Facebook and LinkedIn and

Friendster and all the other “I’m one of your closest pals” media?

We’re marketers. We aren’t supposed to be subject to enchantment, because the backside of enchantment is disenchantment.

Even the sleaziest newspapers carry regular stories about innocents who are lured into fake online relationships. How could a marketing publication be so late in making that discovery?

Nigeria, here we come.

Now, wait a minute. That publication says the average Facebook user’s age has swooped up to 33. It also says the venerable email spam come-ons, which lure people into giving out their banking information with promises of millions, have begun to appear . . . and become effective . . . on Facebook.

Get the point?

At age 33, not only is a Facebook user more naïve than he, she, or it was at age 26 or age 18; the user has down slid to a point at which ancient scams target him, her, or it at the antique age of 33.

Aah, I’m out of space. It’s just as well, because I’m also out of patience with gurus who bombard us with trivia we have already digested and discarded as yesterday’s non-wisdom.



# Is 'social' really sociable?

September 2010

The word 'advocate' is too thin to describe many Twitter followers. A better appellation: 'disciple'.

Twitter is the current darling of what aptly are called 'social media', a latter-day addition to the wonders of electronic communication. Social media include Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Friendster and literally hundreds of others whose names range from the exotic to the arcane – Yelp.com and Getsatisfaction.com are reasonably mild examples.

Since it burst onto the force-communications scene, I've objected to Twitter's use of the word 'follower' . . . which implicitly puts responders like me in a secondary position. I have to 'join' and then am a follower?

Forget it, Charlie.

That may be attractive to 14-year-olds, but not to us leader-types.

## **'Follow me so I can sell you something'**

Social media have, in concert, invaded the commercial arena. Each has a benefit – an aura of personalisation tied to feedback, however temporary that aura might be.

So, the loyalty factor can actually be loyalty rather than greed, the driving force behind most 'loyalty programmes'. Accompanying the benefit is a negative – the message reaches only those who have asked,

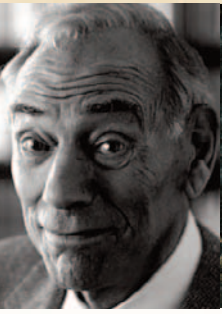
almost like suppliants, for words of wisdom from you.

Combining the benefit and the negative results is an amalgam we might call, simply, the challenge. It parallels online newsletters that so often start off strong and then begin to flag when the news aims itself internally instead of externally.

An authoritative commentary on tweeting has as its heading, 'Why should you tweet?' and follows up with four reasons: a) new contacts; b) quick alerts to your followers; c) supposedly 'insider' news about you; d) information about competitors. That last one suggests a corruption of the great bard: 'Neither a leader nor a follower be.'

Twitter also claims to out-socialise Facebook in its ability to re-tweet a message, so the follower becomes the leader of a new pack. It parallels trickle-down marketing, in which an agent sells to a customer who in turn becomes an agent who sells to a customer.

The question sitting on the table unanswered is whether Twitter is a competitive commercial medium, gauged not by early-adopter enthusiasm but by comparative results, pound for pound, dollar for dollar or euro for euro. A US survey showed fuzzy results, with almost half the respondents expressing



**“The effectiveness of any medium, whether Twitter or skywriting, depends on effective use of the medium.”**



disappointment with tweets as a selling weapon.

The survey may or may not represent the universe as a whole, not only because it seemed to be subjective rather than objective but also because the effectiveness of any medium, whether Twitter or skywriting, depends on effective use of the medium.

### **Do we need the Little Elves?**

We all know the fairy tale about the Little Elves who come in at night, solving problems and sewing up rips

and making things right. Tweeters say Twitter may have that power, but only if they as originators work hard to make the Twitter Elves work hard so Twitter itself works hard.

No surprise . . . Twitter parallels other media. It can be successful or it can bomb. Getting response from a message of 140 characters is tricky and not automatic, and what works for influencing your disciples may not work for influencing outsiders.

But that's how it always has been in our delightful world of direct response, hasn't it?



**Before you go**  
Here's Herschell demonstrating the  
power of targeted communications.



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