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Got It Right?

By Phillip A. Ross

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Spam was not invented on the Internet.

The Internet just helped give it a name. It's been around for a long time. Essentially spam is unwelcome advertising. The problem with the Internet is that you get a lot of it, and it's VERY LOUD and in-your-face. TV's not much different. Then there's junk mail. Very few people even read it. In an effort to get our attention, advertisers are using the two tools that seem to work best—loud and obnoxious.

Hey, they work, don't they! And whatever works must be okay because more and more people are willing to do whatever works to succeed. But does it really work? A successful bulk mail campaign would be ecstatic to get a five percent return rate. But, say a campaign is wildly successful, and gets a fifteen percent return rate. That means that it has an eighty-five percent failure rate. Yet, they call it a success because someone can make money at it.

Problem is when everyone is trying to succeed by being loud and obnoxious, things get pretty loud and obnoxious. Then, loud and obnoxious doesn't work anymore because no one can hear anything. So, they get louder and even more obnoxious. People in an argument often assume (or at least act like they think) that being loud improves their position. And advertising follows suit.

Surely, there's a better way.

Shallow and Immature Self-Centeredness

The values of loud and obnoxious have to do with image and impression. Loud and obnoxious want to create an image, and make an impression. And they do! But what are the underlying values of the image and impression they make? What is really being communicated is shallow, immature self-centeredness. If you think that I'm suggesting that the values of the reigning advertising and marketing wisdom are shallow, immature and self-centered, you're right. Do you really want your business associated with such values? I don't .

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Most advertising, marketing, and public relations efforts appeal to self-centered and shallow values. As a result, most people intentionally do everything they can to minimize the effectiveness of ads. We identify them with the inane. We learn to block them out. We don't even see them or hear them. That's why they have to get louder and more obnoxious. Advertising has become an engine of rudeness and crassness that grows ever louder and ruder. Too often financial success comes at the expense of increasing social and moral corruption. Advertising encourages people not to listen, not to pay attention. We have learned to tune in and tune out. Because when you do listen, you are inundated with a kind of shallow self-centeredness and an invitation to envy.

Do you really want your business associated with shallow, self-centered, rude and crass envy? I don't. Surely there is a better way.

First Impressions

Substance and content always trump image and impression in the long run. Substance and content are worth paying attention to. They don't have to be loud or rude. Substance and content simply stand their ground. They can do that because they actually are what they appear to be.

Of course appearance is important. First impressions are valuable because they create a benchmark for further evaluation. When that evaluation is not consistent with the first impression, a disconnect occurs. Questions arise, and doubts are introduced. But when the later evaluation is consistent with the first impression, an important connection is made that contributes to trust.

Advertising in-and-of-itself is not a bad thing. What makes it good or bad is how it's done and the morals or values to which it appeals. Advertising that appeals to particular morals or values actually strengthens and reinforces those morals or values apart from the product or service that is being advertised. In truth, advertising attempts to effect attitudes, values and morals. Morality is the vehicle that carries advertising and marketing messages in public. Advertising is always necessarily moral because it always suggests someone's idea of goodness or correctness of character and behavior, where good and correct are understood in terms of popularity. Advertising appeals to and influences both popular thought, styles and morality.

Most advertising, marketing and public relations campaigns attempt to affect the minds and attitudes of people outside the company by employing techniques that grab and manipulate a target audience. But people don't like being manipulated, so they learn to ignore ads. The whole endeavor is pure spam, from inception to execution.

Business Integrity and Credibility

The advertising industry occupies a key position regarding social morality. We believe that the advertising industry should, ought, and must encourage the values of moral integrity through the work that it does. Advertising needs to appeal to and build upon maturity and sagacity because it is the right thing to do. The industry and the people who comprise it have additional, not less, social responsibility. They (we), more than others, must be mature, responsible, full of integrity, honesty and moral character—and the work we do, the ads we create, should reflect this character and these values.

A better campaign will attempt to develop and then reveal the substance—the character and

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integrity—of a company. This way when people see an advertisement, they don't need to be manipulated, but are allowed to make their own associations. They are not manipulated with false images and impressions, but are allowed to see how character and integrity effect a company. The only potential drawback is that these qualities must actually exist before they can be revealed.

The effort to create an image of integrity, for instance, without the underlying reality being in place, lacks integrity. Thus, the fundamental concerns of business promotion involve the character and principles upon which the business is built, and the way that the business employs character and principle in its operation.

Financial profitability apart from the values of honesty, integrity and compassion suggest that a business is greedy and self-serving, that the fundamental concern of the business is not the customer, neither narrowly nor broadly conceived. The public will eventually come to see the reality of the character and principles of a business and those who operate it, and will respond appropriately. Public opinion over time will discover the real character of a business and its people. Time tends to bring out the truth. And the long view of history favors honesty, integrity and compassion over greed and

self-centeredness. It favors substance and content over image and impression.

Buzz, Gossip, and Reputation

Public opinion, also known as buzz, gossip, or reputation, is the most effective and efficient means of business promotion. Word spreads on its own power. When people talk, people listen.

The key to long range business success is, then, to do everything possible to insure that the reputation of the business is, first, stellar, and then, familiar. By stellar we mean that the values of honesty, integrity and compassion function at every level of business operation. And by familiar we mean a matter of common or public knowledge. Don't be overwhelmed. The aim is not perfection, but maturity, in the same sense that maturity is valuable to personal development.

Any attempt to convey the impression of such values apart from actually incorporating them into the life and operation of a business will, in time, come to be understood by the public as deceitful, superficial and immature. All such efforts are harmful to a business because they contribute to negative buzz (a negative reputation), which is more harmful than no buzz at all. An unknown company has a better reputation than a company known for greedy and deceitful practices. And a company known for honesty, integrity and compassion will engender customer (or public) trust and loyalty over the long run.

Businesses not guided by long-range perspectives, values and goals actually harm themselves by delaying operational adjustments that will be increasingly difficult and costly to make. The least expensive way to do something is to do it right, because doing it over always increases expenses.

The Virtuous Cycle

Advertising, marketing and public relations work best on this kind of foundation. When the substance of the campaign is actually in the best interests of the customer(s), people take notice. When the motives of a business transaction serve the success of the company and the well-being of its customer(s), a

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kind of business momentum known as a virtuous cycle is born.

A virtuous cycle is a kind of positive symbiosis, or mutually beneficial relationship between two entities. Here those entities are a business and its customers, or the public. James Surowiecki has written an interesting article on the virtuous cycle (http://www.forbes.com/work/free_forbes/2002/1223/248.html). While this article is about an historical virtuous cycle among Quaker businessmen, Quakerism is not necessary to such a cycle. However, a moral consensus among those involved in the cycle is necessary. Call it what you want, but it appears to be a kind of common faith, where the content of the faith is honesty, integrity and maturity.

It's more than the stupid economy. Character not only counts, but adds up to sustainable profitability over time.

The ideal advertising or promotional campaign will employ the instruments of branding (logos, mottos and the like), not merely to create an impression or image in the minds of customers, but to allow the public to associate a particular business entity with high moral ground. The purpose is to remind the target audience of the character and principles of the business. Again, those characteristics and principles must first be in place.

Advertising Success

Two things affect the success of such advertising campaigns in the marketplace. First, the public must

share the values of the character and principles of the business to some degree. That consensus must be in place between the business and its customers. A side benefit pertains to the quality or character of the customers such a business will attract. Don't we want honest, mature customers?

The associations being suggested by a campaign must resonate as valuable and important to the target audience. And, second, the associations should involve more substance than image, more reality than perception. The idea is not to create an image, but to reveal a reality. Advertising and promotional campaigns should take the high road. They should endeavor to help businesses to actually occupy the high ground of honesty, integrity, character, industry and excellence, not to merely suggest them.

There is little value in simply knowing or communicating the name of a business. Rather, the purpose of a campaign should be to associate a business brand with its actual character and principles. This approach can be successful in the marketplace because character and principles are important values of human experience. And because they are already important to the majority of people, and important to the development of personal maturity, they will be recognized and remembered. Even when people don't practice such virtues themselves, they are valued for their inherent worthiness. People feel good about associating with worthy values.

Empty Advertising

Of course, it is possible to generate the impression of business virtue apart from its reality. But over time, such an approach will produce a negative effect because people will discover the ruse. Lies universally generate hostility, even among thieves. No one appreciates a liar. People don't like being

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fooled. Consequently, businesses should concern themselves with getting their own houses in order, and on quality branding, prior to embarking on an advertising or promotional campaign.

It should also be noted that advertising and promotional campaigns can and should be used internally to encourage and reinforce the development of particular principles or values within a company. Such efforts often involve programs of workplace value enhancement. Certain behaviors can be encouraged through the use of incentive programs. Honesty and integrity can be rewarded within the company to encourage their adoption as company policy. Programs can be developed that will remind and encourage the kind of character and principles that a company would be proud to show to the public. And the public will be delighted to see them, and will reward such companies with business and loyalty.

Done right, advertising and promotional campaigns can build a profitable virtuous cycle between companies and customers. And they don't have to be loud and obnoxious.

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Phillip A. Ross, entrepreneur, freelance writer and owner of Business Specialties (www.business-specialties.com), lives in Marietta, Ohio, and provides identity products and promotional services to position companies and organization for substantial success.

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