

“Truth & Order Amidst The Chaos”

The Marketing Rebel

RANT

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Reno, Nevada
Saturday afternoon

Dear Friend and Subscriber,

Forgive me if I've gone off on the following subject before. But it's just too important for serious marketers to ignore. It's a ride worth taking a couple of times, until you "get" it.

Here's the headline: The most incompetent people in your life... *have no clue whatsoever they are incompetent.*

Proof of this astonishing news comes to you from Cornell University, where researchers were left slack-jawed at what they discovered. Not only do incompetent people *not* realize their propensity to screw things up beyond hope... but they also *consistently register absurdly high on the self-confidence scales.*

In other words... even as they botch up everything they touch... in their mind, they believe their abilities and talents are actually *better* than everyone else's.

This would be amusing if the consequences weren't so catastrophic.

They are not just taken aback when you complain about the quality of their work. They simply *do not believe you.* You must be brain-dead not to realize how lucky you are to have them in your life. Regardless of facts, they will humor your silly insistence on doing "a better job"... and simply continue with their own agenda.

In the research, the yo-yo's who scored the *worst* in tests requiring logic, grammar and humor

(hmmm -- this may explain those fallow years of Saturday Night Live)... were also the *same* folks who grossly *over-estimated* how well they had performed.

This explains why Bubba, the auto mechanic who can't seem to fix your leaky radiator, feels completely qualified to tell you how to beat the stock market. Stick around long enough, and he'll explain the mysteries of women to you, too. And then move on to solving the world's political woes.

Meanwhile, your car has been doomed by his incompetence. (I once got half a block down the road with four guys from the auto repair joint running after me, screaming. After changing my oil, Bubba had neglected to screw in the oil pan plug, and I was lucky the engine didn't blow. As it was, Bubba was mad at *me* for spilling oil all over the shop floor. In his mind -- somehow, some way -- he was absolutely not at fault. It simply wasn't possible, since he was such a competent, highly-skilled and able dude.)

The bad news is... there are more incompetents than competents out there. They outnumber us.

And they inhabit every single strata of society and business. They're your boss, your brother-in-law, your partner and the guy in charge of security at the airport.

The good news is... well, heck. There really *isn't* any good news to this discovery. Maybe the

fact the shrinks have finally taken notice will speed along some sort of cure.

You betcha.

I used to think that civilization chugged along in *spite* of the human beings running the show. Somehow, perhaps with the help of angels or invisible aliens, the power stays on and trains run almost on time and the Cheerios stay stocked in the stores.

But Dan Kennedy has a better take on this. He insists that the world runs *because* it was designed to work with incompetent morons at the helm. It makes sense. If nuclear reactors really required Einstein at the controls instead of Homer Simpson, we'd have all been reduced to splotches of bubbling carbon long ago.

So, okay. What's this got to do with marketing?

Plenty, of course. I see two immediate ways to make good use of this information:

1. Pay attention to the people around you.

If you've been scratching your head because a colleague seems to be a total screw-up, yet he's convinced you with his polished confidence that he is actually your best asset... now you know.

Get rid of him if you can. If you cannot fire or kill him, at least *insulate* him from the important parts of your life and business. He and his ilk will destroy you and everything you've built... without even realizing what they've done. Or bothering to acknowledge it.

I remember a guy who owned a sound system my band occasionally borrowed for shows. We let him sit at the controls, because it was his equipment, but we *never* let him set the levels because he was a complete nincompoop.

Still, every single night, I would watch from the stage in horror as he fixated on some dial or switch, his mind churning like a broken garbage disposal... until he would reach out and -- very confidently -- touch something and send everyone shrieking out of the room from the sudden assault of feedback. And he would always be so *astonished* that the feedback had occurred, miraculously, at the same time he'd hit the switch. Certainly, it was nothing *he'd* done.

So get your own sound system, if you have to. Do whatever is necessary. You will pay and pay and pay for the blunders and missteps of the nitwits if you don't get hip and do what needs to be done to free yourself.

And... when you find people who actually do what they say they'll do, and follow through on projects with skill and conscience... *hang on tight*. I've had enough different clients over the years to populate a small city. Yet only a meager handful had the ability to follow directions, and the sense to realize when the plan I gave them was the right way to go.

And I've held onto those clients for years, even when there was better money to be made with new ones. Because the pain of watching your carefully written campaigns crash and burn because of gross incompetence just sucks the life from you.

Beware the over-confident moron.

2. Just get used to the fact that your customer base is heavily populated with these whack-jobs.

You can't fire your customers willy-nilly. As long as their checks clear, you wouldn't want to, anyway. (Though you may occasionally want to hunt them down and read them a riot act.)

But knowing about the intellectual density of many people will both soothe your nerves (when you must deal with their absurd complaints and irrational requests)... and help you *adjust* your marketing accordingly.

Let me explain. Dan Kennedy (at his bitchin' Copywriting Boot Camp last year) reminded everyone of a very critical copy point we all tend to forget:

"It's Not Your Fault!"

It's an excellent term to work into copy when you're trying to convince the reader to change from destructive behavior (like being broke all the time, or getting bullied at the beach, or stocking up fat cells like a bear prepping for hibernation) to whatever program you have for him.

Of course, we now know that in many cases it really *is* his fault he's screwed everything up so badly. Nevertheless, he may be incapable of

realizing it. And he will welcome your assurances.

You can, with the right ego-less attitude, bond even with aggressively-incompetent customers. In fact, you *must* do this... because they may make up the majority of your list.

You can help them... but you will likely never *change* them.

Final note: If, horrors, you suspect *you* may be one of these poor guys... well, the shrinks did suggest taking a college-level course in logical reasoning might help. It's an uphill climb, however. The over-the-top self-confidence of the incompetent is *real*, not faked. Yes, even though it's misplaced confidence, it's there like a brick wall around the person. Realistic self-assessment can't penetrate.

You actually live in your own little world, where everyone *else* is in denial about your greatness.

And it was just a *coincidence* that 100,000 pieces of mail just went out with insufficient postage.

Tales of the Vice Squad

As a kid growing up among the vineyards and foothills of Cucamonga, I was haunted by the notion that *everyone* else knew things I would never be privy to.

Then I came across my first Playboy magazine... and I was suddenly offered *proof* there was a party going on that I wasn't invited to.

This is a recurring topic when I talk with Gary Halbert. We both were mesmerized by Hugh Hefner's lifestyle -- hanging out all day and night in your pajamas, surrounded by gorgeous young things who couldn't seem to keep their own peejays on.

How the *hell*, we wondered obsessively, do you go about getting *invited* to that party?

In a very significant way, this frustration formed the paths our careers took. For Gary, that path went through Hollywood and New York city and Miami Beach, buzzing around the ocean in tricked-out boats and staring down the maitre'd at Toot Shor's, always with a pretty girl nearby.

For me, the path wound through the be-bop hinderlands of America's counter culture.

Dancin' in the moonlight, the sexual revolution, the occasional incoherent chat with God. Heck, I think I once played poker with the Devil. Bastard cheats.

Anyway... there came a time when getting that invite to the Playboy mansion was within reach. I sat in a cushy office on Sunset Blvd., in a building where every elevator ride was shared with a different celebrity, and I was hanging with a guy who was so well-connected in Hollywood that he could get us a table at Spago's with an hour's notice. While crowds of people who'd had reso's for six months languished in the waiting room.

And you know what? I didn't want to go.

Well, okay, a part of me was still interested, if only for the bragging rights.

But a bigger part of me just didn't give a damn anymore. The "party" at Hef's place suddenly seemed more like a silly adult version of Disneyland than something vital and enticing.

So I never went.

After ten years in the wasteland of Los Angeles, I'd reached an important realization: **The rich and the famous were most definitely NOT having a better time than I was.**

In my entire life, there aren't more than a handful of days I wouldn't happily relive. I wasn't aware of it most of the time... but I was waking up every single morning to another chapter of a grand adventure. It was a BIG DEAL to finally realize this. And stop obsessing on the party I felt I was missing out on.

One of the biggest appeals in advertising is the promise of a different, better life. A sudden, jolting change, where money worries vanish, sex is plentiful, and the world cowers at your feet. Or some version of that.

And this appeal forever remains untainted by the dire warnings of those who will tell you that fame has its costs, money can't solve emotional problems, and even wild orgies can grow tiresome very quickly. All of which is true.

However... it's important for marketers to understand that most people lead lives of quiet

desperation. They don't get to meet interesting people, or do interesting things, or go to interesting places.

They are bored shitless. And convinced that life could be a bed of roses if only... if only... if *only* they could find a way to get invited to The Party.

I am not an evangelist on this matter. I'm not going to bang my head against the wall trying to get you to see the truth. But I will share my observations, in the vain hope that at least a few people will catch the hint.

Here's what I'm talking about: I don't know what brought you to your business. But I'm pretty sure you weren't "invited".

I was not invited into the ranks of copywriters. The corporate world kept spitting me out, because I was such a bad fit in the tie-wearing, don't-color-outside-the-lines, 9-to-5 culture. I stumbled into the entrepreneurial field entirely as a result of not finding *anywhere else* to land.

I'm glad it worked out this way, of course... but it was a bumpy ride.

And one day, after decades of bouncing around the American dream, I suddenly realized how *lucky* I was. I'd somehow managed to chew through a wide swath of crucially-important adventures few people ever experienced. And this is what I learned:

First... the reason I believed, as a kid, that everyone else (both adult and fellow child) knew vital secrets I didn't... was because I had assumed their smug confidence and bravado had to be based on something *real*.

Now, I know the truth: They weren't thinking thoughts that I wasn't privy to. Nope. *They weren't thinking at all.* Most of the time, there wasn't a single thought in their heads. They were coasting on vapor.

Second... the only reason the party I wasn't invited to seemed so much better than the party I was at... was simply a twisted version of the grass being greener on the other side. As Halbert says, "I know exactly what I don't want in life... and it's always what I *already have.*"

I'll spare you the gory details... but the average weekend party we threw in college, for almost no money at all... *easily* rivaled the best million-dollar fiesta Hef has ever hosted for fun and wildness. (I've even met shrinks who insist the poor guy is actually depressed. Possibly because there's no challenge left in his life.)

I've hung with celebrities. They are the most boring people on the planet. (As Marlon Brando once noted, a movie star is someone who, if you ain't talking about them, they ain't listening.)

I've hung with rich folks, and with near-penniless desperados. More often than not, money will make you fat and lazy and uninteresting. It's no fun starving to death, either, but for many the risk of losing your essence increases with every buck you pack away.

And, I've hung with corporate CEOs, big-time wheeler-dealers, and women so stunningly beautiful they take your breath away. Scratch the surface of any of them, and you may back away in horror at what you find underneath. Many of them see you as *food*, at best. Many of the rest are nothing more than angry, frightened children in grown-up clothes and masks of make-up.

Lastly: Abe Lincoln was right -- most people are about as happy as they make up their mind to be.

I am blessed with a deep list of good friends and colleagues. People who can lift my spirits in a two-minute chat. People I rely on, and who rely on me and make my life full and robust.

And the one big realization I am so thankful of having... is that these people have provided me with a *life-long* "party" more exciting and more satisfying than anything else going on, anywhere.

Because the key to a great party is a roomful of vital, interesting friends. Not celebrity, not showy banquets, not tits and ass. Life is *already* a grand adventure... however, most people choose to pretend it isn't.

And the punch-line is... all you have to do is *wake up* to get back in the groove.

As a marketer, understanding the depth and urgency of raw *need* in your target population is

critical. This is where world-class sales pitches begin to foment. **It's the basic ingredient.**

But more important... if you truly desire success, you cannot run off thinking it's built on fame, money and power. Because it isn't. Some of the richest people I've met are also the most miserable. No matter where they are, they're convinced the "real" party is across town. And they weren't invited.

When you're truly successful, you're the party. If your life isn't vibrant and stimulating right now, then changing that condition is a big part of your current job.

Remember -- *most people don't get to do this.* They're stuck in normal jobs, numbed by television and caged by their own refusal to risk. Or to read and learn and put a little effort into taking control.

And here *you* are, smack in the middle of the most exciting and urgent part of the business world. Entrepreneurs *rock*. You're part of the life-blood of the planet. Other people *wish* they had your cojones.

When you've got your biz cooking on all cylinders, *you're* the party everyone wants to get invited to.

So. Are you having fun yet?

How-To Department

All right, enough with the philosophical foolishness.

Let's get into some meat here. **How would you like to learn one of the great secrets of creating over-the-top world-class copy?**

I call it "Chops and Chutzpah". (Actually, I call it "balls and chops", but I enjoy torturing my girlfriend by using Yiddish as much as possible.) (Usually incorrectly.)

Here's what the phrase means: To create outrageously-compelling copy, you combine earthy, real *personality*... with honest, real *worth*... and *push hard* for action.

This is the opposite of the Milquetoast way most advertisers approach the sale. They want to appear as bland as possible, believing that

blending into the background is preferable to possibly *offending* someone by being too "pushy".

Nonsense. Blending into the background will make your advertising invisible. You're wasting money, effort and time.

And yes, by stepping up and showing a little personality and salesmanship, you *do* risk offending some people. So what? The only way *not* to offend some folks is to stand very still and avoid speaking at all.

Never, ever, *ever* gauge your advertising by the complaints you get. Rather, gauge it by the *money it brings in*.

And yes, you can go too far with this. I find myself cringing at some of the ads I've "inspired" that are sent in for critiques. The copy reads like it was written by an angry, potty-mouthed psychopath... and the offer has strong suggestions that he will personally stalk you if you do not buy right away.

Wrong approach, guys. Most people understand the need to have "chops". This means you aren't just a bragging, empty suit with nothing of value to offer... but, rather, you have something of **honest worth** to sell.

This is *important*. No matter how good your ad is, if your product gets the "oh, yuck" reaction when it arrives, you've got a marketing problem.

But most people stumble on the "chutzpah" angle. So let's get this straight: **It's NOT about bullying your reader with power words, or assaulting them with attitude.**

It *is* about "speaking their language". My golf ads created such a firestorm in the magazines because no one had ever written to golfers in that "just you and me having a beer and talkin' golf" tone before. It simply wasn't done.

But I had tapped into exactly the way many golfers *really speak to each other*. Not with affront, not with churlishness, and not patronizingly. (Go ahead, look those words up.)

No. With *real* language. But not for the sake of being clever. Good writing is *invisible* to the reader -- he should *not* be aware he's reading something. Instead, your copy should

smoothingly melt into the conversation *already going on in his head*.

You aren't creating the parade he's in. You're just standing in front of the existing one and getting in the groove.

Let me drive this point home by sharing a critique I gave recently.

The subscriber -- a very savvy young marketer named Tom -- was creating fresh ads for some gyms in New York. The headline he wanted to use went something like "Yo! Are You Lookin' For A Friggin' Gym?" And his partner was horrified, and refused to run it. (He actually said, I believe, "Yo! Guys in Brooklyn don't friggin' talk that way!")

God forbid they should insult any sensitive New Yawkers.

Here's my reply:

Hi Tom...

Are you kidding me? That's a GREAT headline. I don't know if you can get it past the Yellow Page censors... but if you can, I think it's killer.

You know, people tried to talk me out of using "kick ass" in my course title. They really, really, really (deep in their little hearts) believed I would be mocked and run out of town on a rail.

Actual result: It gets attention, people LOVE to "hear it like it is", and -- big secret point -- the fact that I can back it up with actual useable advice leaves their heads spinning.

If you got the goods, man, don't hide behind false humility. Stand up and claim what's yours. **People follow leaders with balls and chops.**

Also, a little "edgy" language sets the tone for what they're about to experience as subscribers to my stuff. They aren't shocked when I use strong words (though I NEVER swear gratuitously -- only for occasional effect)... and, in fact, they enjoy being titillated.

Life is boring most the time. Be a bright spot in your reader's

lives. Be the one thing they read in that section of the YP that wakes 'em up and gets their blood moving.

I don't know anything about Brooklyn. I spent a week in Manhattan 15 years ago with a friend who owned a building on the edge of the Village. (One day we walked -- walked -- from Wall Street to Sara Lawrence... 90 friggin' blocks... so I saw a lot of the town.) I'm a California boy. You know, surfin', mellow attitudes, rock and roll.

Punk could have never been invented in LA. You can't muster the needed rage when it's sunny all the time.

So the essence of a Brooklyn existence is not something I can call up without research.

Nevertheless, I know a ballsy approach when I see one.

Anyway, you can do something like "Yo, What're You Lookin' At?" (Or whatever rings a bell in the mind of your intended audience -- yes, even if it's a little corny.)

But you can't rest on outrageousness. What you want to do is to get attention... and then get down to biz in your copy, immediately. Something like this: "Seriously -- are you looking for a gym that makes women feel safe and happy... makes hard-core bodybuilders ecstatic... and lets your average "just tryin' to get back in shape fast" Brooklynite have fun while getting a great workout, or playing some racquetball, or just hanging out in the coolest, cleanest and most happening modern gym this side of Manhattan?"

Okay, that's a long sentence, but I'm pulling this outa thin air here.

I don't know what your USP is, what your main list of benefits are, why most people join and stay. But what you want in a good YP ad is an arresting headline, followed by punchy copy that hits a hot button every few words.

For me, a non-serious iron slinger, I want to know I'm welcome to go play r-ball or roundball without having to navigate the grunt-and-sweat guys with the bad attitudes. (Certain Gold's Gyms are notorious for confrontations in the weight room. Very bad PR.)

The women I know want lots of seriously silly aerobics stuff, and they want to feel like they aren't gonna be the entertainment for horny guys or get hit on between classes.

Unless they want it.

And the hard bodies want a room they can stretch out in, without a lot of skinny wannabe's hogging the bench press.

Create a quick "virtual scene" with your copy, describing the gym in ways that entice all the groups you want to bring in.

Again, I think it's good iron, lots of women, safety, roomy, eat-off-the-floor clean, staff dedicated to keeping you happy.

That help?

j.

Do you see what I'm getting at? The "issue" of the language ("Yo!" and "friggin") may or may not be a problem. But you can make it moot, by immediately focusing your copy on "chops".

The key to a great ad is to combine winning personality... with some honest kick-ass *substance*... in a clear, convincing sales message.

Don't get hung up on the idea that to wake your reader up, you have to be undignified or aggressive.

You don't. Real copywriting power comes from a *skillful balance* of shaking the reader awake, while delivering on large promises.

Remember: Cunning, ruthlessness and street savvy salesmanship -- combined with honest worth -- beats idealism, bravado and aggressiveness every time.

Yo! You friggin' got that?

Next month: Why having God as your spokesman *pales* next to this marketing truth.

Coaches Corner

I know I talk a lot about the roundabout way I arrived at being a freelance copywriter. But these stories are important, because they reveal the various truths I learned that, eventually, became the *foundation* of creating world-class advertising.

One of the events that pushed me out of the corporate world was having a vice president -- who had *seen* me working until almost 1 a.m. the night before -- publicly berate me for coming in the next morning 20 minutes late. Meeting the deadline, to him, was much *less* important than keeping the 9-to-5 lamp burning.

And one of the events that kept me *in* the freelance ranks also involved a "suit". I was being snuck in the back door at an LA agency to help their copywriting staff pull off some mailings for a fussy client. The mucky-mucks liked my stuff so much, they were dangling a sweet job in their creative department in front of me.

What saved me from succumbing to the lure of the corporate womb... was a short conversation I had with one of the staff copywriters. I'd noticed her windowless office seemed a little drab and sterile, and asked her why she hadn't put up some posters or something.

"Against the rules," she said in a whisper. "Nothing is allowed on the walls, because the head of the department thinks it would distract us. We can't even have cluttered desks. He insists we have only one piece of paper on the desk at a time."

I laughed, assuming she was joking. The look she gave back nearly broke my heart. She was slaving away under a madman.

Unfortunately, the advertising world is awash in know-nothings who have slimed their way into the top jobs. And because they don't understand the creative process, they feel they must *pretend* to be masters at it. And thus, rules are born that make absolutely no sense whatsoever. Especially for the truly creative types who must manufacture the advertising.

My desk looks like a bomb went off. Piles of paper six inches high crowd my monitor, while

stacks of cassettes and little buckets of pens threaten to fall off the edge at any moment.

On the bookshelf, I have a foot-tall Homer Simpson wind-up doll staring at me (dressed as Santa -- hit the button and he swivels obscenely to bad Christmas songs). Talk about distractions.

Two dogs slumber at my feet. I'm wearing sweats, I'm barefoot, and I'm careful not to sip from yesterday's coffee cup, which sits next to today's.

I don't even own a tie anymore.

And yet I will put my production up against *anyone*, anywhere, who thinks a little sloppiness thwarts creativity.

The great David Ogilvy was a big fan of **naps**. He would stuff his head full of information, and then go saw off forty zzz's. And awake with a new killer headline.

I do the same thing. It's making full use of the power of your unconscious. Try nodding off in your corporate office, though, and people will freak out.

I also have little notepads all over the house. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night with a burning idea that needs to be written down. And I know I **MUST** write it down immediately, or lose it forever. My "office" includes the kitchen, the back yard, and my car.

I get some of my best organizational thinking done in the *shower*. I relax under the hot water, and I've read somewhere that showers are major producers of negative ions, which are great for soothing the mind and inducing hyper-creative thoughts. Half the notes on my desk have water spots on them -- I wrote them while still dripping wet. (I gotta get one of those waterproof notepads.)

None of the great writers I know **EVER** "turns off" the mental machinery. When we're on a job, we're on it 24/7, essentially.

We may *look* like we're watching TV, or staring at the wall, or playing golf. But we're always a heartbeat away from a breakthrough concept or tactic or idea.

And that's something the corporate creeps can never understand. You can't corral the creative

process. You can't *force* it to operate under oppressive conditions.

Keeping your tie cinched and your desk clean because some nut-case veep thinks writers can benefit from his notions of discipline... is just plain insane.

Look. Maybe you're the kind of guy who needs a Marine drill sergeant screaming at you in order to get your mind moving. That's fine. Do what works for you.

But I get asked, all the time, what I "do" to get the creative juices flowing. It's a bad question, really.

The answer is: **You do what you need to do**. If you have to wear a clown suit and play Romper Room ditties in the background, then that's what you do.

I used to have "writing clothes" I worked in. Filthy sweats, and even a special hat. Putting them on meant I was prepping myself for a session at the desk. (An added advantage was that I couldn't, in good conscience, leave the house in those reeking togs, which meant I **HAD** to stay in the office regardless.)

My routine today is very different, because I've changed. The same goes for you. Any rules you have today may -- and probably should -- be altered as circumstances change and your needs evolve.

I just seriously doubt there are any freelancers out there working in their home offices with cinched up ties and clean desks.

Next month: *The single best piece of copywriting advice I have ever received*. It's been worth a solid fortune to me in royalties, year after year after year. And it's *exactly* what most aspiring copywriters need to hear, right now.

Subscription info: \$199 a year. Send check (payable to Marketing Rebel) to John Carlton, 316 California Ave. #114, Reno, NV 89509... or fax your name, mailing address, credit card number, expiration date and signature (including billing address, if different) to 1-775-562-2655.

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