

“Truth & Order Amidst The Chaos”
The Marketing Rebel
RANT

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From: **John Carlton**
Reno, Nevada
Friday morning

Dear Friend and Subscriber,

If you are an average business owner, then right now, without knowing another detail, I can absolutely tell you that...

**You Probably Suck
At What You Do.**

Strong words, I know. I do not utter them casually, and I'm not trying to insult anyone.

However, at this point in my career -- after 20 years of working with big and small businesses, and now critiquing the ads of hundreds of entrepreneurs and hotshot marketers through the Insider's Club -- I can face a room of 100 biz owners, close my eyes, and safely point out 97 who are screwing up big-time.

I don't care how much money you're making, either. You can smugly inform me you've just raked in a cool mil each of the last twenty months... and I'll bet I can show you six ways you're still leaving that much and *more* on the table. You're robbing yourself. And you don't even know you're doing it.

I see it in almost every ad I come across. And in every commercial transaction I make. The business world is slowly imploding in this country. This is, ironically, great news for anyone willing to get hip to “real world” marketing. But for everyone else, it's Bonzai, dude.

Let me give you some examples of how businesses suck right now. If you see yourself in any of this, *good*. It's the first step to getting your

act back together. I've said before, if you want to climb up to world-class levels, you must let the blinders fall. And willingly suffer the pain of self-awareness and ego-less professionalism. (Which translates to “get real and work smarter”... not exactly something most people want to hear.)

Here are four major ways to suck:

1. You flat out don't know what you're doing. I've known many biz owners who are tragic victims of “luck”. They created a product that accidentally had “legs”, and stumbled into a writer who crafted them a killer ad. For a while, the money pours in. Then the ad gets tired, and the panic begins. **Very common result:** The victim dumps every penny he earned down the black hole of trying to make the magic happen again.

You have to know when the game's up. Smart marketers watch the numbers like hawks, and when it's time to create something new, they *do*. And move on.

But not the guys who don't know what they're doing. During World War II, the Allies created landing strips on some backwater islands in the Pacific. These were used as staging grounds for raids on nearby Japanese strongholds. The islanders knew nothing of the world beyond their tiny beaches, and the sudden influx of B-17 bombers and GIs with chocolate and tools and record players and shiny bobbles must have been like having generous gods visit.

When the war ended, the Yanks left. No more goodies. Just rusting hulks of damaged airplanes on the crumbling runways. And, not understanding why it all happened, the islanders spent their days desperately trying to woo the gods back. Sacrifices, prayers, compulsive rituals. They must have done *something* to attract the gods in the first place. All they needed was a clue of what to do to attract them back *again*.

A lot of businesses are like those islanders. They lucked into some success -- and, not understanding what fueled it, waste away when the luck ends, frantically trying to bring it back. Doing almost everything *but* what actually needs to be done. Which is to get real, and study good marketing. Not hope for magic.

I know a guy who made tens of millions with a diet ad, who *lost it all* when the ad finally petered out. He could not get it into his head that it was the ad, and *not* the product or his charisma or his destiny, that created the wealth. So he flogged that dead ad (and invested in other doomed projects that savvy marketers would have shunned) until all the money was gone. All of it.

I can bend your ear with dozens of stories like this. The chemist behind a hot muscle-building formula that flew off the shelves -- again, due to great ads -- who went broke trying to replicate that success *without* the "hype" style marketing that worked. Hired fancy Madison Ave know-nothings who convinced him that "image" ads could do the same job. Idiots.

Or the publisher who decided to weather a recession by refusing to hire high-priced copywriters. ("Hey, wasn't Suzie in accounting an English Lit major? Have *her* write the ads.") Or the direct mailer who decided to cut costs by going to un-personalized third-class mailings, eliminating all that "wasteful" first-class postage. (Thus saving hundreds in stamps while losing *thousands* in sales.) Or the flower shop owner who decided he couldn't spare the 500 business cards necessary to be part of a direct mail campaign to high-end home owners. (I wrote that letter, and the shop that did agree to donate the cards -- and one free rose to each person who

stopped by -- saw a sudden uptick in biz that was stunning and mega-profitable.) It just goes on and on. And couples with the fact that, usually...

2. Your "instincts" are wildly off-base. I recently talked to a guy who spent a month agonizing over whether to ask customers to mail, fax, or phone in their orders. Finally, he just decided to use phone-only... because "it just made more *sense* that people would order like that."

Well, la-de-da. He didn't test, didn't even try another combination. And guess what? The campaign bombed. Not too long afterward, I ran into another business owner in the same market, and asked him how *he* handled ordering options. He said, "Oh, we used to think the phone was the way to go... until we did some testing, and found out a good percentage of our customers hate talking to anyone on the horn, and get creeped out giving strangers their credit card number. We now take orders by fax and mail only." And he does a *lot* of business that way.

Do you have a sales force? If you don't train them and -- *very* important -- give them scripts of *exactly* how to navigate a great sales pitch... then you're just asking for trouble. Because almost all sales staff think they can sell "intuitively". *And they absolutely suck at it.*

Twice in the past month, I have had salespeople bristle at some objection I had, and say (almost verbatim) "I've been here 12 years, and I've *never* heard of that." In one case, I had spent a thousand bucks on bookcases that were warping... and when the sales person implied I was lying, I took her over to the floor samples, which were bent like bows. She still copped an attitude that "this has never happened before", and evidence be damned. Would not admit she was wrong, and implied this was all my fault.

In the other case, I had cash in hand to buy a new digital camcorder... but when I mentioned that a friend had one that performed both video and photo functions (a few early models actually did this) the salesman got all huffy and scoffed. He was purposely trying to make me feel foolish, under some inane instinct that he had to establish "control" of the interaction.

In both instances, the buffoonery of the sales staff turned me off so much that I took my business elsewhere. We're talking thousands of dollars. Lost. Because the sales staff violated *basic rules* of dealing with customers. They trusted their "instinctual" sales ability. And they sucked. (For more on this, you must get Scuttlebutt Tape #4: "Classic Salesmanship Secrets", with Sam Fishbein, one of the best in the biz.) Worst part: The store owner, I'll bet, hasn't got a clue his sales staff is *actively thwarting the exchange of money* on his floor.

3. Your S.O.P. is stinking up the joint.

Good businesses are like rats who figure out a maze by continually trying new directions until they find one that works. They are the rare ones. Bad businesses (the vast majority) are like the rats that die in the first dead-end they encounter.

If you have a "standard operating procedure", make sure you update it regularly. *And use reality and results as your measure.* Not how easy it is for the employees.

I used to get enraged, but now I just grimly laugh when I hear a salesperson tell me I must jump through some hoops "because it's just easier this way." Yeah. Easier for her. A deal-killer for me. And even if it takes me longer, or is a major inconvenience, I now just smile and go find some *other* place to spend my money. Where I won't be treated like a dumb herd animal. And I'm not alone in this.

Just last week, I sold my house. And was suddenly in possession of a honking big check from the title company, which I needed to park somewhere until I figured out what to do with the money. I walked into a bank where I do some business, asking only to set up a simple money market account or get a short-term CD.

First insult: CDs were now paying around 1%, regardless of the amount you invested. Whoop-de-friggin'-do. Money market, half a point higher. Fine, I thought. I only wanted to make the little bleeps representing cash to go from the title company's computerized account to mine. I wanted the check to clear the bank. (Cuz no deal is done until that happens.)

Second insult: They were using new software. So new, the bank was unusually crowded and the staff unusually flustered. The guy working with me had to ask his supervisor to come over and help him navigate *every single screen* on the computer... but not until he wasted a few minutes fumbling with it himself. A ten-minute transaction bled into nearly an hour.

Final insult: The bank was crawling with "suits" -- big shots from the mother bank, overseeing the transition of the new software. One of them came over and said, "Thanks for being so patient. It's normal for new software to take a little longer."

Oh, really? I said "You know what? I'm *not* patient. I am about to be late for an appointment. If you can't get me out of here in two minutes, we'll have to abort this nonsense." I ended up walking out of the bank with that big honking five-digit check, having wasted close to an hour. The bank's S.O.P. (they'd done it before) was to bring in new software, not bother training their employees on it beforehand, and expect the customer to *be patient* while everyone got up to speed on the fly. *On my time*, in other words.

I made sure that suit saw the size of the check when I snatched it back and walked out. He audibly gasped. And the bank across the street was only too happy to bend over backward to accept my business. Took twelve minutes.

Jeez, I'm getting mad all over again just writing about this. I may pull all my business from that fruit-loop bank. Doesn't exactly make me feel warm and fuzzy knowing their new software is a snake-pit. ("Gosh, we seem to have lost all your data. Oops. Please be patient...")

One more example: Most airlines are still giving out peanuts during flights. Do you know what the number one food to cause life-threatening allergic reactions is? Yep. Peanuts.

But it's just been S.O.P. for the airlines for so long, *they can't break out of it.* I'm watching for someone to sue the guts out of them. I know at least two people who clog up dangerously just breathing peanut dust. This allergy stuff is not secret.

Sometimes, S.O.P. stands for “stupid on purpose.”

4. Your reliance on MBA-induced “science” is slow suicide. The big automakers in Detroit can afford the finest marketing minds on the planet. Yet the result of all that expensive brain power is this: *They now lose money on most of the cars they make.*

The problem? The SUV boom carried them for almost a decade. Until recently, they didn't have to face up to any of the problems eating away at their basic business model. Because people were lining up to pay too much for the latest “apartment on wheels” that got four miles to a gallon.

Well, the party's over. The backlash against SUVs is in high gear, and even die-hard Republicans are starting to mumble about forcing an increase in gas mileage and reining in some of that SUV-belched smog.

Now, Ford is never going to hire me to write kick-ass ads for them. Nor are they going to consult with me about market direction. Not a chance. They will continue to go with Madison Ave, and continue to listen to MBA silliness until they become extinct. (Much like United Airlines and American, both in a rush to become fossils. While Southwest rubs their nose in it, making profits that negate all sniveling about market forces being “too hard to overcome.” I have no sympathy for the behemoths.)

I bring this up because so many small businessmen continue to think “hey, if image advertising and twenty-two-year-old business school munchkins are good enough for the Big Three, then I should follow their example.” So here's your reality check: **It ain't working for them.** And it won't work for you, either. Get over it.

No. There remains only ONE “secret” to making your business fire on all cylinders. All the top marketers know it. And almost none of the rest even have a hint.

I'll share that secret with you, right here. Here's how I answered the basic question when a subscriber asked me this email question:

“I have no copywriting skills, business experience, or venture capital. What would you do, if you had to start from ground zero? Would you copy ads out longhand, or read books, or study swipe files, or what?”

Here's my answer: “Do it all. Obsession is the one common behavior among ALL the top writers and marketers. It's like trying to end your virginity when you're young and horny. How much time did you spend in your pursuit of getting laid? Are you kidding? You lose sleep pursuing it. Nothing is more important, nothing is more urgent. Once you decide to become a businessman, you should prepare yourself as thoroughly and relentlessly as possible. Over-prepare. Obsess. Become one with your goal. It gets easier later on, but the first steps are so tough you may have to do them again and again to get them down. That's why old pro's are so jaded -- they have no patience whatsoever with anyone not willing to bleed like they did for the grand prize.”

Obsess. Get hip. Take the blinders off. Go after it with every resource you have. Most marketers avoid all this because they're intellectually lazy. **And the joke is on them...** because, once you allow yourself to become immersed in your chosen profession... it gets *very easy, very quickly*. Sort of like getting over the shock of how cold the water is when you go swimming in the ocean. Brief screams, and then you're used to it.

Most people will stand on the edge of the water for their entire lives, petrified of jumping in, unable to get past the unpleasantness of that initial (and very minor) trauma.

*And that's not good enough for you. **That ain't living, and that ain't good business.***

Embrace the fact you probably suck at what you do right now. It simply means that, after you recognize and take care of what's making you suck, you're in for some exciting times. And it can start as soon as tomorrow.

Tales From The Vice Squad

Let's say you gotta make a bet. You can either take the United States military, armed with every high-tech toy \$200 billion can buy (plus a blank check for anything *else* they discover they

can't live without), and be the "home" team protecting the goal line... *or...* you can take the scrawny, lonely South American dope farmer with the fourth-grade education, and be the "visitor" team trying to *sneak across* the goal line.

Even at 20-to-1 odds (heck, even at 100-to-1), only a fool would take the home team. Why? Simple. Because by now almost every top marketer is hip to the "smuggler's truth":

**There Is Always
A Way.**

There isn't a prison on earth that someone hasn't escaped from. Not a single bank that hasn't been successfully robbed. And no amount of barbed wire, searchlights, helicopters or land mines will stop the flow of drugs over our border. Because there's a demand. And there's money. And the smugglers just sit back and look things over until they find a flaw.

And there is *always* a flaw.
Always.

I often tell clients they need to start "thinking like a smuggler." And stop throwing up their hands in despair over every little obstacle in their path. Nice, legal and ethical ways are *always* there -- along with the illegal ones.

It's not the methodology that's important. **It's the mindset.** Don't let bumps in the road derail you.

A good friend of mine (who shall remain nameless) has an alter ego he calls "Dr. Lipshitz." He pulls out the good doctor whenever he is faced with an obstacle that would stump him in his normal, non-medical identity.

I was with him, once, when he was trying to reach someone in a hotel, and the line was busy. Time was of the essence. When the operator refused to break into the line ("it's just *not possible, sir*"), my friend finally said: "Listen. This is Dr. Lipshitz, and this is an *emergency*. It may even be life and..."

Click. He got connected. The guy in the hotel had been talking to his girlfriend, and lost track of time. He was grateful my friend got through.

Now, I don't *recommend* this kind of behavior. (This friend also got past a secretary

guarding her boss once by saying, in exasperation, that he was from the *lab*, and had the results of the boss's *test*, and it was *positive*, and... *click.* Straight through.)

No, it's the *mindset* that's important. Personally, I think you just collect bad karma when you start jumping ahead in lines and tweaking people's vulnerabilities for easy gain. I won't do it.

But neither do I ever -- *ever* -- think "that can't be done." Because I know it *can*. Maybe I won't *choose to do* what needs to be done. But I know, if I think long enough about it, I can come up with an easy, doable plan to solve almost any problem and overcome almost any obstacle.

I call the problems my clients bring me "**Lipstick on the Collar.**" In my mindset, a good salesman should be able to wander in late with Maybelline smeared on his neck... and be able to talk his way out of it. (Warning: This is a *metaphor*. If you think you can actually get past the door with a good line of blarney in that state, good luck to you and your marriage.)

Clients come to me, hands wringing, with tales of angry customers, botched products, embarrassing blunders and woeful problems that are "*impossible* to solve."

And yet, I solve them all. You will find, in my collections of letters and ads, how I successfully sold videos with horrific audio problems (and buyers felt they'd gotten the bargain of the century)... calmed outraged customers (and even got them to buy again)... and turned boondoggles that would have sunk other businesses into opportunities that *created fortunes* instead.

This is the heart and soul of successful entrepreneurial enterprise. You can't get started without it, and you can't make a business wildly profitable if you *lose* this mindset as you settle into your groove.

Let's be clear: I am NOT recommending you start "cheating" to get what you want.

Don't do that. It's so much easier to just become a problem-solver who knows there's *always* a way around any obstacle.

Always.

Next month: Why you *cannot believe* the stories of people who have been through the justice system in this country... unless you've been there yourself. It's a brutal lesson that will actually clear your head for making money.

How-To Department

You can always tell who the charlatans are in this information business. If you seek wisdom from someone about writing ads, and they tell you to create a killer "USP"... but neglect to tell you *how to do it...* then you can bet you're dealing with a guy who learned this stuff from books, and not from the real world.

The term USP has been around since art deco. Several guys have claimed credit for it (including some aggressive young bucks who like to pretend they've invented everything good about advertising, and did it all during a vacation last summer). You will see it defined, alternately, as "unique selling proposition" or "unique sales position" or some variation of that.

The key word is "unique". Basically, your USP is *what sets you apart from the competition* (if there is any), or *what makes your product or service a "must have" item*. You should be able to explain, in a single phrase, why a prospect should deal with you and not the other guy... or why he needs what you offer at all.

And that kind of explanation is as far as most "experts" go. Why? Because they've never actually had to sit down and create a killer USP. *They don't know how to do it.*

Veteran copywriters craft killer USPs in their sleep. It's not brain surgery, but it does take some effort and practice. You don't suddenly have the skill to do it just because you had the theory explained to you.

For me, the USP is the *first* thing you need to create, before even starting to write your letter or ad. It's the essence of what you're offering. It is the opposite of theory.

Here are the basics of creating your own USP:

1. You are taking all the vast details of your product or service or offer, and aiming to winnow

it all down to *one pithy sentence* (two at the most) that is clear, concise, **and has the force of salesmanship fused into every word.**

2. You do not write it so it "reads well", but rather *so it creates tension, desire and urgency in the reader's mind*. The mistake most rookies make here is to craft what they think is a USP, but is actually just a slogan.

Here is the first test: If what you write can be adopted by any *other* business without change, then what you have is a meaningless slogan.

Thus... "Simply the best in town" is not even close as a USP. It's just useless bragging, and could be stolen by any other business in the world. (Not that stealing it would do them any good. Slogans don't sell. They just take up space.)

3. Let's deconstruct the USP step by step. Last month I talked about "fast, cheap and good" and "simple, easy and lucrative" as ways to get started. Actually, you seldom need to go beyond these kinds of pithy explanatory phrases.

Think in terms of what your business does for the human being using what you offer.

Your customer doesn't give a rat's ass that you've been around for fifty years, unless you explain *why* that's important. Same with being family owned, or local, or having fifty billion dollars in reserve. These are features, and may mean a lot to you, but they don't mean squat to the prospect.

4. **Your USP should be what comes immediately to your customer's mind when he thinks about you.** Or when he's explaining to his skeptical brother-in-law why he bought from you, and not the other company in town.

You have guaranteed lowest prices? That's a start. *If you can back it up.* ("We will beat the lowest competitor by \$10, or you get it *free*.")

You have the best service around? What does that *mean*? If you deliver, and the other guys don't, *say so*. I know a real estate broker with a killer guarantee: If you aren't happy with the house he finds for you, he will *buy it back from you* at any time in the first year. That's a pro guarantee. But he never tells anyone about it. It only comes up when a client gets pissed. So it's

not a USP -- it's a fail-safe fall-back line. Does no good for front-end sales whatsoever.

Never assume *anything* here. If you have something that sets you apart, tell the world, *and put some teeth into the way you say it*. That's the essence of your USP.

5. Once you get your USP down, your ads will practically write themselves. You can use it as your headline, most of the time. And simply go deeper in your ad on each point.

You know, I've now written about 100 ads for golf videos. At first glance, every single video was pretty much identical to the ones before it, and the ones after it. I've had to dig pretty damn deep in my bag of tricks to come up with fresh slants for each ad. I think it's safe to say most writers would have shot themselves by the fifth ad. I'm just lucky I have a deeper bag than most.

But this has also taught me an important lesson about USPs: **There is *always* something unique about a new product.** Sometimes I have to put on my sales detective hat and dig for a while... but it's there.

Sometimes it's in the product itself. "A unique swing that will instantly *force* you to look like a pro golfer."

Sometimes it's in the offer. "You can learn this simple tactic in *just three swings* at the practice range."

And sometimes it's in the guarantee. "If you don't drop 10 strokes the first round you use this new swing, *I'll send you double your money back.*"

6. **The best USPs are so tight, you cannot remove or change a single word.** Each syllable earns its keep, and pushes the sales pitch forward.

You may get away with something like "A fast, easy way to bring in more customers and raise profits cost-effectively." To me, though, that's just a first attempt. The next few changes will bring home the bacon.

How fast? Three days? Two hours? One minute?

Why is it easy? No previous skills necessary? Is it a short-cut learning process? Is it an ethical way to *cheat*?

What's so cost-effective about it? Is it a money-saving tactic? Or will it create new profits that offset the cost?

If you have well-known competition to bounce off of, you have an advantage. The idea behind Avis Car Rental's old slogan "We're Number 2, so we try harder" is good. It's still just a slogan, though. If the "try harder" part actually manifests as lower prices for better cars, you got something. If your competition is only open 9-5 (while you're 24/7), has no extra services (while you include bend-over-backward hand-holding), and charges more (while you're a bargain), you're off to the races.

If the competition is not well-known, you need to appeal directly to the prospect's needs. Take carpet cleaners, or dentists, or restaurants, or any other service where you're just another name in the phone book. Most ads for these services make dumb assumptions about what the prospect is looking for. You could switch the names in the ads, because all the copy is generic. "We love kids." "Bonded." "Serving Cleveland for 21 years."

If there is a reason why you're different than all the rest, *say so*. If you're not different, then *become* different. **Have a stronger guarantee, longer hours, better prices, specific services no one else offers.**

And tell your story. "We clean the governor's home carpets for state functions because we're professionally thorough, experienced in all types of stain-removal, finish all work on-time (even in emergencies), stay out of his way, and guarantee complete satisfaction or a complete refund. Plus, we're priced less than anyone else in town. And guess what? *You can get the same service as the governor, at the same low price, with the same money-back guarantee!*"

The last line there is the USP. In one pithy sentence, you get credibility, bargain, implied excellent service and a guarantee.

Here's the USP for my course "Kick-Ass Copywriting Secrets of a Marketing Rebel": "An insider short-cut guide to creating sensational ads that will supercharge your business, your wealth,

and your life... even if you flunked English!” The list of benefits I decided set me apart included the fact I am a veteran writer (insider), I know the fastest ways to do everything (shortcut), I’ve put it all down in a form that’s easy and simple to use (guide), and the results will affect every part of your existence (business, wealth, life)... no matter how “disadvantaged” you believe you are now (even if you flunked English).

Here’s one I wrote for a chiropractic coach: “Who else wants to earn an extra \$96,485 this year, while working just 24 hours a week (or less), with minimum stress and zero debt?” The list I had for this guy had several good items: He had a CPA who would swear (and did, in the ad) that two dozen clients boosted income an average of over \$96,000 the first year... they all went from working over 60 hours a week to under 25... they took a dozen vacations each year (compared with *none* for the average doctor)... and their debt vanished, no matter how bad it was to start. These are all *major* hot buttons for chiropractors.

So get started on your own list. Why are *you* the right choice, among all the choices out there? If you are a truly savvy businessman, you will get in touch with what your prospect really wants... and then *give it to him*. You will also get in touch with what pisses your prospect off... and *guarantee it won’t happen* when he deals with you.

You will also confront every doubt he has, and remove all risk and sense of “I might get ripped off.”

And I don’t care what the competition is, either. If I was going up against MacDonald’s (billions and billions served), I’d create a USP like this: “Best-grade hamburger grilled by owner-chef when you order, delivered hot and ready-to-eat within 2 minutes... or you eat free!” I wouldn’t go up against price, cuz you can’t beat a national chain on cost. But I know, from personal experience, that a decent percentage of fast-food consumers are more concerned with *time* and giving their bellies *quality food* that won’t come back up on them, than with cheap prices.

And you know what? It just grosses me out when the guy slapping the burgers together is some greasy-haired punk who probably thought it was funny in the Eminem video where he spit in the food. So dealing with the owner soothes me.

These are the things I consider when I’m listing the elements that will make up the USP. You don’t want to be different just to be different. No. *You are different in specific ways that appeal to the prospect.*

Remember the bank I was ragging about earlier? When I think of them, I imagine a USP like “Sure, you’ll be kept waiting while dealing with staff who are clueless, and you’ll get the absolute lowest return on your money allowed by law... but hey, we’ll apologize every step of the way!” I honestly cannot think of a reason to do business with them. They act as if there is no competition, no other choice out there.

Morons.

The bank I did end up using? Though they didn’t advertise it, their USP came to me while I was there: “Knowledgeable, friendly staff acknowledges your need for fast, attentive service... and when you require extra help, you get it instantly and without delay. Plus: Guaranteed *higher returns* for your investments.”

In theory, your USP is simple to explain. Why should I do business with you, and not the other guy?

In the real world, it’s just a bit more complex. Sit down and start listing *what sets you apart*. Work at it. Run every item through the basic test: *What does it mean for the human being using it?*

When you get your USP down pat, every sales pitch you create will be as easy as pushing a watermelon down a greased slide.

Next month: “Flesh-Eating Bacteria Kills Construction Worker In Boston!” True story... and a *great* lesson for marketers.

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