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Principles of Persuasion

How to be Irresistible to Your Customers

“A terrific book that will help you get more goods and services happily exchanged. Inspirational!”

Steve Lanning, *Executive Director, National Association of Business Coaches*

by Shane Sparks

PRINCIPLES OF PERSUASION

Principles of Persuasion

How to be Irresistible to Your Customers

by Shane Sparks

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These short lessons are based on articles I have written and sent out all over the world. They are a few simple lessons I've learned and I hope they serve you as well as they have me.

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I know you are going to enjoy my little book. And if you can spare a few moments, I'd love to hear what you thought of it. Send me an email at shane@sparksmarketing.ca

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Introduction

FIRST OFF I'D LIKE TO SAY THANK-YOU. Thank you for your precious time. Thank you for your attention. And thank-you for having an open mind to what I'm going to tell you about in the coming pages.

I prefer to think of this as a conversation you and I are having. I know it is a decidedly one-way conversation, but it is a conversation none the less. In it I will pose questions to you, and I hope you will answer them for me. In fact, why not answer them aloud. If you are self-conscious about talking to a book, shut the door, find a quiet corner, sit in car in your driveway and hide out from the world. But answer the questions I ask because it is in this questioning and answering where we will find the breakthroughs and deepening of your understanding that will propel you forward in your business, or job, or life.

The answers are out there waiting for you to articulate them to yourself.

Before you continue on into this book I want to be clear: This isn't a marketing book in the traditional sense. It doesn't really contain how-to advice, there isn't a lot of marketing theory, and it is not a central premise and argument rationalizing some new marketing fad.

It is a book of stories. Stories about business, life, customers, and how those three elements interact in the most wonderful and unexpected ways. This book is about marketing in the holistic sense. About how what you do impacts the world around you. Your staff, coworkers, family, and customers. It about more than advertising, or customer service, or marketing strategy. It is about how marketing is the whole of what you do. How every action a business takes is an act of marketing.

Good or bad, positive or negative. And it routes out examples of these acts of marketing from the everyday sources all around us.

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The 'principles of persuasion' could be easily summed up in one word. For me, it is a word of incredibly power because it describes the feeling I get from doing what I do. It is what drives me to keep doing it, improving, refining, learning, and discovering.

Purpose.

Persuasion is not about tricking or deceiving or somehow manipulating a person to buy. That's a game of liars, thieves, con men, and the worst business has to offer. Persuasion is about purpose. Having a purpose that drives your business and life. Fulfilling a specific need in a specific person and doing it with purpose. It is about instilling that purpose in your people and about communicating it to your customers.

That purpose is what can make your business irresistible to your customers because that is what the whole of marketing is, when done right. A state of being, a driving force, the core of whatever it is you do.

They are the simple lessons I've learned and I hope they serve you as well as they have me.

If you have any comments or thoughts or feedback, I would be delighted to hear from you. Reach me by email at shane@sparksmarketing.ca.

Have a good idea,
Shane Sparks



Lesson One:

How to Increase Your Sales 5,500%

WE JUST BOUGHT A HOUSE FOLLOWING THE ADAGE “Buy the worst house on the block and make it the nicest.” We did, and we are.

So now I’m spending a lot of time in hardware stores. The psychological make-up of the novice handyman is to make dozens of small purchases instead of getting everything you need at one time, two trips to the store when one would have done the job, and to do the repair twice—once to make it worse, the second to actually fix it.

But, I’m getting wiser.

I was in my local Do-It-Centre buying light-switch covers when I stumbled on a display of front door locks. ‘I should get new locks for the house,’ I thought, ever safety conscious. My young son, Toby, was with me and from his squirming I was getting the impression of a pending diaper change. The locks were, ironically, locked behind a glass display. I made a weak effort to find a salesperson, failed, and gave up.

I’m like a lot of male shoppers: I don’t like shopping, but I like to buy things.

On the way to the cashier, triggered by the front door locks, I remembered I needed smoke detectors. But, failing to see any of those in easy reach, and with Toby squirming restlessly (and beginning to smell), I gave up.

My light switch covers totaled \$6. The cashier didn’t even look at me as she rang it up.

It got me thinking that I needed to get organized. Later that day I

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made a list of all the things I needed, then drove twenty-five minutes out of town to Home Depot and spent well over \$300. At the checkout, the cashier asked the question I'd been waiting for all day: "Did you find everything you need?"

"No, in fact I didn't," I said. She then politely helped me find the missing items, and sold me another \$30 worth of stuff.

Why do some businesses think it saves them money by employing fewer staff? For want of a \$10 an hour salesperson, the Do-It-Centre had me do it at Home Depot, and lost out on a \$324 single sale. That's a 5,500% increase from the \$6 they got from me.

How many of those sales are you missing?

Lesson Two:

The Goodwill Bank

CLINK. HEAR THAT?

Clink.

That's the sound of a currency far more important than dollars and cents. It exists in the heart of every customer. You make deposits and withdraws from it, but when it runs dry you're out of luck.

Clink.

It's called your Goodwill Bank. Every business has one in every single customer. Smart businesses know that you've got to add to it before you can take away.

Every time you go beyond what's expected, you add to it. Every time you make that customer feel special, valued, appreciated, you'll hear the little clink, clink, clink, of more goodwill being added.

But when you fail to deliver, make a mistake, cause that customer to feel unappreciated or inconvenienced, you withdraw from it.

And like normal currency, it's easier to spend than save.

The Goodwill Bank can pay dividends well beyond that individual customer. When you've filled up one person's bank, the excess overflows into many other peoples who aren't even customers yet, because that filled-up person spreads it to friends and colleagues for you.

Clink.

I only have one question for you. Is your business a saver or a spender?

Lesson Three:

I Will Never Buy Gas Anywhere Else Again

I PRIDE MYSELF ON BEING ON TIME TO MEETINGS. I consider it gravely inconsiderate to be late for an appointment.

So, of course, I found myself running late and precariously low on gas. I happened on a gas station I'd never been to. As I pulled in, an attendant jogged over and directed me to a vacant pump.

"Fill 'er up?" he asked.

"Yes."

Great fortune! I don't normally use full service. Not because I don't want to pay the additional pennies, but because it usually takes longer, and I resent spending time watching some teenager swagger over to fill my tank. It's quicker if I do it. It was lucky an attendant happened to be at the pump.

"Would you like a car wash, you'd be the next in line?" the attendant asked.

"No thanks. But good up-sell," I said jadedly.

"Can I at least wash your window while you wait? And would you like a complimentary newspaper?"

"Sure," I said.

He passed me the paper and proceeded to give me the most thorough window washing I'd ever experienced during a fill up. This is the best gas station employee in the history of gas stations, I thought. But then I looked around and what I saw amazed me. Everywhere I looked there were attendants literally running from car to car, smiling, giving every person that drove into the lot the identical treatment I'd been receiving.

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I counted at least one attendant per gas pump. The woman in the car across from me even received a fresh-cut flower.

“What motivates you to give such great service?” I asked the attendant.

He smiled. “My boss is a demanding man to work for,” he said. “He has very high expectations.” I could note in his voice, I wasn’t the first person to ask.

“Do you like your boss?”

“I respect him,” he said. “This is the best run gas station in the city. I have customers that travel 10 minutes out of their way just to come here. We take pride in our work.” And then he leaned in, confidentially, “and we work hard.”

I paid, thanked him and left.

But I couldn’t get the experience out of my mind. When I got home that evening I told my wife about it. “They’re famous around here,” she said. “They are being written up in the paper all the time for great service. They’re the most profitable gas station in the city.”

I can believe it. In an age where service is so dreadfully bad that we’ve become accustomed to chronic disappointment, a small gas station in the suburbs of Victoria shines a bright light on the opportunities that being exceptional bring.

Lesson Four:

Pickers and Planters

FARMER BROWN HAD A SMALL TOMATO FARM. It wasn't the smallest but it certainly wasn't the largest. Up the road there were larger, well-financed farms that employed hundreds of farm hands. Farmer Brown always made a good living, but he longed to be bigger and compete with the farms up the road. He wanted more.

Farmer Brown employed two types of workers—planters and pickers. The planters planted the tomato seeds and the pickers picked the tomatoes.

One day Farmer Brown had a great idea: “Why don't I combine the planters and the pickers? That way I don't have to pay for all the extra help and I will make more money.”

So that's what he did.

It started off well—the combined planter-pickers spent most of their time picking, since that's where the money was. When Farmer Brown did his books, he found he was more profitable. Hurray!

But then something odd happened.

There started to be fewer tomatoes to pick. The planter-pickers had been so busy picking they hadn't done enough planting. In a panic, they tried to plant more in hopes of catching up. Of course it didn't work because it takes longer to grow tomatoes than pick them.

Poor old Farmer Brown soon realized he needed planters and pickers to run the farm. He was in trouble.

The difference between sales and marketing is this: Pickers sell, planters market. The planter gives the picker prospects, the pickers give the planters revenue. A well-run farm needs both.

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In your business, who are your planters and who are your pickers? Do you have a good balance between sales and marketing? If you don't, are you expecting the impossible from your pickers?

A prudent farmer makes sure he is planting enough now to pick later. What's the state of your farm?

Lesson Five:

Uncle Charlie

UNCLE CHARLIE WORKED THE NIGHT SHIFT for 30 years in a Ford plant in Oshawa, Ontario before retiring out west to open a flower shop on Main Street Penticton, British Columbia.

“The dusty hills called to me,” he’d say.

Uncle Charlie had an unusual hobby. He walked the shore of Lake Okanagan, binoculars in hand, searching for the elusive Ogopogo—Canada’s Loch Ness monster.

One day as we strolled the sandy beach, I asked him, “Why a flower shop?”

“After working nights all those years I wanted to embrace the day,” he told me. “Flowers are like sunshine.”

Now Charlie wasn’t a businessman, he’d worked his whole life in the auto plant, but the flower shop did a brisk business. He didn’t advertise and his hours were terrible (Uncle Charlie had a problem with sleeping in), but customers flocked to his little shop.

“What’s your secret?” I asked.

“I don’t have a secret,” he winked. “I just do what’s common sense. I think, ‘what would I want from a flower shop,’ and that’s what I give my customers.

“For instance, when a guy comes in looking lost and like he’s in trouble with his gal, I help him pick out something that will smooth over whatever he’s done. Then I ask for his wife’s birthday and their anniversary and I call him a day or two before to remind him he needs to get her flowers. Some days when it’s slow, I’ll call some fellas at work and tell them ‘it’s a

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good day to do something nice for your lady, stop by and pick up some flowers on your way home.' I've saved more marriages than the Pope.

"I do other things. No woman who walks in here leaves empty handed. Even if she doesn't buy anything I give her a rose, or a nice gerbera just for stopping by. I say, a flower for a beautiful lady and wink at her.

"I'm an old guy," he went on, "so I can get away with stuff. I flirt with old ladies. In fact I flirt with the young ones, too. I don't try to sell anyone. I don't care if they buy. I mean, I do, but I don't. What's most important is that I brighten their day. Most people buy something."

"You're amazing," I said.

"It's just common sense," Charlie told me.

Most businesses could use a dose of Uncle Charlie's common sense. How about yours?

Lesson Six:

More from Uncle Charlie

IT WAS A LAZY, LATE SUMMER AFTERNOON. Uncle Charlie was wrapping up a dozen lilies in paper and chatting with the customer, an older woman named Edna. Charlie always found out a customer's name and remembered it. Next time Edna came in, Charlie was sure to remember her.

Charlie walked her to the door just as a man came in, flashing a big smile.

"You must be the owner," he said, sticking his hand out to Charlie.

Charlie shook it. I stood at the corner, watching with keen interest.

"Charlie, right?" he said. "I'm Stanley Model from Empire Floral Distributors, the Okangan's largest florist supplier."

He continued: "I was checking my records and was surprised to see that you don't buy from us, Charlie. I figured you hadn't heard of us, or you just liked to waste money. You see we feature the best of both worlds, the lowest prices and great service. Not to mention our quality, which is second to none. In fact, I'll bet your customers will see the difference."

"You want to save money, don't you, Charlie?" he asked, rhetorically.

Charlie didn't say anything.

"We've got a half-price special on carnations this month. Just to get you to give us a try. Priced below cost. Can I sign you up?"

"No, thank you," Charlie said. "I don't like carnations."

"We carry other flowers, perhaps I could get you a discount on some...".

"Just hold it," Charlie interrupted. "I'm not going to buy anything from you. But I'll do you a favour and tell you why not. Sit down."

Charlie pushed over a stool and the salesman sat down.

“You know, you didn’t ask me a single question, except to ask for the sale. If you had asked me anything about my business you would have discovered that I buy all my stock from a small collective of growers in Vernon. And you would have found out that they deliver every other evening, which is important to me since I have very little storage, and I hate getting up early.”

“You also would have found out that price is not important to me. My customers buy because they like me, and because I like them. And you would have discovered that I don’t care for carnations.”

The salesman squirmed in his seat, checking the door.

“I want you to try something on your next sales call. Instead of trying to talk your way into a sale, try to listen your way into one.” Charlie stared hard at him for a full 10 seconds to make his point crystal clear.

“Now go,” he said. The salesman got up and bolted out the door.

Charlie turned to me, smiling. “You know what? If that salesman ever has the nerve to walk back through my door, I might just buy something from him.”

Lesson Seven:

The Credo

IN 1943 GENERAL ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON COMPOSED A SIMPLE, ONE PAGE DOCUMENT that would be the most important thing he'd ever written. It was written plainly for his employees, customers, suppliers and shareholders. Remarkably, this document is still used today and stands as the core principals of the company he nurtured and grew.

His document is called the Credo. General Johnson was an astute business man. He knew that in order to create consistent values across a growing organization he would need to define those values and communicate them to the people who mattered.

Starting in the 1930s, he championed “a new industrial philosophy,” which defined a corporation’s responsibility to customers, employees, the community and stockholders.

And so when Johnson wrote what he fundamentally believed were the rules his company should live by, he unwittingly set a new corporate standard. His Credo would stand as the philosophical core of what is now the world’s largest and most diversified health care company—Johnson & Johnson.

As we are caught up in the minute-to-minute reality of work and business, and the chaos that controls most of our day, we lose sight of what we believe, the reason we started in the first place.

General Johnson took the time to write it down, and I invite you to do the same thing. What started you on your path in the first place? What was it that you wanted to accomplish? What was the value you wanted to bring to your customers, your staff, your life? What was your passion?

General Johnson built one of the largest companies in the world on a simple, philosophical core, his Credo. What’s yours?

Our Credo

We believe our first responsibility is to the doctors, nurses and patients,
to mothers and fathers and all others who use our products and services.
In meeting their needs everything we do must be of high quality.
We must constantly strive to reduce our costs
in order to maintain reasonable prices.
Customers' orders must be serviced promptly and accurately.
Our suppliers and distributors must have an opportunity
to make a fair profit.

We are responsible to our employees,
the men and women who work with us throughout the world.
Everyone must be considered as an individual.
We must respect their dignity and recognize their merit.
They must have a sense of security in their jobs.
Compensation must be fair and adequate,
and working conditions clean, orderly and safe.
We must be mindful of ways to help our employees fulfill
their family responsibilities.
Employees must feel free to make suggestions and complaints.
There must be equal opportunity for employment, development
and advancement for those qualified.
We must provide competent management,
and their actions must be just and ethical.

We are responsible to the communities in which we live and work
and to the world community as well.
We must be good citizens — support good works and charities
and bear our fair share of taxes.
We must encourage civic improvements and better health and education.
We must maintain in good order
the property we are privileged to use,
protecting the environment and natural resources.

Our final responsibility is to our stockholders.
Business must make a sound profit.
We must experiment with new ideas.
Research must be carried on, innovative programs developed
and mistakes paid for.
New equipment must be purchased, new facilities provided
and new products launched.
Reserves must be created to provide for adverse times.
When we operate according to these principles,
the stockholders should realize a fair return.

Johnson & Johnson

Lesson Eight:

Advertising Science, Part I: Five Ways to Drive Away Readers Through Lousy Layout and Damaging Design

CHANCES ARE, YOU SPEND MONEY ON ADVERTISING OR BROCHURES OR on printing on some piece of paper intended to persuade someone to buy what you're selling.

Many graphic designers and ad men would have you believe that creativity is the key to profitable persuasion, but good ideas have a way of being lost in the quagmire of creativity gone astray.

Here are five ways guaranteed to lose readers. Follow them at your peril.

1. Disrespect the headline

The most important part of a print ad is the headline. You have less than a second to capture the attention of a reader. A well written headline grabs the reader and pulls him into the ad. So discourage the reader from reading by making the headline small, or better yet, hide it, stretch it, twist it, or otherwise distort it, so that the reader has to strain to understand the words. It's a sure way to render your ad useless.

2. Disobey the law of Reader Gravity

Reading has its own physical law. Coined "Reader Gravity" by distinguished typographer Edmund Arnold, this law states that on any given page the eye is drawn to the upper left hand corner or "Primary Optical

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Area," scans across and down progressively through the "Axis of Orientation," and ends at the bottom right hand corner "Terminal Anchor." An image, headline, body copy, or logo layout that complies with Reader Gravity provides high readership comprehension. Disrupt it, say, by placing the headline in the middle of the body copy, and you reduce comprehension by 35% or more.

3. Get tricky with type

Print body copy in ALL CAPS and reduce comprehension by 30%. Use a sans serif typeface and lose 80% of readers. Reverse large amounts of type on black and 88% of people won't fully understand what you've said.

4. Punctuate headlines

The simple act of placing a period at the end of a headline reduces readership by at least 10%. Periods indicate to readers, at least subconsciously, that they have come to an end point, allowing them to psychologically move on. Periods also indicate that what they are reading is an ad because editorial headlines rarely, if ever, use periods.

And finally,

5. Make the ad look like an ad

Since most people claim to hate advertising, make sure they know what they are looking at is an ad, and save them the bother of actually reading what you have to say.

Lesson Nine:

Advertising Science, Part II: The Physiology of Readers

THERE IS ONLY ONE PERSON WHO MATTERS to a printed page, and that person solely determines the success or failure of your message. He is the reader.

Without the reader you are left with unread advertising, unsold products, and unused services. It's a dismal world without him.

But the reader is fickle and difficult to master. Here is what you are up against: 62% of them require some kind of vision correction; 90% of those reading a newspaper claim to only look and read specific items, ignoring the rest; and you can fairly assume that even if you've done your job well, only 4–6% of them reading any given publication will actually take the time to read what you have to say.

So given the mighty importance of the reader and the difficulty of getting him to cooperate, it bears out that you have a responsibility to understand his unique world—the physics and physiology that control how he reads.

I would like to share with you some secrets of this world.

The job of your ad, or brochure, or article, or newsletter is to keep the reader's attention for as long as possible. The more of their attention you retain, the more you communicate, and the more that reader is persuaded to buy what you are selling. Ideas, product or services, it doesn't matter.

You will be aided in this goal by an understanding of The Gutenberg Rule, which dictates that there are four quadrants on a page: The Primary Optical Area (POA), top left; the Terminal Area, bottom right; the Strong Fallow Area, top right; and the Weak Fallow Area, bottom left. The read-

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er's eye enters the page at the Primary Optical Area, top left, scans down, following the most direct route to the Terminal Anchor, bottom right, and exits the page. The downward tendency of the eye is called "Reader Gravity".

Scan through a typical page from a newspaper from top to bottom, and you'll notice an easy flow from article to article to advertisement. Then try to read against "gravity" by scanning from the bottom up. You'll notice it requires more mental energy to synthesize the information.

Making a reader work to understand you is a sure formula for losing his attention.

The POA on a neutral page is top left. However, place a large photograph of a puppy in the center of your layout and you will change the POA. The eye enters at the most dominant element on a page and moves promptly to the Terminal Anchor and off the page. Everything above that photo will be missed because the eye naturally moves downward, pulled by reader gravity.

This is a subconscious process and research has shown that the eye takes its cue from a very specific logical sequence moving from most dominant element to least. Each layout is a complete system, and those that give the reader a sense of completion—that he has followed a logical process to a conclusion—will reap the highest reward.

Master the reader and you win his most valuable asset—his attention.

Lesson Ten:

A Bit of Island Innovation

TALKING TO SUSAN IS LIKE RECEIVING A CLINIC IN HOW TO DO IT THE RIGHT WAY. After our conversations I always come away thinking, 'I've *got* to remember that idea.'

Susan is owner of Write On! Business Solutions (writeonoffice.com), an online and retail office supply company in Port Alberni, British Columbia.

By her own admission, Susan is an innovator in a dull business. "Papers, pencils and paper clips aren't exactly sexy," she says. Still she finds dozens of ways to deliver innovative customer service.

She has customers all over North America, attracting the kind of people wanting an alternative to the mega box stores.

"Our goal is to be the friendliest, easiest people in the world to buy from," she says. "So we asked each of our staff how they could contribute to a terrific buying experience. The guys in shipping came up with the great idea of throwing in small, inexpensive gifts with every order. We ship out all sorts of kooky stuff. Candy, toys, kitchy key rings. Customers love it. I get phone calls about it all the time from customers. It's just one more way they know we ain't Office Depot."

And one more way they differentiate is by winning 'em with kindness.

Community involvement is central to her strategy. "At last count, I think we sponsored or have contributed to 57 separate organizations," she says.

Another thing she runs is an employee rewards program, with staff members getting points for every customer testimonial they receive. The winner gets a trip to Hawaii.

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“The other day one of my staff received a box of chocolates from a happy customer. Food testimonials earn double points,” she laughs, adding wryly, “as long as she shares with me.”

By all accounts Write On! should fail: Huge global competition from Staples and Office Depot, brutal price-driven online competition from the surviving dot coms, they are located in a small market on Vancouver Island, and are self-financed. But Write On! thrives, due to deep community roots and innovative approach to customer service and staff buy in.

Innovation is staring you in the face right now. It's so close you can barely see it, because you're seeing through it. Step back and it will be right there. I promise you.

That's because innovation doesn't have to be dramatic, just meaningful to your customers. In fact the greatest innovations are those that are so obvious, you won't believe you didn't think of them before.

Just ask Susan.

Lesson Eleven:

Be a Mad Zagger

WHEN MICHAEL DELL DECIDED TO SELL his computers directly to consumers, circumventing the traditional retail distribution model, he did it.

When the Charlie Case Tire Co. broke tradition by setting up their auto repair shop at the Phoenix airport, instead of close to customer's homes and offices like everyone else, they did it.

And when Accent Inns put their hotel on the wrong side of the road surmising that tourists inevitably drive all the way into a new city before turning around to find a hotel, they did it too.

What they did was zag when everyone else was zigging. History is full of mad zagers. They are the ones who saw opportunity when others saw adversity. They turned convention on its head, succeeding where others had failed. They were challenged, doubted, laughed at, and discounted by the established. But they broke the rules, and, in doing so, changed the rules of the game.

Dell asked, "Why do I have to sell through retailers and compete head-to-head with IBM?" The answer to that question led him to create a direct-to-consumer distribution model, allowing him to lower his costs while simultaneously increasing his margin. Dell has been consistently profitable, while other computer manufacturers struggle and lose money.

The Charlie Case Tire Company asked, "Repairs take a few days. When is there a several day period where someone doesn't need their car?" While most car repair shops fight among each other in the city, Case offers a true unique advantage by being located at the Phoenix airport, doing repair work while the client is away.

Accent Hotels asked, "How can we avoid being one of many hotels

along the same strip of sidewalk?” The typical motel strip features dozens of lodging competing next to each other on the side of the road approaching the city. Accent had the novel idea of putting its hotels on the opposite side, capturing more than its fair share of customers on the way out.

The thing about zagging is that after others succeed at it, the zag becomes self-evident. There is the inevitable slap on the forehead and ‘now I get it.’ But by then it’s too late. The zagger had won.

But until someone does it, the so-called experts are there to expound on why it will fail, and the foolishness of the endeavor.

Zaggers share the same characteristics: They are curious, asking why and questioning basic assumptions. They have the naivete and gall to challenge convention. The little boy who said, “the Emperor has no clothes!” was a zagger.

They break down the situation to the core problem. A zagger wouldn’t ask, “How can I build a better mouse trap?” He would ask, “Why do I need a mouse trap?”

And zaggers are practical. They realize that each new level of understanding is usually in opposition to the previous level. So they ignore those that don’t get it, and seek out those who do.

Being a zagger is not easy. People will think you’re a fool. They will get frustrated that you can’t just fit in. They will doubt you, berate you, and challenge you.

Until you prove them wrong.

The first principle of zaggers: Always ask ‘why?’

Lesson Twelve:

What Do You Believe?

YOU'RE ON A FIRST DATE. The restaurant is nice, music plays softly in the background, the mood is warm and receptive. You chat idly after ordering what looks to be a fantastic meal. The subject of movies comes up. You ask your date for an opinion about a movie you've both seen. Your date doesn't have an opinion. When you offer your thoughts, your date heartily agrees.

And then you notice a pattern: Whatever you like, your date likes. Whatever your opinion, your date shares the same opinion. It becomes clear that your date doesn't stand for anything, and is simply a mirror to what you think.

Would you go on a second date?

Probably not. And yet, I'll bet you act this identical way with your customers. If a customer walked up and asked straight out: "What does this company believe in?" could you give him an honest answer?

Oh, sure you'd say; "The customer comes first." "We believe in providing good value." "Honest prices, honest service." "Treat people the way you want to be treated." But if challenged to demonstrate how, I bet you couldn't back it up with anything substantial.

Perhaps I'm wrong. Maybe you are the exception. I hope you are.

In our personal lives we have clear values. These are what define our character. The truer we are to our values, it can be said, the stronger our character.

Most businesses focus on having a great personality. When we first meet them, we get a good first impression. But over time the gloss wears off, and underneath the shine is a business without character.

I'll ask again: What are the values of your business? What do you

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believe? Write it down. Tell your staff. Tell your customers. Tell the world what kind of company you really are.

Lesson Thirteen:

Silencing the Inner Voice

THERE IS ONLY ONE NATURAL ENEMY OF A GOOD IDEA, and he resides deep in the creases of your mind. Sometimes he's so small he hardly seems like a threat at all, and other times he's a giant.

That enemy is the Voice of Judgement. And there is one of them in all of us. The Voice is patient. He waits, just below the surface, ready to devour creativity, passion, enthusiasm and curiosity.

The Voice of Judgement has other names: conformity, submission, criticism, safety, blame, fear, and guilt.

We've all had dealings with the Voice. Think back to a great idea you had. He was the one that was quick to say, "No one is going to like it. I'm sure it's already been done. You're bound to fail. Don't bother."

Do you know who I mean now?

It's hard to completely kill the Voice, but you can subdue him. And once he's under control he has no real power over you.

Now, you might say, there are other enemies of good ideas. They often take the form of bosses, clients, managers, co-workers, peers, teachers, friends... . These aren't real enemies because they only have power when combined with the Voice. When an idea is good enough, the judgements of other people are easy enough to ignore.

But the Voice of Judgement is crafty. When you think you've got him beat, he'll find another way to creep back in. But there are ways to subdue him:

Remove your fear.

Judgement is simply internalized fear. Ask yourself, "What is the worst

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possible outcome if I take this action?” Play it out in your mind. Chances are, under the cool light of reason, the worst possible outcome is, in truth, not that bad.

Turn judgement in on itself and create curiosity.

Take statements and turn them into questions. “This has already been done and failed,” becomes, “Has this already been done? Why did it fail?” Curiosity can drive you deeper into an idea and make it better.

Identify judgement for what it is.

The Voice of Judgement, like fear, is emotional feedback. It gets power from looping in on itself. By identifying judgement for what it is, you break the loop and diminish its power.

Imagine if you could double your creative output. What impact would that have on your business and your life? The only thing stopping you is your own internal judgement.

Defeat it, and your creativity will flood in like a tidal wave.

Lesson Fourteen:

The Method of Wasps

MY KITCHEN HAS BECOME A GRAVE YARD FOR WASPS. We have a lovely picture window overlooking the back yard, and there are at least a dozen shrivelled up wasp bodies littering the window sill.

After a bit of investigative watching I discovered the reason.

Most summer days we leave the back door open, which is beside and to the left of this large window. Wasps, presumably attracted by the smells inside the house, fly in through the open door. When they want to leave they go straight to the large window where, much to their surprise, they find a glass barrier. The rest of their short lives are spent buzzing up and down that window, scrambling for a way out.

The odd wasp will retreat far enough back from the window to discover the open door and freedom. But mostly they are trapped and perish.

It got me thinking about problem solving.

How many times have we repeatedly bumped our nose against the glass, seeing the prize but being unable to reach it? We all do it.

It could be the moment the business owner, frustrated by an employee's perceived inability to do the job properly, says, "Never mind, I'll do it," robbing the employee of his job, and adding one more thing to his overflowing to-do list. He can see the prize—a business that can run without him—but continually hits the glass trying to reach it.

And now I turn to you. What problem has your nose pressed against the cool glass? Would a change of perspective show you an open door?

Lesson Fifteen:

Really

THE SAD REALITY IS THAT MOST BUSINESSES CAN'T ANSWER THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION put forth by customers far and wide, every minute of every single day.

“Why do you deserve my hard-earned money?”

Why indeed.

Most businesses, not being able to answer the question, grasp for reasons.

“Quality,” they mutter.

“Bah, I expect quality. That’s the cost of getting in the game,” the customer counters.

“Umm, price,” business says, hopefully.

“Five minutes on the internet and I’ll find 20 companies cheaper than you. Is that all you’ve got?” the customer taunts.

“Service,” the business blurts out, knowing darn well their service isn’t any better than their competitors.

The customer just grimaces. “In what specific ways do you give me superior service?”

The business doesn’t answer, because it can’t.

“I thought so,” the customer says. “You’re just like the rest of them.”

And then the customer does what customers around the world have always done. They just don’t buy.

Lesson Sixteen:

Ray Said...

RAY SAID IT. (I wish I had said it, but Ray told me, and that's almost as good.)

Ray is an account rep for a local radio station.

"Advertising doesn't drive people through my door," one of Ray's clients lamented to him. Ray's sharp. He knows when he's being baited, so without hesitation he quipped back, "You're right. Need drives people. Advertising just tells them which door to knock on."

Ray's point is that advertising doesn't generate need for a product. Advertising takes the pre-existing need and channels it to the advertiser. If you're asking your advertising to create demand for your product or service, you'll be disappointed. Demand must already exist.

A few years ago, a woman called me with a new product she wanted help marketing. "It's new, and there are no competitors," she told me.

"What is it?" I asked.

After a long, dramatic pause she said: "Baby perfume and baby cosmetics." It was my turn to pause. I have a toddler, and am about to have another baby and I can't imagine a product I'd be less likely to buy.

"Ahh, have you done any market research?" I asked politely, trying to turn her off the idea.

"There is a market for any product," she said confidently.

She is wrong, of course. I turned down the account and have yet to see baby Chanel on the store shelves.

There is a reason she had no competitors. All the advertising in the world would not create demand for her product. It's a bad idea.

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Back to Ray. The way to win at advertising is to be the door that is most frequently knocked on. The only way to accomplish that is to dominate your category. And the only way to dominate is through repetition, consistency, and speaking to the heart of need.

What do your customers need? Answer that and I'll bet more of them will walk through your door.

Lesson Seventeen:

Listen to Madmen

IMAGINE THE SHOCK to the delicate Victorian disposition when they learned that the most prodigious private contributor to the original *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) was not only a murderer, but a permanent resident of an asylum for the criminally insane.

You can practically see the women fainting in their parlors.

It started innocently enough when Professor James Murray, newly appointed editor in chief of the OED, made a public call for contributors to help with the monumental task of finding, referencing, and publishing the entire English language.

Keep in mind, it was not only the English language as it existed in 1875 that they wished to chronicle, but rather, the entire history of the English language, beginning with Chaucer, and spanning over 1,000 years of linguistic twisting and reshaping. The task was true mind-boggling. It would not have been possible without the efforts of hundreds of volunteer contributors. Ordinary members of the public took up the call and were asked to submit not only an unusual word, but supporting quotations cited from historical literature, in order that light be shed on the specific meaning of the word. They hoped to demonstrate how meaning had changed over the centuries.

Language is a remarkably malleable entity, changing and evolving since the first, prehistoric utterance.

There were other dictionaries prior to the OED. Most notably Dr. Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1755, but none was to be so utterly complete and editorially pure as the great *Oxford English Dictionary*.

The task turned out to take over 70 years, during which time, Dr. William Chester Minor, surgeon, US Civil War veteran and certified

lunatic, contributed over 12,000 entries over a 40-year span. By far the largest single contributor.

Professor Murray, a man not prone to hyperbole, said, “So enormous have been Dr. Minor’s contributions ... that we could easily illustrate the last four centuries from his quotation alone.”

I should note that Dr. Minor was not some kind of romantic victim of circumstance, cast into an asylum by a cruel turn-of-fate. He was truly mad, landing in the asylum after shooting to death an innocent man on the streets of London. (He thought the poor fellow was an Irish bandit set to rob him.) At his trial he was found Innocent by Reason of Insanity and sent to the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane, where he lived out the duration of his life. During his time there he often complained of “Irish Gypsies” (he had a problem with the Irish) sneaking into his cell at night, damaging his cherished, and sizable, library of books, and performing indecent acts on him. Late in life he cut off his own penis, in a ‘religiously’ motivated act of self-mutilation.

What Dr. Minor proved, no matter how crazy, is that you can never be certain where good ideas will come from. Certainly, Professor Murray never would have dreamed such a great contribution could come from so far outside his academic circle of “peers.” In fact, he didn’t have a clue about Dr. Minor’s circumstances until after nearly 15 years of correspondence. Once he learned the truth, he could have dismissed Minor’s contribution as the work of a madman. But he didn’t. Professor Murray had the good sense to differentiate between the substance and the source.

Professor Murray even made a trip to see Dr. Minor in the asylum, and the two men enjoyed a pleasurable afternoon of conversation.

So how about you? Do you dismiss ideas because they come from too far outside your circle? Or is there room for the metaphoric madman to touch your life?

Ideas are everywhere. Judge them by the substance, not the source.

Lesson Eighteen:

All-Star

A LOCAL FAST FOOD RESTAURANT HAS BEEN ADVERTISING THEIR NEW “CHUBBY CHICKEN” BURGERS with these cute commercials. And so finding myself hungry at lunchtime and running late for a meeting, I pulled into the drive-through and ordered one. The advertising worked, I tried it. The “Chubby Chicken” burger was not very good, and I’ll never buy it again.

The advertising did its job, it got me to try. But the restaurant failed in its half of the deal because it made a lousy product.

There is a saying: “Nothing will put a bad restaurant out of business quicker than good advertising.” Or, as I like to say, “You can trick me once, but I hold grudges.” Either way, you can only sell an inferior product once.

Conversely, J.J.’s Wonton Noodle House has a line-up out the door, without fail, by 6:15 pm every evening. They are closed Sundays and Mondays, don’t deliver, the ambiance is more cafeteria than restaurant, they don’t advertise, and the service is acceptable, at best. But they make the best Chinese food in the entire city. And those of us who know about J.J.’s will put up with pretty much anything to have it.

Bad products fail, eventually. Good products need consistent marketing. Exceptional products just need a push to get them started.

Too often businesses are looking for a marketing solution to a quality problem. If your customers aren’t returning and your business isn’t growing, it might not be that you’ve got the wrong kind of customers, you might just have a lousy product. In which case, the solution is simple—sell a better product, give better service. It’s easy.

The real secret to be a runaway success is to be an All-Star. All-Stars are experts. They know everything there is to know about their business.

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They live, breathe, obsess and exude passion for what they sell. It's hard not to feel the energy All-Stars have when they talk about their business.

The owner/chef of J.J.'s is an All-Star. The creative person at the advertising agency that made the chicken commercials is probably an All-Star. And the executive in the product development division of the corporation that owns the fast food chain—he isn't one.

Lesson Nineteen:

The Applicant

YOU ARE IN THE PROCESS OF HIRING a manager. It's an exciting move for you because you will finally be able to delegate some of the responsibility that has kept you from doing the really important work.

You've pinned it down to one of two applicants. They both look good on paper, solid education, great work experience and credible references. You call them both in for an interview.

Applicant one comes in. She's dressed conservatively and professionally, much like you. She immediately seems to fit into your office. Your first impression is "she's the one."

You begin the interview. As you run through the questions she gives you straight answers. She is clearly trying to win the job—telling you what she thinks you want to hear. Not what you actually need to hear. You attribute it to nervousness. She'll come around, you think.

Applicant two arrives. She is a few minutes late and looking dishevelled. She's not half as professional looking as applicant one. You practically decide right there to go with one, there is just the formality of the interview.

As you run through the questions, applicant two comes alive. She tells you her opinions and beliefs about her work, and backs it up with stories and insights about why she approaches her work the way she does. She talks about her visions, and at one point even challenges you outright about something you say. It's clear she has thought a lot about the subject and speaks with passion and clarity. She ends by summarizing her qualifications, and outright asks you for the job.

Who do you hire?

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I've tested this scenario with several people and their answers back up what I suspected. Everyone chooses number two.

Here's what it proves:

In advertising, message is far more important than form—what you say is more important than how you say it. By presenting an argument that speaks to the heart of the customer, and backing it up with examples and facts that overcome objections and drive towards a conclusion, you will greatly outperform an ad that simply looks good.

However, having created hundreds of ads I've noticed that 95% of a client's effort goes into how the ad looks, not what it says.

The ad agencies may try to convince you that advertising is for getting the message out there. "Ad's aren't meant to directly sell anymore. They are for establishing name recognition and building brands," they say. But if you chose applicant two, then you know they are wrong.

Advertising is about selling. In fact, it's even been proven that a simple change of headline can increase an advertisement's response by 20 times!

What are you selling, why is it worth buying, and what benefit will your customers gain from it? Answer these questions and you've got money in the bank.

Lesson Twenty:

The Faces of Toby

THERE IS A COLLAGE OF MY SON TOBY which hangs above his bed, pictures taken over the past two years chronicling his growth. What I find striking about the collage is how each photograph captures a slightly different perspective of him.

Sometimes I catch a glimpse of his mother, sometimes myself. In other photos I can see a hint of the man he will become. In another the troublemaker, still another the angel. One photo shows a hint of sadness. In another I see joy. But each photo gives me an insight into who he is.

This doesn't have anything to do with marketing.

But the collage got me thinking about goals. We all work hard in our jobs and businesses. Most days our heads are down, caught up in the moment-to-moment drama of work. And then there are times where we are confronted with a much greater reality. That's when we are forced into truly seeing the petty daily details as what they really are.

So I asked myself, why do I work?

I have to confess that part of why I work is for the pleasure of working. It has nothing to do with money, or success or family. It is for the simple gratification of accomplishing something.

But as I look at the many, subtle faces of my lovely son, I realize that my work is just a method of providing a good, safe, comfortable, loving life for my family. And I'm shamed into the further realization that I frequently lose sight of this fact by getting caught up in the daily struggles and taking my eye off the prize.

Ask yourself the same question. Is your goal to work? Or are you working towards a greater goal? Which is it?

Lesson Twenty-One:

Inside Boxes, Behind Doors

WE HAVE ALMOST FINISHED RENOVATING THE HOUSE. It looks great. Jess and I have developed that ‘pride of ownership’ realtors are always on about.

But I’ve been avoiding the garage. It’s the last thing to organize.

Everything that doesn’t have a clear place in the house gets relegated to the piles and chaos of the garage. We’ve hauled these things through probably half a dozen moves: boxes of children’s out-grown clothes, cherished books that seemed so powerfully profound when first read that I can hardly remember now, the trunk I moved most of my worldly possession in, when I first came to Victoria ten years ago.

And then I found it: A box filled with the poetry I had written in college. Most of it from two years of creative writing classes, and most of that to Jess, during the start of our love affair.

Odd bits and scraps that made up the yard stick of my emotional depth, as a twenty-year-old in love. Before kids and mortgages and businesses... before I was of any use to anyone.

I look through the box with a mixture of curiosity and horror. The writing is a mixture of raw, vulgar confession, and experiences stolen from the lives of people who had lived more interesting ones.

And so in this garage of displaced things, important enough to keep, yet not quite fitting in anywhere, I wonder, where does this part of me fit in now?

Don’t get me wrong, I have a very creative job, which I love, and those countless poems gave me a foundation in writing that has served me well.

But what strikes me is that while the sentiment was awkward and tripping, there is also a naive energy and spirit about them. A sense of discov-

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ery perhaps. A passionate need to probe deeper is what propelled the words onto the page. It doesn't matter so much what the words were, but rather that they were coming out at all.

So that awkward, gushing twenty-year-old self is like my garage. I want to keep a bit of him around, but I'm not quite sure where I can fit him in.

Perhaps he's simply a reminder to stay curious, probe deeper, ask why, put up a fight sometimes, and never settle.

What about you? Does that awkward, innocent, idealistic younger you ever come out of where you've stored him away?

Lesson Twenty-Two:

Play ‘Little Ball’

I’M A BASEBALL MAN. I didn’t start out this way, but somehow it crept up on me in my late 20s. As a kid, then teenager, I was basically apathetic towards baseball. I played it for a few years, but I was uncoordinated, slight-of-frame, and more comfortable in front of a book than a fast-ball.

Today I’m at the point where every morning I check at least two sports websites for my daily fix. And what’s worse is that during the off-season I’m just as persistent—tracking trades, player movement, expert opinions on how my team, the Seattle Mariners, will fair in the coming season.

But in my heart I know that baseball is analogous to business.

Let me give you some quick background that will help explain why.

The ‘dead-ball’ era ended in 1919 when the game stopped using a ball that was literally “dead”—softer and more difficult to hit. Up until then the odds were against the hitter. Home runs were a rare commodity and teams were left to rely on the hit and run, singles, bunts and stolen bases to win games.

For pitchers, it was the era of the ‘spit ball’—a pitch completely legal at the time. Many pitchers relied on the spitball and other trick pitches to keep batters on their toes. The batters used heavy bats, and as a result choked up on the handle.

Then in 1920 a livelier baseball was introduced and the game completely changed. Offense went way up as the ball came, more sharply, off the bat. And on May 1, the prototype slugger, Babe Ruth, hit the first of his many home runs into the seats of Yankee stadium.

Since then it has been the era of the slugger.

The interesting thing however is that as much as offense has been the main thrust of baseball for 80 years, pitching and defense still win games.

Take the Mariners.

In 1999, the Mariners lost the first of two superstar power hitters, Ken Griffey Jr., and then in 2000, Alex Rodriguez. These were both the kind of players that come along once every few decades and Seattle had both on one team. Before they left, Seattle regularly lead the league in home runs. But even with their superstar power, they had a losing record most years.

After they left, Seattle transformed into a team of pitching, speed and defense—what they call ‘little ball’. Little ball is when a team does all the little things it needs to win: bunt ahead runners, draw walks, steal bases, drive up pitch counts, hit in the clutch. Seattle could no longer rely on a big scoring home run inning.

What’s interesting is that little ball wins games. If you look at the 2001 season, Seattle tied the alltime major league baseball records for victories in a season, winning 116 games. In an era of sluggers and home run records, little ball works.

So what about your business? How is your team’s little ball? Most businesses I know—and certainly the clients I’ve dealt with—are in the same boat. They can’t afford superstar advertising, or a high-paid sales force. They are small- to mid-market businesses that will always lose ace staff to bigger markets and greener pastures. They can’t compete head-to-head with the sluggers in their industry.

But you don’t have to.

You can win by executing on the little things that capture your customers’ heart—better service, involvement in the community you serve, being faster, more convenient, friendlier, in touch with your customers’ needs. These kinds of companies get the most out of the players they have. They win.

How can your team improve its little ball?

Lesson Twenty-Three:

Beautiful, Like Me?

ARE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE BETTER THAN THE REST OF US? Do they deserve to make more money? Be hired for better jobs? Get more recognition at work?

Of course not, but that doesn't stop them from getting all these things.

One study even found that attractive CEOs get a measurable increase in productivity from their work force. (This was a study of large companies and the increase was actually measurable.)

The power of 'looks' is that strong. It's an unfair world and being attractive is a competitive advantage.

Damn those beautiful people for getting more than their fair share, right?

You can't control how you look, but there is a way you can get the same advantages those damn beautiful people get and apply it to your business.

You see, a brand isn't much different than a person. It's judged on first impressions, and impressions are formed by appearance. Unlike the large nose, weak chin, or crooked teeth you are born with, a brand can be shaped and molded and formed into whatever you dream of. It's yours to control.

You do it through graphic design. Design is the great equalizer.

I've always had trouble explaining design to people who aren't familiar with it. Graphics sounds trite and is misleading. Communications sounds pretentious and vaguely like 'consultant'. Marketing sounds suspiciously like it will cost a lot, and not net any visible return.

Really it's none of those things. Graphic design is how you control the impression your business makes, how you set expectations, and how you empathize with your prospective customers. It's the strong chin, smooth skin, white teeth, and broad smile of a company.

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It's how you leverage the power those damn beautiful people unfairly have and unleash it in your business.

What's the impression your business is giving, wallflower or knock-out?

Lesson Twenty-Four:

The Quitter

ODDLY ENOUGH, I'VE FOUND QUITTING TO BE THE BEST THING FOR MY CAREER.

I quit university when I realized what it had to teach me wasn't what I needed to learn. I quit a government job after I realized it was taking me away from my goal of being a graphic designer.

And when I found myself unable to get a job as a designer, lacking both skills and experience, I did what was natural: quit looking for one and started my own business.

Some years later, after building a successful graphic design consultancy, I took on a partner and started a communications agency. It seemed like the natural progression. And after building up that business I realized it wasn't what I thought it would be. So, I quit that too.

Remarkably, all that quitting set me on a course that has landed me here. My work, until now, had been confined to an industry box. It wasn't until I looked objectively at the work I was doing and the impact it had on my clients, that I realized what I had to do.

So I started a brand new business, Sparks Marketing Inc. With it I've taken the best parts of what I've learned: graphic design, business coaching, advertising, and marketing, and created a *system* for transforming small businesses. I would never have gotten to this point had I not quit.

So my advice to anyone who is not living the life they want is to quit. Take the opportunity to start something new. You may be surprised to find where you end up.

What are you waiting for?

Lesson Twenty-Five:

My Divine Hammer

I'VE DEVELOPED A MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH A HAMMER. He's a 14 oz. steel, straight-claw Mastercraft, with rubber sure-grip.

I call him The Master.

I bought him after I broke the handle on my old wooden hand-me-down hammer pulling out a large and stubborn nail.

I never really connected with that old hammer, but me and The Master kick some ass together. I had no idea how much destruction a man and a hammer could inflict on a basement in need of renovation. We've been ripping down walls, tearing up floors, smashing and pounding and acting primal. It's really fun.

The Master is rugged and dependable (and backed by a life-time warranty) and I'm feeling that way too. Two months ago I didn't know a retaining wall from an exterior wall. Today I'm a master builder, offering unwanted advice to the more skilled labour who are helping out.

Now isn't that the point of branding, to create a relationship between product and consumer? My rational mind knows, of course, that it's just a hammer. But I feel strong and manly with The Master in my hand. What do you think is more powerful? And when it comes time to buy more tools, what will resonate in my head?

Branding is the transfer of attributes from product to consumer. iMac people are more unique and think differently; Rolex people are rich and sophisticated; Volvo drivers are safer than the rest of us; Mastercraft people are hard working, dependable, and guaranteed for life.

Sounds just like me.

Lesson Twenty-Six:

Jack's Short Course on Selling

I'VE GOT A CONFESSION TO MAKE: This is lifted completely from a terrific presentation I attended by sales guru Jack Daly. For three shining hours, Jack dazzled, entertained, berated and, most importantly, taught, 300 or so business owners how to sell.

Jack's short course on selling is this:

Ask questions and listen.

Most sales people are those type-A, action, mile-a-minute, gotta-be-heard types that talk more than listen. The image of 'salesman' is of that fast talker we all try to avoid. For him, every sale is about defeating the customer.

They are the worst kind of salespeople. The top sellers don't tell a prospect anything, they do what Jack does, ask questions and listen. What those sales pros have found is that by listening to a prospect, you inevitably are told exactly what the prospect wants. Then all you have to do is give it to them.

Jack's pretty smart. He knows that people like to buy, but they hate to be sold to. Listening lets the prospect buy.

He knows, too, that selling is a transfer of trust. When every sale is about beating the customer, there is no inherent trust. It is a short-term, low-conversion sales strategy. And a bad one. It costs 5-10 times more to land a new client than it does to sell to an existing one. By establishing trust at the start of a relationship, the ace salesperson yields a long-term client.

Long-term clients make for healthy businesses.

Lesson Twenty-Seven:

Wisdom from Dad

MY FATHER IS A SELF-MADE MAN. He started his career pushing a broom at CKDX, a TV station in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1966. He then graduated to cameraman, shooting evening news for the CBC. He quit that, started his own business while in his 40s, saddled with three kids and two mortgages, and retired 9 years later, not quite rich, but close enough.

I consider him a success.

“Let me tell you about Stan,” he told me one day. “I knew Stan from my CBC days, where we were in the union together. After I left to start my company, I’d see Stan every so often. He’d always ask me, ‘How’s business?’ If I told him business was bad his face would light up. If I said business was good he’d become sullen.”

“Why?” I asked.

“If you achieve any amount of success in life, some people will resent you for it. I took some risks and I made out all right. Stan stayed put, never took a risk, and now he hates me for it because he wishes he had.”

“That’s not very big of him,” I said.

“No, it’s not, but you are a mirror to the fears of others. They hold themselves up against you. Your failures are their victories, your successes their misery. These kind of people don’t take pleasure in anyone else’s success.”

He went on: “There is an important lesson here. These kind of people believe there is only a certain amount of success to go around. They feel your success takes away from theirs. They’re completely wrong. Successful people surround themselves with other successful people. Don’t ever begrudge another person’s success. It will only help lead you to your own.”

Lesson Twenty-Eight:

My Junk

WE'VE BEEN GETTING READY TO MOVE HOUSE. Packing up boxes, and emptying out closets of long-forgotten things. I've realized that at least 25% of everything we have in this house is junk I could easily do without. With every move, it seems our junk gets packed into boxes, carted to the new house, unpacked, and forgotten about again.

My wife, Jess, is becoming ruthless about throwing things away. She's an inspiration. But, even with her sharp eye, we end up with a house full of things we don't need or use. Junk.

Deep down I know it's because I find my junk comforting. I'm used to it. It's an extension of me. It's safe. But the fact that it comforts me doesn't make it right.

How many of us are like this in our businesses? Burdened with junk we don't need. Processes that don't really work anymore. Training that hasn't been dusted off in years. Beliefs that have never been questioned. Assumptions we've long since forgotten were assumptions.

I'll bet it's more of us than we care to admit.

This junk accumulates without much effort. The real trick is keeping it in check.

Let's make a deal—I'll change if you will.

Open up that metaphoric closet that your business resides in and shake off the cobwebs. Everything that is potentially junk has to go. If you haven't used it, written on it, met about it, or made money from it in the last 3 months, toss it. Chances are it wasn't of any use in the first place.

If you're worried that your junk is irreplaceable, I guarantee you that inside 6 months your closet will be bursting again.

Lesson Twenty-Nine:

The Worst Salesman I Ever Met

LIKE MANY PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN, it has occurred to me that I should save some money towards my children's education.

Jess is an excellent mother, and it was on her maternal urging that we set up an appointment with an RESP (registered education savings plan) sales rep to discuss our children's future.

Now I'm not a financial planner, nor particularly smart or knowledgeable about these things, but the big question I had was why is an RESP better than a regular retirement savings plan. Simple.

I'm not mean, so I won't name the company or the particular sales rep that showed up at my door one Thursday evening. I'm sure he is tormented enough by his woeful closing rate.

I'm an inquisitive person. I like to ask questions before I make a decision. However, instead of answering my questions, what I received from him was a 45-minute monologue on the history of RESPs. During his lamentations, he read from what I affectionately call "the big black binder." Many sales organizations have their own version. It is intended to be a sales tool, outlining features of a product, the history and competitive advantages. For practical reasons it starts at the beginning and goes in a linear fashion to the end to aid in finding what a sales rep needs.

In creative writing school they taught us a valuable marketing lesson: never start a story at the beginning. It's boring and immediately conveys to the reader (or listener) exactly what is in store. There is no surprise, and what makes anything interesting is the surprise factor.

What was in store for me was 45 minutes of trying to figure out how I

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could politely get this man out of my house. I don't remember a single detail of the meeting except the dreaded "black binder," and my discomfort.

To engage a prospect you must give them something to be excited about. Starting with a benefit is a good way to do this. It's the hook, and the reason a prospect has allowed you to access his time. The benefit is the emotional reason to buy the product. And like it or not, we buy from our heart.

A sales tool is exactly that: Something to access that supports salient points of the sale. Any salesman who does things by the book should be in a different line of work. Book binding, for instance?

Lesson Thirty:

My New Suit

I BOUGHT A SUIT LAST WEEK. Actually, I bought the suit a week prior but was having alterations done. I picked up my suit last week.

The day I bought it the clerk told me it would be ready on Wednesday. He then took down my home and work phone numbers. I made a mental note to pick it up, but I assumed they'd call first.

They didn't call. They didn't call on Wednesday. They didn't call on Thursday. And they didn't even call on Friday.

The following Monday I went to the store to check.

"I bought a suit here last week," I said. "No one called so I don't know if it's ready..."

"Name," one of the clerks said stiffly.

I told him my name and he meandered into the back. Another clerk stood at the counter.

"We don't call," she said matter-of-factly. "When you bought the suit you should have been given a pick-up time."

"Okay," I said.

Then the guy came out of the back with my suit. "Here you go. We don't normally call when a suit is ready."

"I heard," I said. Then I left.

I didn't think about until I got to my car, but then I started to wonder: Why don't they call their customers? Don't they like them? It's a courteous and polite thing to do. Don't I deserve that?

Both clerks were very clear that their policy was definitely not to call customers. So why did they take my phone number in the first place? And

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why do they expect me to buy any more suits from them? All I got was a reasonable suit at a reasonable price. These days, that's not nearly enough.

I'm surprised because this same company advertises on television at great expense. And their promise is, among other things, terrific service.

Their problem is good marketing and lousy service. They got me in the door (good), and left me feeling ambivalent (bad). Whoever is in charge of marketing should take a field trip to the local stores and see how they really operate.

How many customers are you turning away because you're not doing the little things to deliver on your service promise? Those little things are the difference between a one-time customer, and a customer for life.

Lesson Thirty-One:

Befriend Thy Enemy

I HAD A GREAT LUNCH WITH DAN, the sales manager for a local radio station. He was telling me about how tough it is to convince advertisers to put their money in radio.

“Competition is tough. With three new stations entering the market in the last year, most advertisers are waiting to see how it shakes out,” he said.

“The real challenge will be establishing a niche. For instance, we’ve got a lock on males, 18–25. The other guys can duke it out for everyone else.”

This is generally a good strategy: Uniqueness in the market.

Then he told me something truly astounding.

“It’s also difficult trying to fight the local daily newspaper (the city where I live, Victoria, has only one daily newspaper, a monopoly). They get the lion’s share of advertisers. In fact they do four times the total radio sales for all stations.”

“WHAT?” I exclaimed. “You mean that one paper sells four times more advertising than your entire industry?”

“Yep.”

My friend Dan and his colleagues in radio don’t have a problem because there are too many radio stations. Their problem is that they are in the wrong fight. They are locked in a battle for market share—the percent of the market each station can claim. Like trench warfare, there are a lot of casualties, but not much movement.

They should be working together to increase the size of the market.

It’s simple math. 10% of 100 is 10. 10% of 500 is 50. Increase the market, not the market share.

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The radio guys need to work together to entice the entire advertising buying market. There are a lot of compelling reasons to choose radio over print. It wouldn't take much to chip away at the newspaper, and the growth that resulted would provide extra revenue for all stations. The market would grow, and everyone would prosper.

Dan and his station are stuck in a battle because it's convenient, not because it's the right one. The stations will jockey back and forth, a few will likely die, and others will take their place, and no one will ever enjoy lasting success.

In your industry, are you waging a marketing battle against your perceived competitors, or the actual ones?

Lesson Thirty-Two:

10 Rules for the Marketing Ace

I DON'T DO LISTS VERY OFTEN because I don't find them very eloquent; however, sometimes you've just got to lay it all out.

So here it is: 10 Rules for the Marketing Ace. If you can nail these, your business will prosper and the life of your dreams will be within your grasp.

1. The core of a company is in its promise. Everything comes from that.
2. Your brand is simply the execution of your promise. The goal is to be "Total Branded"—living your promise inside and out.
3. Marketing is a 52-weeks-a-year effort and lasts the length of time you plan on being in business.
4. No action can be taken until a person sees themselves taking it—engage the imagination. Because of this, sell to the heart and imagination of a prospect, not the mind.
5. "You" is the most powerful word you can put in a piece of copywriting. "Us," "we," and "our," are, conversely, the least powerful words.
6. Repetition breeds familiarity which breeds trust. You don't buy from people you don't trust, do you? Thus, advertising needs to be sufficiently repetitious to make a mental impression on your prospect.
7. The more singular and specific your promise, the greater the impact you will have on your prospect. This is called positioning. The tighter your niche, the greater likelihood a prospect will buy.
8. Buying is an emotional journey. Create a little mystery around your business or product.
9. "Educate" customers at your own peril. People universally respond to education efforts the same way. They don't buy it.
10. Perception is the currency of marketing. Understand it, and you understand the market.

Lesson Thirty-Three:

The Drama Unfolding

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN WATCHING A MOVIE when you spot a glaring continuity error? The actor is holding a glass, then it's gone, then it appears again. It completely breaks the flow of the movie. Suddenly you find yourself thinking, "I'm watching a bunch of actors on a set somewhere reading lines," instead of experiencing the plot and drama unfold.

In theatre it's called the fourth wall, the mysterious barrier between performer and audience. In order for it to exist, the performer must not acknowledge the audience, and in turn, the audience must suspend their disbelief, allowing the drama to exist as if it were real. Otherwise it's just two groups of people, one group looking, the other group being looked at.

Great businesses know that when a customer is buying, the same sort of 'theatre' exists. While we shop we become engaged inside the buying experience. It captivates our imagination. But when something causes us to step out of this realm, we are suddenly shaken into the cold light of objectivity. This is bad, because where the imagination is eager to buy, the objective mind is a scrooge.

You see, when you break it down, a business is simply a set of people who perform a task in a predetermined way. Objectively it's not very exciting. But to a customer, a business provides the possibilities that come with buying something—the buying experience. Ask a customer how she feels after buying a new car, or how a business owner feels after buying a new piece of equipment, and you'll find the experience is anything but boring.

If you've ever heard, "Those idiots in accounting don't know what they're doing." Or, "You were Jack's customer, but he doesn't work here anymore." Or, "Someone's misplaced your file." Or, "Our distributor in Calgary can't get the part until Thursday." If you've heard any of those things, you've experienced the fourth wall come crashing down.

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Ask yourself, 'If I were a customer of my business, would I want to buy from it?' Then ask, 'how would I want the transaction of product/service for money to go? What would the business look like? What questions would you be asked? What choices would you be given? What products would you want to buy? What would the service be like?'

The truly dynamite business engages the customer in a pleasant drama that unfolds with the business getting what it wants (money), and the customer feeling like he got more than simply what he purchased. Is that the experience you're giving your customers?

Lesson Thirty-Four:

Dethroning the Emperor

Jack M. Greenberg
Chairman and chief executive office, McDonald's Corporation.
c/o McDonald's Restaurants of Canada Ltd.
McDonald's Place,
Toronto, Ontario M3C 3L4

Dear Mr. Greenberg,

My favorite Sunday of the year is October daylight savings when we gain one blissful hour in the morning.

But on this Sunday we are out of syrup and the kids want pancakes.

So I'm in the car at 8:30 a.m. in my pajamas and slippers, desperately trying to hold on to my extended morning, driving to our neighborhood McDonald's for pancakes.

I wait in the drive-through line and order. As the McDonald's girl collects my order I notice a timer and sticker that says "30 seconds from the time you pay to the time you go." The timer is at 128, 129, 130, 131... the girl passes me my order. I think about asking her, 30 seconds or what happens? But the kids want their pancakes and I'm in my pajamas. I'm not giving up my daylight savings Sunday morning.

When I get home, my wife Jess and the kids are sitting at the table. Jess opens the bag...

"They forgot the syrup," she says.

"I don't want pancakes with no syrup," my 4-year-old daughter Tristan

whines. Toby, my 2-year-old son's eyes begin to tear up.

"Don't worry, kids," I say. I go back outside to the car and drive back to the McDonald's to retrieve syrup.

I get to the drive-through line-up. Wait, wait, wait. My Sunday ticks by, the pancakes at home get colder, colder, colder. Finally it's my turn at the window.

"You forgot to give me syrup," I blurt out.

"I'm sorry," she smiles, "we're out of syrup."

I'm stunned. McDonald's is out of syrup? The company who invented modern fast food, is out of syrup. Ray Krock would turn over in his grave. How can this be?

"You can't just sell pancakes and not give people syrup. I have kids at home who expect syrup."

She looks at me with a blankness only a 17-year-old can achieve.

"Get me your manager," I say.

The manager comes to the window.

"You can't just sell people pancakes without giving them syrup," I say.

"You should have been told we were out of syrup when you ordered," he states, as if to say it's my fault.

"But I wasn't told. I wouldn't buy pancakes without syrup. The reason I came here in the first place was because we ran out of syrup at home. I could have made no-syrup pancakes all by myself."

"I'm sorry," he says. I can tell by his look that he wants to end the conversation. There are other customers piling up behind me.

"GIVE ME MY MONEY BACK."

"Certainly, sir." I get my money and drive off.

Sunday morning, I'm in my pajamas driving around thinking 'where can I get syrup', when I know that no stores are open because it's daylight savings and we're all supposed to be enjoying the extra hour.

I go home, defeated, having to explain the syrup situation to Jess and the kids.

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We make due, we're survivors.

Mr. Greenberg, the way I figure it, next Sunday morning you owe me one extra hour to make up the one I lost today. I'm not optimistic you'll pay up, in which case, a simple apology to my family and four orders of pancakes, with syrup, will do.

Sincerely,
Shane Sparks

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*Shortly after sending that letter, I received this response.
We could all learn how to keep customers from their example.*

The Emperor lives!

Lesson Thirty-Five:

Lessons from the Razor King

ONE MORNING IN THE SPRING OF 1895 a traveling salesman named King Camp Gillette, after cutting himself while shaving, had a good idea. Back then, shaving offered much more personal risk than it does today. A man had two choices: the straight razor, or so-called safety razor. Gillette routinely traveled by railway. Shaving with a straight razor on one of those bumpy trips could quite easily cause a man to cut his own throat. Gillette, sensibly, favored the safety razor.

Now the safety razor of old was a unified piece of handle and blade and had to be manually sharpened on a strap. Eventually the blade got so worn and dull it became useless and the whole thing had to be discarded. It was just after Gillette had finished a miserable job of shaving, and thrown this safety razor in the trash in disgust, that he thought, 'If only someone made a safety razor with replaceable blades.'

Eureka!

It took Gillette seven years to perfect the idea. (Sharpening thin metal was a major technological obstacle in the 1890s.) But in 1901, Gillette formed the company that still bears his name. For the first time, razor blades would be sold in multiple packages, with the razor handle a one-time purchase. Production began in 1903; Gillette won a patent for his product the next year. The rest is history.

To give you an idea of the size of modern day Gillette, consider that between 1993 and 1998 they spent about \$750 million developing its Mach3 razor. After that they spent another \$300 million to market it. That's over a billion dollars to develop and sell a disposable razor that retails for about \$8.

Most people don't know that King Gillette was an opponent of capitalism. At least, as a young man he was. He'd written a number of books

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promoting a socialist utopia, declaring “competition to be the root of all evil.”

So if you were saying to yourself, ‘Old Gillette must have been a natural businessman,’ you’d be wrong. He was just a left-wing salesman with a good idea and passion enough to run with it.

The first Gillette razor was sold in 1903; 51 razors were sold that year. The next year, 90,000 were sold. By the end of 1908 sales had passed the one million mark.

How far can a good idea and a little effort take you?

Lesson Thirty-Six:

Believe Me!

I WAS IN A MEETING WITH A CLIENT and we were talking about some of the marketing strategies he might employ to build his business.

“I don’t know if I believe all this marketing stuff will work for me,” he said.

Whether you believe something or not has little bearing on whether it is true. Too often people mistake belief for fact.

But here’s the rub: It doesn’t matter.

Fact has little relationship to action, and furthermore, fact does a lousy job of motivating action. This is because there are two separate realities existing in tandem and we’re constantly flipping between one and the other like wild flocks of darting birds.

These two realities are subjective reality and objective reality.

Subjective reality is the domain of the imagination. It is the reason otherwise rational people buy ab-masters, and fad diets, and no-money-down real-estate courses. It is the reason we buy stuff we don’t need. It is so compelling it can drive us to make foolish decisions. Subjective reality is the domain of the heart—it wants what it wants.

Objective reality is the domain of the mind. It is well thought out, observant, precise, rational, considered. In objective reality we are sensible and buy what we need.

Fortunately for marketers, we buy first with our hearts.

Remember the movie *Jaws*? How many of us were scared stiff to go swimming after seeing that? Even in a 10 foot deep swimming pool I remember looking down feverishly to make sure that a shark wasn’t ready to sink his teeth into my soft, pale body. My rational mind knew there couldn’t be a shark, but my subjective, emotional mind had whipped my

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heart into a panicked frenzy.

Our hearts inspire imagination. It's a great thing and important to know because this is how you get people to buy your stuff. Find the dramatic appeal of your product and you'll get into the heart of your prospect. Get them to feel incomplete without owning it and you've got some jaw-dropping marketing.

And so when that prospective client said he didn't believe in marketing I knew I couldn't persuade him with the truth. So I put aside all the statistics and data and said, "Many people go out of business due to lousy marketing, whether they believe in it or not. Do you want to be one of those people?"

And you know what? He bought that.

Lesson Thirty-Seven:

What Newton Knew About Business

I'VE MET HUNDREDS OF BUSINESS PEOPLE— managers, owners, entrepreneurs—and I've come to realize something important: There is no shortage of ideas in the world. There seems, however, to be a drastic shortage of people with the momentum to act on their ideas.

I believe it comes down to Newton's first law of motion, which states:

An object at rest tends to stay at rest unless acted upon by an outside force.

Ideas are not forceful enough on their own to combat inertia. Push and prod as they might, a simple idea cannot create action in an inert body. The ideas simply fall away and disappear.

Of course, Newton also knew that the opposite was true: A body in motion will stay in motion. I believe that is why successful people always seem to succeed with such little effort. They have built momentum. For these people, ideas have just enough substance to push them ahead at greater and greater speeds. It's like pushing a rolling car. It requires very little effort in comparison to the weight of the vehicle. When you make ideas easy to act on it's not surprising that they get acted on.

So, how do you break the bonds of inertia and start moving?

Start by following the laws that govern aircraft, they are a perfect example of Newton's law. An aircraft requires 100% of its rated power just to get off the ground. But once aloft, it only requires 60% of rated power to stay in the air at a comfortable clip. The consequence of slowing too much ensures aircraft never do.

That's how you should treat your business.

It's not easy. There are obstacles to overcome before you can push

ahead. Every company has them. For some it is a decision maker who is trapped in doing 'what has always worked' and who is unwilling to take a personal risk on something new. Sometimes it is a system, originally designed to help the business, which actually makes it more difficult. (This is frequently the case with sales. A prospect has agreed to buy, but is so overwhelmed with product options and payment terms, the customer retreats out of fear, backing out of the sale.)

It could be a staff member, terrified of change, who purposefully undermines any attempt at it. Or a corporate culture that has discouraged staff input and consistently failed to act on ideas, draining the passion and creativity from its people, and turning them into drones. Frequently it is several or all of the above.

There is an occasion when an inert business will suddenly and unexpectedly experience the painful outside force necessary to get it moving: when it begins to fail, usually after a faster-moving competitor starts taking customers.

But by then it's too late.

Here's how you keep moving:

Find ways to continually improve. Be open to ideas and actively seek them out from staff, suppliers and customers. Embrace and realize that change is simply the process of breaking down and discarding that which does not work, and discovering the opportunities for you and your business to improve.

Remember that risk is directly proportional to reward. Less of one means less of the other.

And finally, understand that people who are unengaged, ignored, or not valued tend toward the inert. Motivate, inspire, and involve your staff, and your will have no trouble soaring above the competition.

Newton was a genius.

Lesson Thirty-Eight:

Your Box

YOU ARE ON THE VERGE of uncovering an incredible opportunity.

You are about to revolutionize your industry. You could be the first to do it. Your customers will love you for it, your staff will be invigorated, and you'll be rewarded with fabulous wealth.

You are about to have a break-through idea.

It's right there. All you have to do is open your eyes to it.

You see, practically every business operates within the confining box created by the rules of its industry. And contrary to what your gym teacher told you in third grade, playing by the rules is not what you should do. Abiding by rules ensures fair competition. But who said business should be fair? Unfair competition, with the advantage favouring you, is what you want. Don't you?

Right now the values you hold and the way your business operates are virtually the same as the values your competition holds and the way they operate. You may have different names, different advertising, different claims, but you're probably more similar than different.

You're both in the box. And the more competitors you have, the more crowded it's getting. The bigger ones are hoarding most of the space, and the rest are fighting and jockeying for their little piece of turf.

It's depressing.

This opportunity I'm telling you about isn't inside that box. It's outside and you can't see it from in there.

The first thing you have to do is smash your way out. You have to challenge the values and assumptions of your industry. Question down to the foundation of how you do what you do, for whom you do it, and why they

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buy it. You have to begin to see the box before you can break your way out.

It's not easy getting out of your box. Your competitors, and even your peers, don't want you to get out. You validate them by staying in it.

But it's time. Are you ready?

Lesson Thirty-Nine:

Showing Up the Competition

SOME TIME AGO, I received an invitation from a local graphic design college to attend their graduating students' portfolio review. Eager, young designers ready to step into the professional world of communications.

The timing of the invitation was perfect, as I was finding myself short of help, and long on work. So I attended, hoping to hire an assistant.

I showed up at the school to a room full of hope and promise. The students stood around the edges of the room, talking nervously among themselves, while I walked around the table displaying their portfolios. I casually flipped through a few books, and was impressed enough by the quality of work that I decided to hire one of them.

Tentatively, one student engaged me in a question. Who was I? Was I looking to hire someone?

"Yes," I said. "I'm interested in hiring an assistant." Then the students came alive. As I went through each portfolio, the student responsible for the work came up and discussed it, telling me the goal of the project, the reason for selecting one typeface over the other, etc.

After I'd looked at all the work I addressed the room: "All of you have done very good work and I'd like to hire one of you. I'll leave a stack of my business cards on the table, those of you who are interested, please call me to set up an interview."

I expected to be flooded with calls.

But after a few days I received exactly one call, from Janice. She came in for an interview and I hired her.

For a moment I was uncertain of the wisdom of hiring the only person

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that applied for the job, but Janice took the time to write me a clever thank-you letter following the interview and that sealed it.

Janice teaches us is that sometimes opportunity is found simply by showing up. For you that might simply mean calling a prospect you haven't talked to in a while, or sending out a letter to your customer list.

She has turned out to be a fantastic addition to my business, and I'm glad she showed up when she did.

What simple step could you take today to be there when opportunity shows its face?

Lesson Forty:

People Like You

HERE IS A POWERFUL TRUTH that will greatly aid your success in business and in life:

People like people who like them. People buy from people they like.

A friend of mine just got a job as a car salesman. He's been struggling to find work and feels this job is a great opportunity. I'm happy for him. I think car sales is an ideal way to learn selling, human nature and business.

However, he related to me that during his job interview the sales manager told him, "Customers are idiots. You have to do the thinking for them."

If I'd been there I would have grabbed that dope by the collar and shook him into reality. "Customers are certainly not idiots. They are generous, wonderful people. Without them you wouldn't have a job!"

I fear my friend will get the wrong kind of sales training. He's young, and bad habits learned early are hard to unlearn.

I like each and every one of my clients. I like them because they are good people. I like them because they make good products and offer good services. They are the most deserving people I know. Our clients have been kind enough to trust us to do good work, and they've been kind enough to pay us well for it. What's not to like?

At Sparks Marketing we won't work with people who sell a bad product, are unethical, brutish, deceitful, or manipulative.

Now I have a question for you: What is your opinion of your customer? Do you see her as the barrier between you and her money? Do you see her as someone to manipulate into buying? Is she simply someone to sell as much as possible to, in the shortest amount of time?

Or do you see her as the generous, compassionate person she is? Do

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you like her? Can you honestly say she's your friend?

If it's the former, STOP IT! Someone's pounding at your door, and it's the competition down the street. They would love your customer. They'd treat her well, value her business, and become her friend. Your competitors understand that he who deals with 'idiots' is likely one himself.

And if you are the latter, what have you done today to let that valued client know she's a special individual? What have you done to show her you cherish the relationship? What will you do tomorrow to ensure that the competitor down the block doesn't beat you to it?

Tell you what. As soon as you finish reading this, why don't you call that great customer and let her know how you really feel. That should tell her a lot.

Lesson Forty-One:

The Certainty of Your Path

I GREW UP ON A HILL overlooking Indian Arm, in the overgrown corner of North Vancouver. When I was a boy, there was only a single gravel road leading to Deep Cove. It's far different now. But then, the few stores that made up the village were a half-hour walk from my house.

I knew a short-cut, a trail through the forest which emerged just steps from my house. And since most of my friends lived near town, I walked it thousands of times.

It got so I could run that stretch of trail, at full speed, navigating the twisting path and slippery roots in the half-dark of twilight. I never tripped because I knew where to duck, where to jump, and where the path took an unexpected turn. I could anticipate the dangers. And I knew where the path was taking me.

There's a lesson.

In my business life, when I'm certain of my path—the actions I need to take to reach my goals—I find I'm able to move very quickly. It's hard to catch up to me. Then I realized:

The certainty of your path determines the swiftness with which you travel.

Ever wondered why some people are able to move through treacherous terrain without slowing down? How they navigate the twists and obstacles, and still are able to achieve their goals, while others struggle and fail?

How can a blind man climb a mountain? How does an entrepreneur begin with nothing and end up with millions? Why do some businesses grow to be wildly successful?

The answer is certainty. These people are able to define their goals in

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concrete terms, and then plot the many small steps it will take to reach those goals. So once they have begun, those small steps become swift strides as they move rapidly from goal to goal.

How many times have you stopped in your tracks, unsure of your next step?

Try looking farther down the path and the answer may become clear.

Lesson Forty-Two:

Spilled Milk

I'M FURIOUS AT MY 4-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER after she's spilled an entire glass of milk on the couch. It's not so much that she didn't tell me, so the milk has had time to soak in. It's not even that I'm worried the milk will sour and create a terrific smell.

Though, those are good reasons.

It's that she's not acting sorry. She's trying her hardest to ignore me.

I say, "Tristan, do you understand why what you did is bad? (blank look) We have to rent a steam cleaner, and even then I don't think it'll come out. (looking at the television, ignoring me) Milk turns sour. Do you know what that's going to smell like? (looking at her feet) Are you listening to me? (she's not listening) Tristan? (huh?) TRISTAN!!!!!"

It's clear to me why I'm so mad. She's not acknowledging either that she screwed up, or that she's sorry.

But Tristan is a smart kid. She can sense when I'm close to my boiling point. All of a sudden she gets serious, looking me straight in the eye.

"It was an accident daddy, I'm sorry," she says.

And then all at once my anger starts to dissipate. "Run and get me some rags and next time be more careful," I said, just to get the last word. She skips off to get the rags, and then the situation is over.

There is a lesson here.

Everyone makes mistakes and more frequently than we like to admit. Errors and lapses occur and customers rightfully get angry. The way to resolve it is as amiably as possible, to listen intently, take responsibility no matter what, offer apologies, and find a way to make it up to that person.

Tristan knows. She's got a bright future.

Lesson Forty-Three:

Dear Mr. O'Hara

Steve O'Hara, CEO
Executive Office
Rawlings Sporting Goods Co., Inc.
P.O. Box 22000
St. Louis, MO 63126

Dear Mr. O'Hara,

I recently purchased a Rawlings Radar Ball from your online store and wanted to share my buying experience with you. I have to say, I am disappointed that a company I formerly held in high esteem could have let me down in such a big way.

It's not even that you ultimately sent me the wrong product, or that the 1-800 number listed on your website doesn't work in Canada; or that the product took forever to get here; or that there is no contact email address listed anywhere on your site and therefore no way for me to get updated on my order; or that your catalog is inconsistent and unintuitive; or that my \$29.99 US purchase ended up being close to \$80 CDN on my VISA due to unexplained costs. It's not any of that.

It's that you sent me the little league ball. I don't want to know how fast I can throw from a little league mound. I want to know how fast I throw from 60 feet 6 inches—the length of a big league pitching mound. Your product clearly says on the packaging it is accurate only to the distance it is calibrated for, in this case 46 feet.

You see, Mr. O'Hara, I wasn't a very good athlete as a kid. In fact, in my last year of little league I had exactly two hits, both in the same game,

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off the same pitcher. One was a grand slam, the other a solid double.

For one magic day I was a star. I still have that grand slam ball. It sits on my desk at home. And though it is dirty and scuffed, I can still make out the brand name—it's a Rawlings ball.

I'm like many of your customers—people who wish they were better athletes than they are. People who still have the spirit of that kid playing ball, but are now grown adults. You've tarnished a great memory for me. Whenever I look at that ball I'll not only remember my grand slam day, but the lousy feeling I have for the Rawlings company.

It's clear to me that your online effort is half-hearted, which puts me in the awkward position of feeling unwanted. As a result, the thing you are really losing is not only my business, but my goodwill. Something you've been building since 1887.

I'd suggest you decide, really decide, whether Rawlings wants to be online. And if you do, stop navel-gazing, and create something that considers the user first. An online store shouldn't be an after-thought. It should be user-centric, intuitive, friendly, helpful, and above all interactive.

I sincerely hope you will give your website a chance to be successful, remembering: just as you win business one customer at a time, so too do you lose it one at a time.

Sincerely,
Shane Sparks

Lesson Forty-Four:

Information is Free, It's Knowledge That Costs

MY FRIEND PETER HAS A GOOD IDEA. In fact, I think it may even be a great idea. And I'm not easily impressed by these things.

But Peter also has a problem.

He's governed by the fear that someone is going to steal his idea. It makes him cagey and suspicious, and when he talks about his big idea, he does so in a vague, elusive way. He doesn't want to tell too much for fear you'll take that information and cut him out. "People don't have a right to the things I know, unless they pay for them," he says, vehemently.

Peter doesn't get it. So I tell him about Farmer Johnson.

Farmer Johnson had a small dairy farm, but over the years he found increased competition and technological innovation was driving down the price he could get for the milk. Bigger competitors had made large investments in automation systems that allowed them to produce more, for less.

It was a tough spot. But then Johnson had an idea. City folks were always driving up to his farm and asking to look around. They loved connecting with nature on the weekends because they weren't able to during their work week. 'I'll bet city people would get a kick out of being able to milk a cow themselves,' Johnson thought. 'I could charge them by the amount of time, and they could keep the milk they get.'

It'll never work, the nay sayers told him. It only takes a few minutes to milk a cow, they quickly pointed out. You'll never make a dime.

But Johnson did it anyways. What happen next surprised even him.

The city folks loved the idea. They came in droves. But when they sat

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down at the cow and started trying to milk her, nothing came out. Being city folks, they didn't know how to do it. One cow could be milked all day, netting far more in fees than she would have commanded in milk.

The point, Peter, is this. There is a big difference between information and knowledge. The only way you can turn one into the other is through the application of it. Knowledge only comes from experience. So you can sell your milk, which is what most people do. Or you can give your milk away, as Farmer Johnson did, and sell the experience of getting it.

What's it going to be, Peter?

Lesson Forty-Five:

Tricks to Avoiding Committees

MY FRIEND DOMINIC IS UTTERLY UNEMPLOYABLE. He's terrifically smart, insightful, funny and well-educated, but what continually gets him fired from every job he gets is his inability to restrain from telling the truth.

"This woman I work with—Kathy—is a complete moron," he tells me in his booming voice, thrashing his arms in exasperation. Dominic is like my two-year-old, his enthusiasm cannot be contained by mortals. "During a brainstorming meeting—which I hate, anyways—she throws out these useless ideas. Not just one, but terrible idea after terrible idea. I mean, remarkably bad. Unforgivable. Everyone in the room is trying to ignore her and just push through, but she won't relent. Finally I say, very politely, 'Kathy, your suggestions are not helping us.' She shoots back, 'No idea is a bad idea when you are brainstorming.' So then I say, 'Why is it only the truly stupid who say that?' I think I crossed the line because after that they fired me. Turns out Kathy filed a complaint.

"It's OK, I made sure I had a good severance package when I took the job."

Dominic has developed a brilliant formula for gauging the collective intelligence of a committee:

"Take the lowest IQ in the group, divide that number by the amount of committee members and you have the Committee IQ. The more people, the worse the group," he explains.

I think he's on to something.

Good marketing—hell, good business—requires intelligent and occa-

sionally risky decisions. It takes a bit of the maverick spirit to say, “Screw what everyone else is doing. If they’re going left, we’re going right. If they’re going down, we’re going up.”

Rarely will a committee take this kind of collective risk.

I will often tell clients, “We can do good work for you, or lousy work. The cost is the same, but it is completely up to you.” What I mean is that for marketing to be effective, it must be interesting. You can’t bore someone into buying from you.

Having the courage to make decisions against the grain will always be tough. And while sometimes those decisions will fail, the successes will more than make up for it.

Did you know that a committee of America’s best advertising and programming reps unanimously concluded that the Charlie Brown Christmas Special—the longest-running cartoon special in history, airing every year since its debut in 1965—would fail dismally because it had no laugh track, used amateur voice actors and had an obscure jazz soundtrack?

As it turned out, the debut was seen in more than 15 million homes, capturing nearly half of the possible audience. It won critical acclaim as well as an Emmy Award for Outstanding Children’s Program and a Peabody Award for excellence in programming.

Imagine if the head of the network had listened to that committee.

If you’re not sure whether you’re making good decisions, I know a great guy who needs a job. I guarantee he’ll tell you the truth.

Fear is contagious. Beware of committees.

Lesson Forty-Six:

You're More Creative Than You Think

I'VE SAT THROUGH MORE "BRAINSTORMING" sessions than I care to remember and I'm convinced that most of them are a complete waste of time. The reason for this is that most people misunderstand the concept of creativity.

My job is to be creative. And I can tell you, the creative process is not coming up with as many ideas as possible, but rather the refinement of a single concept into an unexpected conclusion.

The unexpected is what makes work engaging, delightful, exciting. It's what makes something "creative". If you look at the great artists, their work is almost always single-minded.

Everyone knows a Picasso when they see it. While his style changed several times during his career, Picasso went through periods that were deeply consistent variations on a single theme. I suspect that his work was a personal working-through of an idea. He painted again and again until he felt his idea was fully flushed out. Hemingway had a specific style of writing that never changed. Emily Carr painted those same trees again and again. No one would accuse these artists of lacking creativity.

The golden rule of brainstorming is that no idea is a bad idea. While this is a nice sentiment, it's not true. There are lots of bad ideas.

Effective brainstorming is done by defining the goal prior to beginning. How else can you determine whether an idea is a good one?

Brainstorming can lead to magical and never before considered conclusions. But like Emily Carr's trees, the idea needs to be built on a solid goal. And then refined and refined and refined.

Creativity is a muscle. Use it and it gets stronger, but don't and it will stay weak and useless.

Lesson Forty-Seven:

Snap the Elastic

I LOVED THAT SLINGSHOT.

The summer just before I turned twelve, no empty can, tree stump, or wayward fern leaf was safe from its wrath.

I'd scoured the woods for weeks, searched for just the right tree branch that formed a perfect "Y." Not too brittle, not too weak, and perfectly symmetrical. Some kids I heard of had sent away for mail order slingshots, made of steel and medical rubber. But there was no way my mother would have allowed me to buy one. Plus, that was cheating. A real slingshot should be crafted by the hand that wields it, I thought.

When I found just the right branch I crafted a handle on its base out of tightly wound string, and carved guides into the wood to hold the rubber strips of bicycle tire which I attached to a square patch of leather liberated from an old belt of my father's.

That slingshot lasted all summer, and shot strong and true.

And now, when I meet with small businesses I wish I still had that slingshot. They could use it.

You see, it taught me an important principle. The farther you pull the elastic back, the harder the rock hits the can. Your prospect is the can, your salesman is the rock, and the way you sell is the slingshot.

When you only pull back a few inches, the rock doesn't strike the can hard enough to make it move. But if you rear back, that can goes flying.

How sold is your customer before you ask them to buy? 10% of the way? 50% or way? 110% of the way sold?

You pull that elastic by building up a reputation of service and quality; by consistent, repetitious and irresistible advertising; by making a unique and powerful promise to your customer, in a sea of sameness; by finding

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ways to knock the socks off your existing customers, so that your prospective ones are sold 110% of the way before they've even bought.

And when you let go, that rock sales like a bullet and strikes the can dead on.

How can you snap *your* elastic?

Lesson Forty-Eight:

Have You Bought Caviar Recently?

TRY YOUR BEST. Be the best you can be. Being the best is how you achieve success, right?

Wrong. Most people don't really want the best.

When I go out for dinner, I don't want the best. Even if it's a nice dinner, I'd be very happy with good. I don't want the best car, I don't want the best house, or the best TV, or the best stereo, or the best computer or the best of anything.

Rolex makes the best watch, Rolls Royce the best car, Armani the best suits. I'll never buy any of those things, even if money wasn't an object. The best is excessive, high maintenance and not worth the cost.

No, most of us don't want the best. It's not important to us. In fact, I don't think I've ever truly wanted the best of anything.

I just want good. What I don't want is average, and I won't tolerate bad.

So if you think about it like that, business is not that hard. You don't have to be the best, you don't even have to be great. All you have to avoid is being average. Average is right down the middle. It's wishy-washy, non-committal, goes unnoticed, dull, grey, plain, blah. It's nothing in particular. Average is boring.

How can you be good? The best way to start is by defining average. Look at your industry. The highest quality level of service and innovation shared by 50% or more of your competitors is the average mark. Anything below that is bad. Anything above is good.

Now tell yourself, your staff and your customers that you'll never be satisfied with average again and challenge yourself to better the average by

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100%. If the average turn around time in your business is two days, do it in one. If the average product lasts 5 years, make sure yours lasts 10. 100% improvement over average gets you to good. Good is money well spent.

Once you're standing from a position of good, and surveying your competitors and their pitiful average, you'll realize just how bad average is. Forget about being the best. If most customers will settle for average, imagine what good would do for your business.

Lesson Forty-Nine:

Ralph's Personal Guru

THIS IS THE WAY RALPH TELLS IT:

Ralph and Bill had been struggling for months, ever since opening the doors, selling computer training to anyone who would buy it. Bill walked into Ralph's cramped office.

Bill started with: "You're not going to like this, Ralph."

What now? Ralph thought. He'd been busy that day sending out flyers, trying to get people in the door. And when they came, he was the one teaching them. At night he'd sometimes ask himself, "Is this what being in business is all about?" But Ralph persevered, though he didn't know for how long. "What am I not going to like?" he asked Bill.

"We have to stop selling for tomorrow, and start selling for three months from now."

Bill paused to let it sink in. Bill was responsible for marketing the business, Ralph for running it.

A pained look stretched across Ralph's face. "WHAT?!? We can't afford to do that," he exclaimed. Cash was, of course, squeaky tight.

"Here's the thing," Bill said. "We can keep doing what we're doing, and slowly we'll grow. After about three years we'll peak and then after that sales will start to go down, and continue to go down. No amount of advertising or sending flyers will save it."

"How is selling for three months from now going to change that?" Ralph asked.

"I haven't told you the second thing you're not going to like." Bill

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smiled, his eyes twinkling. “You need to create an actual curriculum. Right now we are just computer tutors, we need to become teachers.”

“But that’s a lot of work. I don’t have time to do that.”

Bill gave him a consolatory pat on the back. “There’s good news. Do it my way and in five years we will have a thriving business that makes a real difference in the lives of the students who attend here. Every session will be full, and graduating students will shower us with praise.”

“...and that’s how it happened,” Ralph finished saying. “Nearly five years to the day, we have a solid business, enrollment is always around 90%. We get positive feedback from the students, and employers are looking to us for qualified graduates. What Bill told me was true.”

“The key to success was to build a better offering, not lose our focus, and work for tomorrow, not today. Thank goodness I had Bill.”

Could you use a Bill?

Lesson Fifty:

What Business Are You In?

WHEN I ASK MOST BUSINESS PEOPLE TO DESCRIBE their business, they talk about it as an extension of what they sell. It makes perfect sense. Right?

A company that makes software is a software company.

A company that provides plumbing services, are Plumbers.

A person who sells accounting is an Accountant.

Wrong. Your business is not really about what you sell at all. In fact, what you sell is completely secondary to the true nature of your business. The product or service your business delivers is simply the means of exchanging the thing that you really sell.

You don't believe me. I can see you shaking your head.

Here's why. There are many, many, many companies just like yours that sell, more or less, the identical thing you sell. How can you possibly expect the customer to differentiate between you and your competitor if all you can offer them is a lousy category?

So, that's not it.

The thing you really sell is that unique, point-of-difference that makes your business special. So the question is, what's special about your business? What do you do that's unique or interesting or novel or against convention?

Whatever that is, it is the thing that you truly sell.

Are you friendly?

Revolutionary.

Expert.

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Cool.

Intelligent.

Technological.

Kooky.

Caring.

Worldly.

Is your approach radically different from your competitors? Are your hours better? Your turn around faster?

There needs to be something wonderfully unique to get in the game, otherwise your business is just another one of those dozens of dreary companies, selling the same thing for, more or less, the same price. And why would you want to be that?

Sometimes businesses try to get around the fact that they are the same, by claiming a difference that isn't really there. "The best service in the industry," they say. But, here's the catch: That special thing that you are, that unique point-of-difference, you actually have to be that thing. You can't sell a lie. If you don't give the best service, you can't claim to. If you're not fast, you'll be found out.

Liars are bad people. No one spends their money with bad people more than once.

To achieve difference you must nurture it in halls and offices, and hearts of your employees. Nurture kookiness, or loyalty, or cool, or expert, or revolutionary, or whatever it is that separates you from the rest of that aimless pack.

Your business is not defined by the product you sell, or the service you provide. The thing you truly sell exists in the heart and imagination. So what yours?

Lesson Fifty-One:

Bike-riding 101

I'M TRYING TO PERSUADE ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES that her graphic design values are hurting her clients' businesses.

She's not buying it.

"Surely you'll agree that most creative work is reactive," I say. "A designer is hired to solve a problem they cannot solve. When the client says 'brochure,' he is really saying 'more business.' Designers don't know how to do that. They only know how to make things attractive."

"So they probe around and try to find 'the big idea' to build on. 'You'll be the people company,' they tell the client. And build around that with images of people and cooperation. But the client isn't really a people company. He knows it and the designer knows it. It is just baseless, unsubstantive puffery."

"What that client really needs is a sound positioning platform to build on. A tangible reason why his prospects should spend their money with his business, and not elsewhere."

"But good design is good business," she interrupts.

"Sure it is. But not nearly as good as a relevant, persuasive, compelling reason to buy."

"You are talking about marketing," she says. "What credentials do you have to give marketing advice?"

"I have no credentials," I confess. "I dropped out of college, then university, then college again. I'm a terrible employee. I've been fired numerous times. I have the opposite of credentials."

Then I tell her about my four-year-old daughter.

Tristan learned to ride a two-wheeler last weekend. I took off her train-

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ing wheels, and we went to an empty parking lot. I had her practice coasting, to learn balance, by pushing herself along with her feet on the ground.

After a few minutes of that, I held her seat and ran along beside her for a minute, let go, and she was riding a bike. First try.

She hasn't stopped since. She's getting better every day, turning, starting, stopping. I'm so proud.

But Tristan is unqualified to ride. She has no credentials, no formal training. It doesn't matter to her. She can ride a bike.

Then I say: "I go toe-to-toe with smart, successful, aggressive, leaders.

They pay me to give them sound advise, and to create advertising that will increase business. If I wasn't credible they'd spot me as a phoney, and eat me alive. I'd be out of business."

Don't mistake credentials for ability. The wealthiest man in the world is a drop out too.

I didn't end up convincing her. She has a solid business and is living the dream of many designers. I don't always expect to persuade the first time.

She'll come around.

Lesson Fifty-Two:

Crowded

I have a slight agoraphobic tendency which comes out when I'm around crowds.

It's something about the mass of sameness swarming together that causes my palms to sweat and my body to tense up.

My wife can tell you lengths I will go to avoid crowds. If we show up at a restaurant that has a line up, I'll refuse to wait. We've skipped movies, left stores and travelled dozens of kilometres out of the way to avoid them.

I don't mind being in front of a crowd, but don't stick me in the middle of one.

I think it's the anonymity of it that puts me on edge. And it's the reason I can't understand why many business people insist on following them.

I met a travel agent last year, who asked my advice. "All my competitors advertise in the Travel section of the newspaper, should I run an ad too?" he asked.

"No way!" I told him. It is impossible for any business to stand out in the middle of a crowd. A crowd is where you go to blend in. Crowds are where people hide.

The only good spot in a crowd is in front of it, leading a crowd.

We have a marketing principle we use in my business. It's an exercise we have clients do. You can try it too.

List the common practices within your industry. Where do people congregate? Where do all your competitors advertise? What are the conventions? Make a list of all the usual places.

Good, now that is your "Places to avoid" list.

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Make a second list. This is your opportunity list. Brainstorm and write down every unconventional place or way you could advertise or promote your business.

Here's a simple example: Every Christmas I get a ton of cards from people I do business with, and people who want to do business with me. They go on the wall for a while, all together, and then I throw them out in January.

But every Groundhog day I receive a single card, from an illustrator. He is lodged squarely in my mind and whenever I can, I send him work. He's my first choice.

He avoided the crowd and was able stand out from it.

How could you avoid the crowd in your business?

Lesson Fifty-Three:

I've Tried it and it Doesn't Work

"I'VE TRIED ADVERTISING AND IT DOESN'T WORK FOR MY BUSINESS."

"I've tried sending out sales letters, but it doesn't work for my business."

"I've tried brochures, websites, sales packages, promotions, bus boards, flyers, handouts, and everything else under the sun, but it doesn't work for my business."

Are businesses so different that what works for one will not work for others? Because basically there are only two types of businesses: Those that sell to the general public, and those that sell to other businesses.

And there is only one kind of consumer, he universally asks the same question: What's in it for me?

Now, I've heard all sorts of excuses from business people telling me that advertising does not work for their businesses. "I tried it and it doesn't work," I'm often told.

I'm always reminded of a conversation I overheard in an Italian deli. Two stout men were sitting in a booth discussing weight loss. One said to the other, as he stuffed an enormous meat sandwich into his mouth: "I went to the gym once, but it didn't work for me."

One failed attempt does not prove anything except ease of defeat.

There are two factors that determine the success of any advertising or promotion: Audience and appeal.

You can say the wrong thing to the wrong people.

You can say the right thing to the wrong people.

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You can say the wrong thing to the right people.

Any of these will fail. There is only one way to succeed:

Say the right thing (appeal) to the right person (audience).

Finding the right audience is much easier than finding the right appeal. Describe the person most likely to buy and go where they go. There's your audience.

On appeal, John Caples, a giant of the advertising business and 50 year veteran, writes "There is no element in an advertisement more important than the appeal."

Appeal is the subtle language of the heart. It speaks from the point of view of the buyer.

For the business that engages in random acts of advertising, it's no surprise that they fail. Failing has always been easier than succeeding. But the real tragedy is that they do not discover why they fail.

Learn from Thomas Edison. From 1878 to 1880 he worked on at least three thousand different ways of creating the light bulb. He experienced a lot of failure. But he only needed to succeed once to forever have light.

Lesson Fifty-Four:

The Australian Gardener

THE LOWEST POINT FOR JIM WAS TWO WEEKS before the Christmas of 1982. He was thirty years old, \$30,000 in debt and a failure. He'd just lost his house and been swindled out of the meagre business he'd managed to scrape together.

He could of given up. He almost did, but then he said the same thing he'd said to himself a thousand times, while pushing a lawnmower on a green stretch of grass in the Australian suburbs, "Put one foot in front of another, keep on taking the next small step and the job gets done."

It's a good thing he did, or what would the 1,600 current "Jim's Mowing" franchises have done?

So he started again, with \$24, a new bride, and the first of many hard lessons under his belt.

Maybe you've never heard of Jim Penman, but I'll bet you've seen his face. He's the bearded man in the "Jims Mowing" logo and he's in the classified section of newspapers all over the world.

Last week, I promised you the story of a business that escaped the box. Jim is that example.

He was right in there with us. Elbowing inside his box, fighting for a bigger piece of turf, trying to build a business and finding "success" elusive.

Then he discovered his opportunity.

It was a few years later, he'd learned how to attract customers, and sell them off to independent operators. So instead of mowing lawns, he'd create and sell small lawn mowing businesses. But it wasn't his real goal. He needed to build a franchise. But not just any franchise, one that gave fran-

chisee's "an offer too good to refuse."

The box opened up, he stepped out and reinvented the franchise.

Instead of making the franchise agreement benefit the company, he made it heavily favour the operator, surmising that to get quality people, you needed to give them a quality offer. He guaranteed franchisee's an income. If they didn't make a minimum weekly wage from the business, he would cover the difference. He treated his franchisees like customers. They could leave the franchise and go independent at any time, taking the customers with them. He ensured they had a proper advertising budget and created a system that virtually guaranteed success. He designed an agreement that was unfair to him, but was too good to refuse for franchisees.

He charged nothing for the franchises except a modest ongoing fee for advertising and office support. How did he make money? He didn't and he didn't intend to. He wanted the new franchisees to make the money and lots of it. Once the system was proven, people would be eager to buy in. That would provide the capital for further expansion. That's when he'd make money.

Jim learned this lesson from Ray Kroc, who had done the same thing when he came upon the McDonald brothers' hamburger stand in 1954. Ray was selling milkshake mixers for a living. Years later, when some of his franchisees had become millionaires, the mixers were still his only income. The franchise fees did not cover the cost. But success begets success. Once he proved the franchise worked, it drew more demand allowing him to eventually charge over a million dollars per single franchise.

It worked for Jim too. Almost twenty years after stepping out of his box, Jim single-handedly created the largest lawn mowing franchise in the world.

Lesson Fifty-Five:

The Difficult Customer

THE TRULY DIFFICULT CUSTOMER -- the pure jerk — is a rare genetic anomaly.

He was born that way. And he has the deep misfortune of living that way his whole life. When you run into him, take solace in the fact that being him is much worse than dealing with him.

Every other difficult customer is the result of a misunderstanding between her and you. Her version of reality and your version are separate and disharmonious. So that angry, irrational person yelling at you over the phone, or red-faced and spitting curses at you on the other side of the counter, is really a nice, ordinary person at the end of her rope.

I have a personal principle that describes this phenomenon: Reality is subjective, but perception absolute.

Human beings lack the conceptual ability to see objectively. Reality, for us, is just an idea and a set of physical laws. It doesn't really exist. Our perception of reality is the thing that guides us. It's a narrow, biased and flawed interpretation. But it's all we've got.

I was going to tell you a story of one of my difficult clients, but then I realized I'm a much more difficult person than any of my clients. As this story will show.

I had stopped to the grocery store to get treats for Jess and I. We have three small children and very little adult time together. Many nights someone has an earache or bad dream or just can't sleep and invades our adult time. That night we were determined to bunker down in front of the TV and enjoy a movie uninterrupted by little people. I'd picked out popcorn, soda, and expensive, indulgent chocolates.

I went to pay for my purchase.

"Do you have a Club Card?" the cashier asked.

"Yes," I told her, "but not on me. My wife carries it."

"What is your telephone number?" I told her and she typed it into her computerized register. "Your number isn't in the computer. If you had a club card, you would save \$4.38 on your purchase," she said.

"I do have a card. In fact, I've signed up for two cards and neither seem to ever make it into your system." This had happened before and every other time the cashier had taken my word for it and given me the discount. I waited for her to do it, but she wouldn't.

Are you calling me I liar, I thought, starring at her.

After a minute I said, "I'm not paying full price, I have two club cards."

"You need to carry your card with you. There is nothing I can do," she said.

There was a pause as she waited for me to pay, then I said "Forget it. I'm leaving." And I stormed out.

When I got to the parking lot I was red hot. I had a nice, relaxing night planned. They were not going to ruin it for me. I work hard. I'm a good father. I have two club cards. I deserve my bloody discount!

I paused at the car and looked in my wallet in one last desperate hope. The Club Card was there!

Snacks were saved, our night was saved, the kids would stay asleep.

That cashier isn't going to ruin my night, I said to myself with resolve.

I'll show her who's the liar.

I stormed back into the store and marched up to the same cashier. "I found my card," I said, handing it to her in victory. "I'm not a liar now, am I?" I spat rhetorically.

"I'm sorry I don't understand," she said.

"You wouldn't give me the discount. Every other time I've come in the store, the cashier gives me a discount on a card she keeps in her drawer. You wouldn't."

"We're not allowed to do that anymore. It's a new rule." And then at that moment our two separate realities collided. I understood her, she

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understood me. The dysfunction was resolved. And now I felt petty and stupid.

I paid her and left.

We are all somebody else's bad customers at one time or another. And it is almost always because of poor communication. The next time you come across a difficult customer, could you take a peek into his reality?

Lesson Fifty-Six:

The Perfection of Others

"Why do so many clients seem like corporate teenagers, all wanting to discover their unique identity while desperately wanting to fit in with their peers?"

— Bob Roach

TWO YEARS AGO I SAVED A COPY OF THIS QUOTE from a posting to a discussion board on advertising and graphic design. It so perfectly articulated a common phenomenon in clients that I wanted to write about it.

I emailed the author and asked his permission to quote it, which he gladly gave me (thanks Bob!). But I was never able to do anything with it.

So I saved it, until the right opportunity presented. Here it is:

Last week, while meeting with a client, we disagreed about an advertising strategy. Frequently, I will challenge clients by asking questions. Why are you sending that message? What do you hope to accomplish? How will you know if it works? That sort of thing.

In this case, the client wanted to create an image ad -- big picture, artistic layout, very few words, and the client's slogan. I suggested we do the opposite, a sales ad -- lots of copy, outline the benefits, raise and resolve objections, with a clear call to action.

I couldn't understand why she was fighting me. I'm trying to make her more money, after all. We argued for a while, neither wanting to relent.

Finally it came out. She had reviewed several of her large competitor's ads, and "that is how they do it" (in her words). Hence, we should do it that way too.

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In the face of uncertainty, she wanted to defer to the perfection of others. As if duplicating someone else success would result in her own.

Never mind that image ads are expensive, non quantitative, and superficial.

And that 'perfection' or secret knowledge in others is a false god. Her logic was clear: The large competitors does it, so we should too if we want to be like them.

You can see the mind of the metaphoric teenager at work.

When Bob wrote of "corporate teenagers...wanting to discover their unique identity while desperately wanting to fit in with their peers," he nailed it.

I've said this before, but it bears repeating: Nothing good happens in the middle of a crowd.

We all remember when we were teenagers; insecure, frightened, desperate to fit in. Thank goodness it only last a few years, and we can start to become centred, confident adults. That happens when we realize that other people don't really have it any better than us. They share the same stresses, obstacles, fears, hopes and dreams. They have access to the same information. We are all hopelessly similar.

Here's what I want you to do. If you feel the insecure teenager in you acting up, send him to his room and ground him on the spot. You will be doing it for his own good.

Lesson Fifty-Seven:

What's the Big Idea?

THE AGENCY FOLKS OF THE WORLD would have you believe that the 'big idea' is the answer to all your problems.

The 'big idea' will cut through the clutter, they tell you. Your message will be seen by your market. People will sit up and take notice of our 'big idea,' they say.

Don't listen to them because they are misled. The opportunity is not in the 'big idea.' The opportunity is to cut through the BS and look deeply into the soul of your customer. That's where the solution begins.

The opportunity exists when you begin to ask difficult questions of your business: What is our promise and do we really deliver on it? How can we improve our service 100%? What are our customers really buying from us?

The opportunity exists in discovering the unclaimed marketing turf you can grab and ruthlessly protecting it from the competition.

All the 'big idea' will do is set an expectation in your customer that you can't live up to. With the 'big idea' you make the sale once. But after your customer leaves disappointed, confused, wondering how you got their money, you can forget about making a second one.

My friend, Gregg is a savvy, very experienced marketing consultant. Earlier in his career, before he knew better, he helped several lousy restaurant go out of business simply by doing his job well.

"Nothing will kill a bad restaurant quicker than good advertising," he tells me. You can get people to come in once, and once they discover the food is bad, they don't come back and they tell their friends not to go either.

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I want you to put your guard up to those misinformed creative types. They sing like sirens from the water, calling you like lonely sailors to jump into the water and embrace them. "Your message sing so sweetly," they will call to you. "It will tantalize and inspire your customers," they promise.

Don't listen because you may find yourself sharing the fate of those sailors, in a watery cage with so many other 'big ideas' and distant, fleeting claims.

Lesson Fifty-Eight:

Two-Minutes

THIS WILL ONLY TAKE TWO-MINUTES. But you have to stop what you are doing and concentrate for the full two-minutes.

Also, I should note that this is more applicable to service companies than those that sell products. That said, product companies will benefit too.

If you are not ready now, put this email aside and come back to it when you are ready.

OK?

Good. Let's begin.

We are going to do a very short exercise. You'll need a pen and a piece of paper. I'm going to ask you three questions, write down your answers in point form.

Question #1: What are at least three reasons why I should buy your product/service?

Question #2: What are at least three reasons why I should choose your competition's product/service over yours?

Question #3: What are at least three reasons why I should just do it myself?

Are you done?

You've just identified the competition gap in your business. The questions I've just asked you are the same questions customers are asking themselves every day. Many times we get lulled into thinking that our competitors are the other companies in our industry. But that's wrong. Customers are competitors too. Because often it is easier or less hassle or

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safer to do it ourselves than trust in the services of others.

If you could not give me a reason to buy from you that was different than your competitors AND sufficiently compelling that I should not do it myself, you need to do some work.

How can you improve your service? How can you differentiate? How can you make it easier to buy? How can you create such a powerful value proposition that your customers cannot find the reason they are looking for to say no?

My two-minutes are up. What did you discover?

Lesson Fifty-Nine:

All About You

I KNOW YOU. OR AT LEAST, I KNOW YOUR KIND.

Tell me if I'm getting it right. Every day you come into work thinking, "Today is the day I get organized."

But then a staff member comes into your office with a petty emergency, and a supplier calls with a delivery problem. Then a salesman gets through your line of defence and keeps you on the phone for 20 minutes. And then a dozen other little things chip away at your day, until you look up at the clock and it's quitting time.

Then you survey your business, office, store, whatever the size, and think "How the heck did I get here? How did some idea I had 2, 5, 20 years ago, end up with all these people doing all these things?"

"And why can't I get anything done?"

You put in an hour just to make sure you can say you accomplished something today. You'll go home, think about work, while trying not to let on to your spouse that you're thinking about it.

Go to bed, wake up the next morning and say "Today is the day I get organized."

You are in the middle of it. The centre of the storm. And all around are tornado circles consuming people and time and energy. Where ever you go it follows. Always in the centre.

The tornado is made up of three things: Your life, your business, and your customers.

Your life is struggling to control your business. It's all consuming. Your business is struggling to understand and respond to your customers, (who you don't really understand). And your customers couldn't give a damn

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about your life, because they are thinking about their own. Where does that leave your life?

Everything is out of whack. But hear this. What if you could tame the tornado? What if you could develop a deep understanding of your customer and then engineer your business to do the things that will make that customer pleased. Would that help?

Well that is marketing. Doing things that make customers happy. And doing those things for more people, more often.

Your problem is that you're confined in the tiny box that is called 'The way it is supposed to be done.' This box is made up of all the rules, procedures, beliefs, values, and perceptions that make up how you do what you do.

It is created by all the people in your business, in your industry, in the trade magazines you read, in the discussions and debates that rage between industry pundits. The box is the rules all these people collectively live under for no reason other than it has always been so.

For them the box is invisible, until you become aware of it. Then suddenly it becomes so clear.

So your first step is to see your box. Join me, won't you?

Lesson Sixty:

How to See the Box

A YOUNG COUPLE GETS MARRIED, and settles comfortably in domestic life. Every Christmas the couple hosts a family dinner. The husband notices his wife has an unusual method of cooking the roast. She starts by cutting both ends off before she puts in into the oven.

At the time he doesn't think anything of it. But every year she prepares it the same way. Finally the husband asks, "Why do you cut off the ends when you prepare the roast?"

"Because my mother does it that way," she replies matter-of-factly.

Now the husband is curious so he asks his mother-in-law why she cuts off the ends.

"Because my mother did it that way. She taught me," she replies.

As luck would have it, the elderly grandmother is still alive, and at that very Christmas dinner.

The husband approaches her and asks, "Grandmother. Why do you cut off both ends of the roast before putting it into the oven?"

She looks at him, and he can see in her eyes she is thinking back. "When we first moved from the old country, we couldn't afford a very large apartment, and we had an even smaller oven. I couldn't fit the roast in the oven unless I cut off both ends."

Do you see the box now? Doing what you do because it has always been done that way.

Let me give you another example:

My friend Bruce has a computer store where I buy most of my computer things. Computer retailers exist on extremely thin margins. It's a tough business that requires lean, and efficient operations.

My company goes through a fair amount of consumable items—cartridges, special inkjet paper for colour printing, writable CD's —that sort of thing. Inevitably when we run out at a bad time, midway through printing an important proof, or with a deadline pending. So we call the store and have them rush courier the item to us. I don't really care about the price because my need is immediate.

For years I've told Bruce he is losing valuable profit in that courier cost. It's going somewhere else. What I really want is you to deliver to me. That would be great. You could even charge me more, I tell him. Your margin would increase because you would satisfy a different need.

But computer stores aren't in the delivery business, he says. Then I've got to hire a delivery guy, I don't know if other customers would use it, I've got to keep my prices competitive... And he relays a bunch of reasons why it isn't a good idea.

Whenever I see him I keep on it. When are you going start delivering, I ask.

He's starting to listen. In the spring he told me, he will begin offering a free pick-up and delivery service for computer repairs and maintenance. I have no doubt this step out of the box, will greatly increase his revenue and success.

Seeing the box can be as simple as looking at it from the customer's vantage point. You'll be amazed at what opportunity shows itself.

I have an exercise for you to do. List for me, the top three complaints your customers have: Too slow, too expensive, don't deliver, don't know when the delivery will arrive, no guarantee, poor exchange/return policy, whatever they are, write them down.

Now above your list write the word: Opportunities.

Those complaints define a wonderful opportunity for you to take a giant step out of your box. If your customers complain that you do it in five days and he wants it in three, do it in two. If your customer complains about your hours, extend them.

Remember if it is a complaint you are hearing, your competition is hearing it to.

What is the opportunity you are missing?

Lesson Sixty-One:

The Pattern of Winners

THERE HAS BEEN A CROWD AROUND HERE RECENTLY. It seems to me like a lot of new people have come into my life. I find these things come in waves. A big one just hit.

I like meeting new business people. I am fascinated by the stories of what they do, how they got where they are, and where it is they are going.

Every one of my clients are small business people. And I've met a lot of them, from single consultants to presidents of high-growth, multi-million dollar businesses.

I've noticed a pattern. There are basically two kinds of business people, and the size of a business is not an indicator -- Those that are lazy and those that are not.

A few years ago I was courting a potential client. This company provided environmental consulting services, had twenty or so employees and reasonable sales. They were owned by a much larger engineering firm who's mandate was for them to grow. The president and I met several times. He always surrounded himself with lots of his staff, and we went over the same ground again and again. How much it was going to cost, the strategy, and the marketing process we would use.

Finally we agreed on the work to be done. But two days later he emailed me to say the job was cancelled because the owners didn't want to spend the money. It was a cop out, and a cowardly one since he didn't even do it over the telephone.

In retrospect, I realized he never intended to buy anything. He went through the motions, initially hoping I would provide an easy answer. And when it became apparent to him that no easy answer was available, he

retreated, seeking one elsewhere.

Instead of spending time developing his own vision of where his company needed to go and the steps it would take to get there, he shopped around for someone else to provide it.

(They went out of business shortly thereafter, chiefly, I believe, due to the laziness of their leader.)

Conversely, I had to tell a great client and friend that his customers were unhappy, but that it probably wasn't his fault. Even though he had built a respectable business doing a few million in sales a year, the nature of the business model was such that there would always be conflict between his clients interests and his own. To fix it he would have to radically alter his business model.

A week later, he called me down to his office and outlined a revised business model that took half an hour to explain, but brilliantly solved the problems I had identified.

He had laid awake each night rolling the problem over and over in his head until he found the solution. When it came to him at 4 am, he jumped out of bed and sketched the whole thing out.

Your success, or lack of it, has much less to do with your intelligence, education, ability, connections, or experience than it does with the effort you put into whatever it is you do.

Winners work harder. And whether you win or not is completely up to you.

Lesson Sixty-Two:

How to Improve your Marketing Results

THE DIRECT RESPONSE MARKETERS SAY, "Image isn't important, it's all in the appeal of the copy." Ad agencies and graphic designers tell us, "Image is everything. It's all about perception." They are both wrong, here is why:

95% of advertising doesn't work. And the advertising that does work often fails to make the sale. The reason for this becomes apparent when you look deeply into the emotional world of your customer.

We all walk around living our lives with the utmost concern about only one thing: ourselves. Our own worries, stresses, beliefs, and dreams. Self-interest is the one true constant you will find in every consumer.

If your advertising does not engage the self-interest of a prospect with an immediate, actionable, irresistible message it will fail to generate any substantial returns. That's why direct response advertising always outpulls image advertising. Direct response is all about the prospect, image advertising is all about the advertiser. Who do you think the reader is more interested in?

But here is where it changes. The moment you have engaged the interest of the prospect, the moment his mind and heart have opened up to the idea that he will benefit from what you are selling, then it stops being about his self-interest and it becomes all about you. Who we buy from is a reflection of who we are. To that customer your business is a reflection on him. Your credibility, your appeal and the likelihood that you will deliver as promised. To complete the sale you must pass the critical judgment of your prospect.

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Now, whether you win or lose the sale is all about perception. It could be as simple as the business card you hand him, or the sign on your door, or the uniform you wear, or the logo on your letterhead, or the sales material you hand out, or the presentation slides you show. Most likely, it is a combination of these things.

Many marketing people cannot reconcile these two intentions. They get entrenched in a point of view and cling to their side of the fence. But here is the truth: Image doesn't work in advertising, but image is critical to completing the sale. If you view the sale as anything less than a two step process of generating the lead, and then converting it, you are over-simplifying the process, and will experience more failure than you need to.

Follow these principles and I guarantee you will see dramatic improvements in your sales.

Lesson Sixty-Three:

Stealing from the Poor

IT ALWAYS SHOCKS ME WHEN a small business owner will rationalize his advertising by saying, "We look at what the competitors do and copy them."

Now, I'm all in favour of stealing ideas. In fact, I'd encourage it. There are no original ideas under the sun, as the saying goes. So whoever it is you are stealing from, stole from someone else. But, for goodness sake, be smart about it.

Taking the ideas of a competitor is like robbing the poor. It is cruel and there isn't anything worth taking.

The real prize is in making a careful study of those who are successful. They are the ones you should be eyeing. That's where to find the good stuff.

But, don't be tricked by thinking biggest is best. Most companies got big on the shoulders of great leaders who are long since departed. They are now run by bureaucracies and managers. The methods of big companies are vastly different than those simply wanting to get big.

You will not rise up by emulating them.

Also, do not look within your industry. Industries are filled with debates, agendas and information that is completely irrelevant to your customer.

A local restaurant, The Macaroni Grill, is doing a brisk business (which I'm sure is making someone very rich) largely by stealing the ideas of supermarkets. When you order an entrée your waiter will up-sell you a \$1.99 starter salad, which is a twist on the point-of-sale impulse purchase. A bottle of wine is strategically placed on every table and is sold by the inch, allowing patrons to buy exactly the amount they want. It is no dif-

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ferent than the bulk goods bins at your supermarket. Desserts are brought along on a platter, allowing the customer to select one on the spot, which is just a form of merchandising.

They know how to steal good ideas that better the customers experience and increase profitability. What can you do?

Lesson Sixty-Four:

Take Me Out to the Ballgame

IT'S BEDTIME. In honor of the opening week of baseball season, I sing a gentle, lullaby version of "Take me out to the ballgame" to my son Toby.

On weekends I sport a Seattle Mariners baseball cap. I've kept it on all off-season as a small vigil to the coming season. The winter is long and lonely without the crack of the bat and daily update of statistics. (In baseball they measure everything. I've found it to be good marketing advice as well.)

Occasionally someone will strike up a conversation about my team. In fact, just the other day as I waited in line up a fellow customer asked, "What do you think of those Mariners?" pointing to my hat. I could see he was just making conversation to pass the time. But I couldn't help myself as I launched into an in-depth analysis. (They've upgraded in left field, and third base. They lost Sele but I don't think he was a gamer. I think Baldwin will surprise some people if he stays healthy. But what will be key is if Boone can repeat last year's numbers....)

When I finished speaking I got a blank stare and a vague, "Oh yeah, I don't really follow that closely."

Passion is singular.

Unless you are a true blue baseball fan, you don't want to talk to me about it. I will bore you with useless insight and far-from-expert opinion. My wife Jess will tell you, it is horrid. But I can't help it.

When you talk about your business, are you like me when I talk about baseball?

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Do yawns abound? Do you answer questions that weren't asked? Does your knowledge get met with a blank stare and an awkward moment of disinterest?

It probably happens more often than you think. But don't feel bad. We all do it. Most often it happens when we sell. Have you ever given a prospect information he didn't ask for, and complicated his decision with choices he doesn't need?

I'll make you an offer. I will pledge to control my outburst of Mariner-trivia, and baseball enthusiasm, if you will control yours. Is it a deal?

Lesson Sixty-Five:

Next Time

BUSINESS STARTED OFF GREAT. People came from all over the neighborhood to try it. Customers were lining up, they couldn't get enough. The clink clink clink of the cash box filled her with delight.

It was her first business and it was everything she hoped for. Give the customers what they want. Take their money. Everyone is happy. It couldn't be easier, she thought.

But then business started to slow down. Sales dropped. Plummeted. It seemed to happen almost immediately. One minute it was teeming with people, the next minute completely empty. Not a soul.

At first she was patient. They'll come back, she told herself resolutely. It's just a slow spell. But then it dragged on and she started to worry.

Starting a businesses isn't easy. She had worked hard preparing hers and now it was beginning to fail.

Why won't they come? Are my prices are too high? Should I change the product? She even considered giving it away for free. But then, how would she make any money?

It wasn't a big company, in fact it was about as small as they come.

And so she began to advertise. Circling the neighborhood with flyers, practically shouting at everyone that passed. Come in, try it! It's the best you'll ever have, she yelled.

Finally, at the end of the day she gave in.

"I tired of this Daddy," she said to me. "Can we stop?"

So I helped her pack up her little lemonade stand and we counted her money.

"How did you like being in business?" I asked my little four-year-old,

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soon to be five-year-old entrepreneur.

"I liked it, but it was harder than I thought," she said, and then paused reflectively. "Next time I'll do it different."

It takes many of us a lifetime to learn that lesson.

Lesson Sixty-Six:

One Final Question

I'M CONVINCED THAT KNOWING THE ANSWERS isn't nearly as important as asking the right questions. It is only through probing, self-reflective questioning that we can really find new possibilities in our work and our world.

I'm a great question-asker. Not so much because a higher strategy is at play, but simply because I'm curious and I like to know things.

I learn by asking.

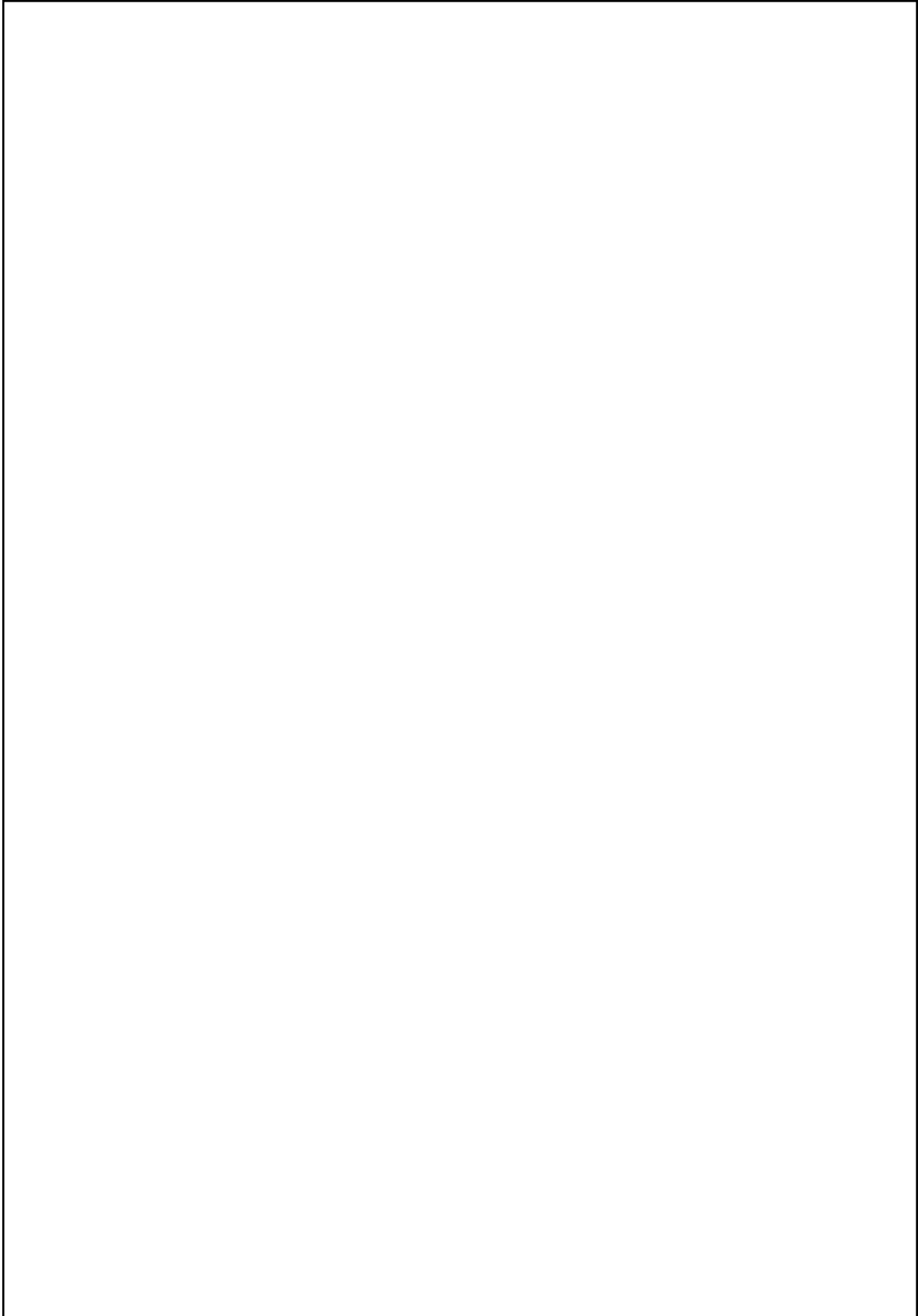
I saved this question for the last page of the book. It will change the course of your business life, if you let it. I've asked this question to my clients and myself hundreds of times. I guarantee you that the answer will give you a new resolve in your business, and a tighter focus in your life.

I'm not the first person to ask this question. It originated from some of the greatest thinkers of the world, spanning all cultures and all time. But I've used it to help business owners see beneath the surface of their businesses and customers, to unearth a deeper understanding.

Are you ready? Here it is:

Why?

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About the Author

Shane Sparks is an award winning creative director, copywriter, and marketer and president of Sparks Marketing Inc.—an advertising and marketing agency with small business clients across Canada and the US.

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