



## **A Little Less Conversation: Connecting with Customers in a Noisy World**

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### **Introduction**

*“So what’s the answer?”* I could sense that question playing on the mind of the weary-eyed executive sitting directly in front of me. I’ve picked up that same vibe during countless presentations over the past few years: *“Tell us what to do to attract and retain customers. What’s the formula? Give us the solution.”* But this time was different, much different. On this particular Thursday morning in April, I was presenting to, arguably, the most storied marketing company in the history of the world. Yes, the prophetic day had arrived. The complexity and rapid change of today’s contemporary marketplace had finally overwhelmed even the brightest minds in the biggest and best companies in America.

Yogi Berra once quipped, “The future ain’t what it used to be.” If you look beneath the surface of Yogi’s seemingly absurd aphorism, you’ll discover an insightful truth about succeeding in the 21st century marketplace. And it’s this: you can no longer benchmark and model the past in order to be successful in the future, because the future is changing too quickly and unpredictably (It ain’t what it used to be). Trying to do so will lead to your inevitable downfall, as smartly described by Professor Donald Sull in the *Harvard Business Review*: “Many leading companies plummet from the pinnacle of success to the depths of failure when market conditions change. Because they’re paralyzed? To the contrary, because they engage in too much activity of the wrong kind. Success breeds active inertia, and active inertia breeds failure.”

A head-down, plow-ahead mentality is deadly in a rapidly changing marketplace. You may believe that you know what’s happening around you, but like driving the same road to work every day, you’ve simply become hypnotized by your extremely narrow, short-term interest and unchanging point of view. Instead, realize that, like it or not, today’s shifting marketplace is like one of those car racing video games: there is no actual car. It’s the road to success that is moving right in front of your eyes. The only way to make sense of it and, hopefully, be successful is to pay attention and move with it.

“Okay,” you may be thinking, “*but why another book on customers? People are still just people after all.*” No, they are not. The people of mature, 21st century marketplaces are much different than those of years past. They are also unlike consumers in emerging markets: they are more experienced, skeptical, savvy, and connected. They have much different attention spans, mindsets, motivations, media habits, sources of social influence and, most importantly, marketplace desires. But most customer-focused business books still espouse 1950’s absolutist rhetoric and western, mass market concepts like, “positioning,” “Unique Selling Proposition” and “top-of-mind awareness.”

There are no absolutes when dealing with customers. It’s not an objective process, like a physical science where you try to influence the behavior of chemicals in a beaker. Especially today, it’s a subjective and complicated blend of art and science where you’re trying to influence people’s feelings. So the goal of this little book, like my previous one, *A Clear Eye for Branding*, is to cut through all of that noise and help you feel what’s really happening in the marketplace for products, services, entertainment, causes, and ideas. I want to shake up your present worldview and help you see a new meaning about how to attract customers, and engage, seduce, and delight them; a meaning which, by the way, transcends communication.

I’ll be using the word “customer” throughout this book to refer to any person involved in examining, evaluating, purchasing, using, or recommending anything of value. You may refer to said person as consumer, prospect, user, member, client, constituent, donor, patient, resident, audience, voter, fan, citizen, or some other idiom. And that’s fine, so long as you embrace the sentiment in the late, great ad man, David Ogilvy’s adage, “The consumer is not a moron, she is your wife,” and appreciate the fact that she is also your child’s teacher, your colleague, neighbor, future employer, prolific blogger, political leader, and media maven.

So let’s get to it. Let me set the stage for the hypothetical, yet reality-inspired dialog that’s to follow. I’ve just finished presenting my concepts at a major conference, and I’ve arrived at the airport the next morning to discover, once again, that my flight has been cancelled. I’m standing at the ticket counter, my head hanging in disgust, when I notice an empathetic, elderly man of the cloth standing to my left. Happy reading!