



## Forget Understanding

Belief is what drives behavior.

**AROUND THIS TIME** last year, JCPenney hired former Apple retailing star Ron Johnson as CEO. Soon after, the company made headlines by announcing the end of weekly sales and coupon inserts in favor of an “everyday low price” strategy. It was a bold move; one Johnson and his army of VPs and advisors clearly believed in. And one that was doomed from its conception.

Here was the rationale (I can hear it as if I were a fly on the conference room wall): “Customers abhor chasing sales, fussing with coupons, dealing with prices that end in 9s, and other meaningless promotions. So let’s get rid of all that hooey and replace it with “Fair and Square” pricing. And let’s bring this new strategy to life on prime time television (CUT TO: Annoying commercial of shoppers screaming “Nooooo!” at various offending promotions).

This idea, of showing people what you believe they’d like to eliminate or prevent as a way to induce behavior change, is one of the most mixed up concepts in the world of communication. It assumes that conveying information and gaining understanding (albeit in an emotionally powerful way) is what creates belief and motivation when in fact people’s beliefs are driven by their desires. And no one desires what they don’t want (including information about it).

“We’ve got to get our pricing across,” Johnson said during a recent call with analysts and investors. “Coupons were a drug, they really drove traffic. [Customers] need to understand the value we’re offering.” Customers don’t need to understand a thing. It’s Johnson and scores of other communicators who need to understand that belief is what motivates behavior, not understanding.

And people believe what they want to believe.

Consider another drug, cigarettes, which, in fact, are detrimental to customers. Do you think smokers are oblivious to the adverse health effects of their behavior, or that they can be scared straight via communication? People who smoke like to smoke. And they choose to believe that nothing bad will happen to them (or if it does, then they’ll quit). In fact, many smokers reinforce their belief (and desire to smoke) with clever rationalizations: “Smoking helps me stay thin. I’m under a lot of pressure and smoking relaxes me. My grandmother smoked and lived to be 100.”

Think of it this way: Thoughts of pleasure are pleasurable, and motivate action. Thoughts of pain are painful, and motivate suppression (of those thoughts). Showing cigarette smokers with tracheostomies, soda drinkers guzzling down glasses of fat, animals and people suffering from neglect, and shoppers vilifying coupons are erroneously designed to be tuned out by those very people they’re intended to stir up.

I’m sure that Penney, like many others, rationalize their counterintuitive communication strategies by conjuring up Freud’s “pleasure principle,” in which people are programmed to instinctively seek pleasure and avoid pain (like the imagined pain of clipping coupons). And that’s true with infants. But adults are skilled at postponing pleasure and tuning out displeasure (Don’t want to experience the pain of a shrinking retirement account? Don’t read the monthly statement.).

Human beings are not uninformed, critical thinkers. They’re self-deluded, pleasure seekers. Recognize their present behavior for what it truly is, evidence of their beliefs and desires, and use that understanding to create something compelling. Help them experience a new vision, one which they find highly desirable, rather than dwelling on the downside of the status quo. Give up trying to educate, and work to inspire. Forget understanding. Focus instead on belief.