

A Brand New World

10 Guiding Principles for Success in Chaotic Times

by Tom Asacker



WHY a brand new world? Because we're living during a time of complexity and change driven by scores of emergent events, conditions and behaviors happening all at once. Can't you feel it? Doesn't the world seem a bit unpredictable and unstable? Well, it is! And in a chaotic environment, searching for connections and causal associations and developing a step-by-step recipe for success will never work.

Instead, you must develop a new way of thinking.

This new worldview is about the universal, rather than the particular. It's about being human, as much as about being in business. It's about tuning in to your audience's new frequency. Turning on your inherent sense of empathy and passion. And ultimately, it's about standing out in a marketplace that's bursting at the seams with look-alike products, services and salespeople.

To make matters worse, war, terrorism, deadly infectious diseases and the recent rash of misdeeds by corporations have created an atmosphere of fear and distrust. People see the world as an extremely risky place, with selfishness and fakery at the core of human nature. Truth be told, the world—especially the world of business—has reached a state of crisis.

But, like the Chinese symbol for crisis, which is comprised of both the symbols for danger and opportunity, there is tremendous opportunity today. But only if you are willing to move out of your comfort zone and unlearn all of the old rules that continue to exert a tremendous pull on your strategic thinking. Otherwise, danger is imminent.

*And that **danger** is the very real possibility that you and your business or organization will become . . . **irrelevant.***

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Truth One: From Real Goods to Feel Goods

You're not in the real goods business any longer; you're in the feel goods business.



THE PROBLEM today, of course, is one of abundance: abundance of information, abundance of ideas, and abundance of technology. This wealth of opportunity has resulted in too many companies with too much stuff chasing too few people. This consequent shift in power to the people has seriously hurt even the most “customer and employee-centric” organizations, as they struggle to understand the new value equation of these turbulent times. So, here it is—your first taste of unlearning (be prepared—it may make you squirm in your chair). You know those wonderful products and services that you work so diligently to create, improve, market and sell? They are not your value equation. That’s right. They are *not* your competitive advantage.

To understand why, you must tap into the fairly new realities of today’s economy. First, and foremost, people are completely overloaded with options and conflicting information regarding just about everything; from which products and services to purchase, to which school to attend or charity to support, to selecting a doctor or even a brand of pain medication. In addition, everything looks pretty much the same to them. Nothing truly stands out as the “best” choice in their minds. This new marketplace reality has made people confused, frustrated, tired, and more cynical and hard-nosed than ever before. And since they intuitively know that it is impossible to *rationally* cope with all of this choice in their lives, they have turned control over to their instincts. They choose with their *guts*.

Think about the last time you chose a computer, TV, insurance policy, mortgage, accounting service, restaurant, hotel, etc. Did you sit down and make a comprehensive list of the features and benefits? Did you make a purely rational choice based upon the price/benefit ratios of the plethora of competitive alternatives? Of course not. Who has the time? So what *did* you do? You created a mental short list based primarily on what you’ve heard or read. Then you did a little shopping and/or a little research to get a “feel” for your list of alternatives. Or perhaps a salesperson paid *you* a visit. Either way, in the end it was the “feel” that motivated you—by and large—subconscious decision. Because in an oversupplied economy, it’s feelings that drive purchase decisions, and as a result, profitability. Sure, knowledge may inform, but it’s emotion that motivates.

At first, I found it hard to believe myself. I had been educated to focus on features and benefits and Unique Selling Propositions (USPs). I left business school obsessed with the “4 Ps” of marketing and an assortment of theories like AIDA and SWOT analysis. I later realized that those concepts originated during the heydays of mass production and mass marketing, when price, image, and mega spending on advertising drove business growth. But those concepts simply don’t work any longer. How do you decide which camera to purchase when there are hundreds of models available? By choosing the cheapest? By comparing features and benefits?

The traditional view, which, by the way, they still teach in most business schools, concerns itself with a rational, analytical view of value. But in an oversupplied market with an incomprehensible amount of information (there are over 3 *billion* web pages on the Internet!), rational decision-making is a myth. Today we base our choices on what feels good to us. How will owning that product make me feel? What does my association with that organization or salesperson say about me? What image does choosing “whatever” project to others? Forget about Unique Selling Proposition and start thinking Unique Feelings Proposition.

Now, for this new way of thinking, feelings are not the same as emotions. Feelings refer to a very specific quality: pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality in an experience and in a state of mind. Pleasant feelings—excitement, fun, reward, increased self-esteem, etc.—habitually condition desire. Unpleasant feelings—pain, effort required, decreased self-esteem, etc.—condition aversion. And neutral feelings condition forgetfulness. Given this definition, your number one goal should be to increase people’s good feelings while minimizing their bad ones. This simple-sounding objective should be systematically applied to every interaction customers have with you, your product, your company, your communication, and your people.

*Do it well, and achieve the trust, admiration
and liking of your audience. Do it poorly and . . . let’s just say that it
definitely won’t be pleasant.*

Truth Two: From Facts to Truth

Like it or not, perception is reality. Give up your fixation on the facts (the what), and be fanatical about your audience's truth (the why).



YEARS AGO, I studied magic with one of the most knowledgeable and skillful practitioners in his field. This guy would spend hour upon hour perfecting the most novel illusions and esoteric sleights. In fact, he had become so expert at his art that he even fooled most professional magicians. He was the “best.” And you’ve probably never heard of him. Because unfortunately for him—and for scores of others—being the best is not the route to success. Yes, the “fact” was that the quality of his magic was beyond compare, but the “facts” didn’t matter much to his audience. What mattered to them was how *they* were feeling during his performance—their “truth.” And their “truth” was that they were less interested in his technical proficiency and more interested in being entertained.

Most people and organizations get this wrong. Like my magical friend, they obsess over the “facts”—the features, attributes and quality of their offering, while ignoring the “truth”—the feelings of their audience. They focus on the rational and measurable, and disregard the emotional and ethereal. But a product or service is never more than a means to an end. And that end, that truth, is always a feeling. It’s the feeling that draws an audience in. They want to get lost in your marketing. They want to *feel* the importance and meaning of what you offer—for themselves, in their guts—rather than having it be overt and obvious. They *don’t* want to be objectively convinced. They want to subjectively believe!

It may be difficult for you to operate from this new paradigm—this new assumption about how the world works. To accept that changing people’s behavior happens mostly by speaking to their feelings, rather than to their rational minds. Your education and training has programmed you to be skillful in the techniques of selling and the art of persuasion. To strive for perfection in your products and services. To convey the “facts” and make well-reasoned arguments with adequate evidence. It’s okay. Don’t feel badly. Even some of the world’s most successful organizations have been drawn to this outdated mode of thinking.

Try to imagine spending millions of dollars and polling tens of thousands of customers to improve the quality of your product. And then after releasing the new and improved version an immediate and very loud protest is raised . . . by those very same customers! That's right. Long before they'd tasted a sip, millions of Americans had decided they *hated* New Coke. Yes, in blind taste tests they had consistently said they liked the new formula better. But a soft drink is much more than merely its taste. Coca-Cola, one of the world's most successful companies, had ignored the truth—the emotional connection its audience had developed with its brand—and focused instead on the facts.

An airline executive once remarked, “If passengers see dirty trays or seat pockets, they can't be sure that we did a good job servicing the airplane engines.” Logical? Of course not. Should he argue that fact with the passengers? Of course not. Is it logical to pay more for sodium chloride simply because it comes in a blue box with a picture of a little girl holding an umbrella on it? Do you think Morton Salt cares? Is it logical to pay big bucks for a gas guzzling SUV and never tow a darn thing, nor take the vehicle off road? Think GM cares? And does it make sense to pay a dollar for a bookmark, when you could simply use the dollar bill as the bookmark?

The truth is the why behind the buy.

To Coke drinkers it was the feeling of being traditional and old-fashioned. New Coke? Oxymoron! A slap in the face. To Harley riders it's the rough, Wild Bunch image. Market a Harley Ford pickup truck and watch it soar. Market a Harley minivan and experience the wrath of the HOGs (Harley Owners Group). The key to success in business today is to forget the language of logic and arguments, and become proficient at the language of feelings and beliefs. Discover and appeal to your audience's why . . . their truth. If you focus on the facts, you'll believe that your mission should be to convey those facts. Wrong! The truth rules. Everything is subjective. Every decision is driven by what is inside someone—memories, images, stories and feelings—not what's on the outside.

Truth Three: From Capture to Attract

Metaphors matter! They condition our sensibilities and behavior. Stop trying to force fit today's complex market environment into the outdated models of yesterdays' much simpler time.



PERUSE ANY business publication or be the proverbial fly on any organizational wall and you'll be repeatedly exposed to war and sports metaphors. You know: capture market share, armed with information, attack the competition, hit a home run, go the distance, raise the bar, and so forth. It's difficult to change your thinking when you're surrounded by such inapt language. How can anyone treat customers like friends when they're consistently referred to as targets to be captured or territories to be conquered? How can you expect initiative taking, when managers are busy ordering the troops around and the troops are sitting around waiting for new marching orders? And how can you hope to build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships when you're busy "hooking them" and "reeling them in."

I've got news for you: Business is *not* war and it is *not* a sport. That's yesterday's worn-out thinking again. And by continuing to speak yesterday's language, you are unwittingly sustaining yesterday's ineffective actions. Because metaphors do a lot more than simply enrich your speech. They structure your thinking. They condition your sympathies. They direct your attention and influence your decisions and actions. James Autry, retired CEO of Meredith Corporation wrote: "Becoming a manager has much to do with learning the metaphors; becoming a good manager has much to do with using the metaphors; and becoming a leader has much to do with changing the metaphors." To succeed in business and achieve your dreams, you must choose words and thinking that tune you in to *today's* world and *today's* challenges.

One of the most powerful and dangerous metaphors in business today is the mechanistic, Newtonian model of reality. Many executives continue to respond to our complex, rapidly changing and increasing uncertain marketplace with simplistic, linear cause-and-effect thinking. Big mistake! The marketplace is not an objective process, like a physical science where you try to influence the behavior of chemicals in a beaker or balls on a pool table.

Appealing to customers is a subjective blend of art and science, where you're subtly attempting to influence feelings (and thus, behavior). You're dealing with the perceptions and actions of intelligent, curious, socially influenced human beings. People whose preferences change constantly, especially in the United States of Extravagance. So stop looking at business as chemistry, physics or mathematics, and begin seeing it for what it really is: a study in social psychology.

When asked what single event was most helpful to him in developing his theory of relativity, Einstein answered: "Figuring out how to think about the problem." With his enlightening answer in mind, here's a mental model to help you think about your problems and stay aware of and adapt to the increasing number of sudden and unexpected shifts in the marketplace. Think of yourself as a magnet, and your audience as iron filings. You could either say that you—the magnet—cause the iron filings to move towards you. Or you could say that the iron filings value movement towards you. Scientifically speaking, both statements are exactly the same. But metaphorically speaking, they are very different. To believe that you cause your audience to move towards you implies certainty. To believe that your audience values movement towards you implies preference.

By adopting the cause-and-effect metaphor, you'll have a tendency to follow formulaic thinking, even in the face of changing customer preferences and declining business. In 1999, The Gap reported profits of over \$1 billion. Two years later, they lost close to \$8 million. How? What happened to all of their loyal customers? What was going on in their world and why? The Gap should have been obsessed with finding out, and I'm not even sure that they were curious. Instead, they focused on their own world. They continued to pour money into television advertising, assuming it to be a formula for causing sales. It's a common mistake. Our assumptions—our mental models—determine what we see. We think we know what's going on and what the solutions are, and so we filter out everything that doesn't fit our way of thinking.

Stop filtering and start rethinking your business problems. You can begin by dropping the words "loyalty" and "retention" from your lexicon. Why? Because repeat patronage was never anything more than a series of mutual concessions: "You give me the feelings that I value (in a product, service, or work environment) and I'll give you what you value (money, time, intelligent work, etc.). And if, by chance, I decide to transact with you for a second, third, or fourth time—whether it's work for pay or money for products or services—it's simply because I expect something in return." It has absolutely nothing to do with loyalty. It has to do with staying tuned in to your audience's changing preferences.

And being turned on to continuously seduce your audience with emotion, passion, and daring creativity.

Truth Four: From Interesting to Interested

It doesn't matter what people think about you or your company. What matters is how you make people feel about themselves and their decisions in your presence.



WHENEVER I make this statement during my seminars, everyone immediately stops writing and I get some really curious looks. I then go on to tell the story of a woman who was asked her impression of the two renowned British statesmen, Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone. She replied: “When I left the dining room after sitting next to Mr. Gladstone, I thought he was the cleverest man in England. But after sitting next to Mr. Disraeli, I was sure that I was the cleverest *woman* in all of England.” “So, who do you think she would prefer to spend her time with in the future?” I ask.

I typically pause and watch as heads slowly nod up and down, and I think: “They get it! Great!” At least, that is, until they return to work, when I’m sure that it’s right back to their habitual, narcissistic ways. Take a look at 99.999% of all marketing communications, from Web sites and direct mail, to sales sheets and advertising. They’re all SHOUTING . . . “Look at me!” “Am I great, or what?” “Buy me!” and other irritating noise that no one gives a damn about. This loud voice of business is completely out of touch with the subtle, more compelling voice in the heads of today’s audience. Why? Because people aren’t interested in you. They want you to be interested in them, and to show them how their association with you will help them feel better about themselves.

I don’t know why so many people and organizations get this wrong, but I have a guess. I think it’s because being genuinely interested in others, and working to understand their feelings and motivations, is tough: it’s imprecise, messy, and time consuming. It’s much easier and faster to talk about something that we know a lot about . . . us and our stuff! We simply memorize all of the pertinent facts and then when it’s time, flip the brain/mouth switch and out it pours. It’s also easier to simply bury our heads and focus on getting things done, isn’t it? “Five sales calls to make . . . better get hustling!” “Two ads to create, as well as a capability brochure and a direct mail piece. No time to think.” “The company is measuring me on number of transactions. Slow down and listen? Yeah . . . right.” But guess what? That’s great news for you! Because by being other-focused and truly interested in your audience, you’ll stand out. Simply because no one else is doing it.

I once met with an entrepreneur to discuss his strategy for a new products launch. As he passionately recounted the story of their development and described the various human factor considerations designed into his products—from ease of use and comfort, to the choice of color and durability of materials—it became clear to me that his audience was first and foremost in his mind. And then . . . he handed me his sell sheet. And what was it oozing with? Features and benefits, of course. The completely rational copy emphasized all of the products’ nuances and advantages compared to his competitors’ products. Differences that he was justifiably very proud of. So, after discussing these differences, we concluded that any logical person would choose his product over the competition in a nanosecond. He only had one little problem—finding *logical* people.

Isn’t it strange? He designed his products to excite his audience, to prevent human error, to save them time and money, and to enhance their experience. But he took the exact opposite approach when designing his communications. Instead of trying to prevent human error, he filled it with confusing data and meaningless “chest-thumping” superlatives. Rather than attempting to save his customers time and money, he’ll probably waste it by inundating them with redundant information, sales calls, junk mail and e-mail. And instead of trying to enhance his customers’ experiences with his company, he’ll most likely use his cleverness and either try to impress them or try to make his customers like him by telling them all about what makes his company so special . . . so *interesting*.

It’s really quite simple:

If you want people to pay attention to your communication you must tune into their frequency.

Their current situation. Their anxieties, desires and fears. Establish an emotional bond based on your audience’s feeling of finally having been understood by someone. Because if people feel that you are genuinely interested in them, they’ll be much more likely to open up and interact with you, and give you the information that you need. So stop, sit down and scrutinize every single piece of company communication, from sales presentations to annual reports. Do they speak to your audience in terms of what’s most important to them? Do they speak with passion and caring and energy? Will they make their eyes grow wide and pulse quicken? They should.

Truth Five: From Branding to Bonding

A brand is not a logo, and branding is not a communication strategy. A strong brand is a strong bond, and branding is your business.



FOR THE past 250 years, companies have leveraged their power to influence and—in many situations—control commerce. They’ve used various barriers to entry to curtail competition and grow significant mindshare and marketshare. The most common marketing related barrier employed was *brand* preference, created with mega spending on advertising and control of distribution channels. Building a strong brand was all about top of mind awareness. I say “beer!” and you shout . . . “Budweiser!” And it’s still that way in the case of habitual buying, which occurs when involvement is low and differences between brands is small. But for considered purchases—like choosing a new car or home—and ones involving a strong emotional connection—like deciding where to invest or donate hard-earned money—building a brand requires much more than that. Today you’re competing for heartshare, not marketshare. Top of mind without goose bumps is a waste of money.

Of course to those with a dated, mass-market mentality, branding is *still* all about image and awareness. It’s about tag lines, logos, cute little animal mascots or clever jingles. It’s about spending millions of dollars on Super Bowl commercials, hiring celebrities to sing your corporate praises, and covering cars with advertising banners. Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that awareness is unimportant. In fact, not promoting your business is like winking at a beautiful woman in a dark room. YOU know what you’re doing, but she hasn’t a clue! But, does well-known equal strong? Not any longer. The rise of the global economy, the rapid adoption of the Internet, and unprecedented access to capital have all ignited commercial innovation, and put an end to those days forever. Today, like just about everything else, brand logic has been turned on its head. Strong brand now equals well-known brand.

And please, don’t get hung-up on the word “brand.” Schools, nonprofit groups, high-tech firms, and small businesses tend to fall into a camp that believes that branding is either too commercial, too expensive, or otherwise not appropriate or applicable to them. And that may have been true in the heyday of mass marketing, when branding conjured up ideas of spin, manipulation, and “in your face” corporate propaganda. But not any more. Today, the word “brand” is shorthand for the gut feeling people have about something, some

group, or someone. It's a kind of Platonic Ideal, which stands for the essence of a business, school, organization, person, or even place. If you add up the tangible and intangible qualities of something—the gestalt—and wish to represent the meaning and distinctive character this greater whole conveys to its audience, today we call it . . . “brand.”

Think of your brand as a “file folder” in your audience’s minds (not a perfect metaphor, since memory is malleable, but stick with me anyway.). When they’re exposed to you (e.g., through advertising, design, a salesperson, word-of-mouth, etc.), a feeling is immediately filed away in that “brand file folder.” As time passes, much of what your audience has filed away—the details—will become inaccessible. However, they will remember where they stored the folder: in the front (positive feelings) or pushed to the back (negative feelings). Given the sheer volume of brands trying to find a place in your audience’s overloaded “brand file cabinets,” you must not only get their attention and be relevant (a file folder labeled with your brand name), but you must also get it placed in the front of their file cabinet (elicit strong, positive feelings of intense personal significance).

Now when I say intense personal significance, I’m not talking about “10% more real juice” or “Buy One, Get One Free.” I’m talking all consuming, deep down to the bone marrow meaning. I’m talking spirit, mystery, and intimacy. Think Harley-Davidson. Harley-Davidson builds more than motorcycles. It manufactures an attitude. And once you purchase a Harley, you adopt that attitude. It becomes part of who you are. Harley viscerally understands—and expands—this reality. As a Harley executive once observed: “What we sell is the opportunity for a 43-year-old accountant to dress in black leather, ride through small towns and have people be afraid of him.” Harley-Davidson gets branding. They have a strong sense of their own identity, a gut-level awareness of the feelings of their audience, and an intense desire to bond with—and enhance—those feelings.

Despite what the Madison Avenue folks may tell you, the strength of your brand lies *not* in the fact that you own a folder with your name prominently displayed on it. Repetition does *not* create memories, relevance does. The strength lies in your folder’s position in your audience’s file cabinet (the emotions that linger in their memory).

*The strength lies in the **bond!***

*So make your brand about **feelings**, not just familiarity.*

Make it about shared values and trust. About honesty, vulnerability and presence. Because a brand is *not* simply a promise. How can it be, with everything changing at breakneck speed? A brand is a living, breathing relationship. Revel in the messy world of emotions and create a brand that’s about leadership and differentiation; about customer insight and radical innovation; and about clarity of purpose, passion and a sense of humor.

Truth Six: From Fact Telling to Storytelling

Facts don't persuade, feelings do. And stories are the best way to get at those feelings.



I ATTENDED another networking event last week. As I mingled my way through the crowd balancing miniature food on a tiny plate, I was frequently asked the standard conversational icebreaker: “So, what do you do, Tom?” After a while, I began to tire of giving my elevator pitch. So eventually, I simply answered generically, “I’m a branding guy.” “Oh, branding,” one executive responded. “Tell me. What type of ads work best today?” I smiled. That type of formula-seeking question always amuses me. “The same as always,” I replied. “A good story. We’re up to our eyeballs in information and sick and tired of ‘Buy . . . Buy . . . Buy!’ Give us an engaging and meaningful story. Something we can connect with and—heaven forbid—believe in.”

Storytelling was the original form of influence, and all through the ages great communicators have stirred people’s emotions and influenced their behavior through story. I know you know this. So why haven’t more business people embraced this powerful, persuasive form of communication? Think back to your last encounter with a salesperson. What was it like? Can you recall a recent advertisement? Describe it. Or how about your last meeting at work? My guess is that they were all fact-filled and uninspiring. What my friend Dick Orkin describes as “announcements.” Which means that, by and large, they were ineffective means of influence. No engagement, no visualization. No visualization, no personal, emotional impact. No emotional significance, no change in behavior. Simple. We believe what we internalize, what we decide for ourselves, not what we’re told. A story allows us to experience the knowledge in our minds eye and make the meaning for ourselves.

Storytelling is especially effective in today’s multimedia world, where information overload forces us to simplify. Stories are the quickest way to communicate. They instantly transmit complex ideas; they’re a kind of cognitive shorthand. Stories are the most memorable, because they are laced with emotion. Want to be remembered? Tell a good story. Stories also put people at ease and help build relationships. And believe it or not, stories are the most believable form of communication. We are more deeply influenced by one person’s story, than we are by mounds of data. And by the way, don’t we love stories? Of course we do! Stories are embedded in our lives—business and personal. We love stories in song, in books, on TV, in film, and around the proverbial campfire and water cooler. We love to hear them, we love to tell, and we love to participate in them. Stories are how we make sense of the world. We are storytelling creatures by nature. It’s in our DNA.

“So, tell me a story. Tell me a true story of someone you’ve recently helped with your products or services.” That’s the first request I typically make to an executive team, prior to working with them to develop their brand. It may sound like a simple request, but I rarely hear a story. Instead, I hear all about the facts—when they started, the number of employees, their products and services, etc. But a brand is not about facts. A brand is a story. An engaging, authentic story that everyone in a company lives and tells. So, stop and ask yourself: What story does my audience conjure up in its imagination about itself when purchasing or experiencing my company or products? Do we complement and enhance that story in every single thing that we say and do? Do we even know what that story is?

Great influencers are obsessed with understanding that story, and with managing all of the details. The guttural roar of a Harley engine enhances their rugged and independent brand story. When Hurricane Andrew ripped through South Florida, State Farm Insurance not only paid the claims, but “like a good neighbor,” also paid its customers additional monies to bring the houses up to code. Guinness could easily speed up the 119.5 seconds it takes to “pull” a perfect pint of their luscious black brew. But they know it would weaken the spirit and soul of their brand story. All of those details help augment the stories that demonstrate who these companies are, instead of them telling us who they are. Announcing that they’re special, trustworthy, or “the best” is more likely to make us suspicious than make us believers. Belief is something we subjectively make for ourselves. Stories are the compelling evidence.

So instead of obsessing over data-laden presentations and strategic plans, start perfecting your brand story. Have a dream! Create a drama; write a detailed and compelling script; design the set; direct the action. Then use that persuasive story as your distinct, unifying strategy. Use it to engage your customers’ and employees’ minds, and to build credibility by touching their hearts. Use the excitement and drama of your brand to bring life to all of those boring numbers and pie charts. Tell brand stories so people can live the experience in their own minds. So it becomes real to them, stimulates their emotions and helps them understand the ideas and behavior required to live the brand. Stop trying to change people’s minds with information or coercion. It doesn’t work. They feel manipulated. Instead, capture their imaginations with heartfelt stories so they can make their own meaning.

*And never — never! — stop telling
those stories with conviction and passion.*

Truth Seven: From Doing To to Doing With (and for)

No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care. And it doesn't take a genius to tell the difference between someone who listens in order to get something, and someone who listens because she cares.



I CARE about business and I care about people. And it's great to see the old world of business beginning to finally fade from the horizon. That world was pretty much about one thing: doing things *to* people to make a buck. It was all about control and manipulation. Consider selling: It's a universally accepted approach to business. But the simple word "sales" conjures up high-pressure and contrived tactics like "foot in the door," "closing techniques," and "bait and switch."

Guess what? People repel from the unpleasant idea of those slick and insincere practices. Today, they want you to do things *with* them and *for* them. They want respect and understanding. They want to feel special. They want to express themselves and they want control over their lives. And they want *you* to help them get there. Business is no longer a simple cause and effect, transactional, quota-driven environment. Now it's all about trust and involvement—relationships. And relationships are messy. Relationships are hard to quantify. Relationships take time.

This is a moment in time that holds more possibilities for you than any period in the history of humankind. And the only thing standing between you and the results you truly want is you—and your need to control it. That's right! Your mind is your enemy. And control is your albatross. Control destroys relationships. Control blinds you to opportunities. Control shuts down your inner voice. Control is driven by your ego's need to serve itself. Control is an illusion you cling to primarily to alleviate your fears. Leaders give up the need to control, come to terms with their own egos, and dedicate themselves to helping others. They inspire. They embrace change. They accept the uncertainty of the future. They trust people and help them live their dreams.

We like to believe otherwise. We like to believe that control is a good thing—an attribute of a strong individual. In our upside-down way of thinking, we assume that by being in control, we can prevent bad surprises and get precisely what we desire out of life. We're convinced that control keeps people secure and in their places, thereby preventing us from being disappointed by them. But nothing could be further from the truth. The need for

control comes from weakness or insecurity. It is fear-based, plain and simple. Fear of the unknown, fear of failure, fear of being judged by others, fear of intimacy, fear of loss, fear of not making quota. And this fear is what prevents us from discovering our true passion and purpose. It prevents us from doing what we do best and letting others do what they do best. It stifles people's growth and eventually pushes others away from us.

Do you want to be fearless in this new and complex and environment? Do you want to eliminate the anxiety that comes from giving up control? Do you want to get past the impatience, frustration and skepticism of today's customer and employee? Here's the trick: Simply change your intentions. Start right now by listening to your inner voice and never act again without first asking yourself: "Is this a loving way to be? Is this a caring thing to say or do?" When you create this openness and love for life, the feeling radiates within, and to others around you. Sincere caring for others will act as an antidote to reduce fear and anxiety. You won't be afraid of what others think or whether or not you'll be successful. You'll simply feel good about your efforts to help others. It's all there within you, but it will take time and patience.

Giving up control will also provide additional benefits. It will create a huge sense of internal relief. By giving up, you won't have to pretend to be perfect, to know it all. You can set very grand, general expectations and thus avoid the disappointment that comes from trying to micromanage people and events. By allowing for the unexpected, you can stay mindful and in the present. And by accepting the uncertainty of the future, you can absolve yourself from the blame that comes with making bad predictions or choices. You know: "It shouldn't have happened that way. I should have seen it coming." Blah, blah, blah. You can finally give up trying to be the best *in* the world, and instead, focus on what matters most: being the best *for* the world.

As Gandhi said: "Be the change you want to see in the world." You don't have to be part of the world that emphasizes the pursuit of wealth, reputation and conventionality. Instead, be other-focused and have boundless empathy for human frustration and suffering. Stop listening to your weak, cynical and selfish inner voice that tells you that it's "their problem." You're much greater than that. Let your mind go and feel and understand with your heart and gut. Don't be quietly cynical or apathetic. Don't push or persuade. Be open, optimistic, compassionate, and kind. Help people feel better about themselves and their place in the world.

*Because the true measure of success is **not** what people think about you nor how many people know your name, but how many people's lives you've touched.*

Truth Eight: From Honesty to Authenticity

People today are incredulous of marketing, institutions and the media. The only way to suspend disbelief, cut through skepticism and create trust is to act as a real human being and get to the truth. As the sages say: "Words that come from the heart can enter the heart."



TRY THIS: Ask everyone you meet today if they believe themselves to be honest. They will undoubtedly answer, "Sure." Okay. So then what exactly has happened to the world of business—from Enron, Arthur Anderson and WorldCom, to Global Crossing, Adelphia, Xerox, and others? What happened to all of those "honest" people? They're still honest. They're just not authentic. In my view, business has become infected with the same sickness that has infected the

world of politics—professionalism. You read it right. Paid professionalism rules politics and big business today, with emphasis squarely on the word "paid." Money has become their single-minded pursuit and measure of success (and if not success, then their *illusion* of power or security). And to achieve this pursuit, people will bottle up their feelings—their authentic selves—to avoid confrontation, embarrassment and other perceived dangers. They'll go along to get along.

So what needs to change? Regulations? Incentives? Jail sentences? It's much simpler than that. What the business world needs now is a return to the idea of amateur spirit. Now, it's probably not the amateur spirit as you may think of it. The definition of amateur has evolved for the worse over the past few hundred years, coming to represent a dabbler or incompetent. The original spirit of amateur was a positive, noble tag to apply to someone (the Latin root for amateur is "amator," lover). An amateur pursuit was one you did for love, with a spirit of passion and authenticity. And it certainly didn't imply a lack of skill. Thomas Jefferson was an amateur writer and philosopher when he drafted the Declaration of Independence.

Organizations—actually the people in them—must recapture this amateur spirit. Not because it is morally right, but because it's the only way to succeed in a world stunned by scandals and greed-is-good ideology. Ask yourself these simple questions: Do you want customers and employees to come to you first—and stay with you? Do you want them to recommend you to their friends and associates? Then what do you have to get them to do? Trust you. And how do you go about doing that in a post-Enron economy? Certainly *not* by saying, "Trust

me.” That kind of talk immediately causes people to put up their defenses. Instead, you must get them to believe! Success today all boils down to belief. “Who should I believe? Who *can* I believe?” These are the critical questions. You must be believed to have any chance of success.

But I have some bad news: No one will believe you. That’s right. In today’s court of public opinion, you are guilty until proven innocent. It’s the harsh business reality of our time. But there is a way to quickly transcend this reality. Here’s how: Within the first few seconds of meeting you or being exposed to your communications, your audience will form an impression that is easily reinforced and unlikely to change. They’ll observe your mannerisms, voice, choice of words, etc. and judge whether you are worth listening to. To cut through their innate *disbelief*—and very short attention span—simply push past your comfort level and be authentic! Amazingly, that’s all there is to it. Simply take off your mask—your title, your expertise, your bureaucratic language and technical jargon—and connect with them with honest, simple, and engaging language. Be on the level. Be moved to candor. Tell them what you believe and what you think. Speak the unspoken. Try it and see.

Do you have kids? I do. And without having any idea, mine have put everything into perspective for me. Especially how to gain trust and love: Say what you mean. Mean what you say. And don’t be mean when you say it. Don’t be defensive. Lighten up. Children have an inherent sense of honesty and humor that adults adore. It’s this authentic nature that you connect with. It doesn’t connect with you because it’s cute. It connects because it’s true. And you know it. So listen to your innocent, inner voice. Be childlike. Speak in a language that is natural, open, and honest.

*Get rid of all of the **hype** and toss in
a dash of self-deprecating **humor**.*

State what you feel in a candid and caring, yet unapologetic way. And never—never—hide anything. People will then believe that you are being straight with them (warts and all), and as a result, you’ll be worthy of their trust.

Daniel Boorstin wrote: “The amateur is not afraid to do something for the first time.” And that’s the measure of great artists, great lovers, and great entrepreneurs (not to mention children). To say, “I don’t know.” To ask the hard question that is on your mind (in a soft way). To take risks. To be bold. To state what you are feeling, openly. To admit your weaknesses. To adopt this amateur spirit takes courage and demonstrates your love for—and connects you on an emotional level with—your audience. They’ll believe you. It will demonstrate your trust in them, and your desire to eliminate their fears and their concerns. And it will inspire them and engender trust because it rings true.

Truth Nine: From Knowledge to Wisdom

Knowledge speaks. Wisdom listens. Go into every situation with an inwardly calm mind, and be a learner, not a teacher.



I ONCE heard a story about a young boy who was hanging out with his friends one afternoon in his room, when his little brother wanders by. The boy says to his friends, “Hey guys. Wanna see something funny?” His buddies gather around. “Hey Bobby,” he calls out to his four-year-old brother. “Come here for a second.” Bobby, excited about being with the big kids, hurries over. “Bobby,” the older brother flashes a nickel and a dime in his outstretched palm. “Which one do you want, the big one or the small one?” The older brother glances back at his friends and whispers, “Watch how stupid he is.” Bobby’s eyes ponder his choice for a few seconds, and then he reaches out and grabs the nickel. “This one!” And with a big smile, little Bobby jams the nickel in his pocket and leaves the room.

The older brother puts the dime in his pocket, turns to his friends and breaks out laughing, “Is he stupid, or what? And he does it every time!” The other boys chime in, “Wow . . . he’s dumb. Yea, that’s funny!” Unbeknown to the boys, the brothers’ father was standing in the doorway and overheard the whole thing. He immediately headed for little Bobby’s room. “Bobby. Come over here, son, I want to ask you something.” He sits on the edge of the bed and leans toward his son. “Yeah, Dad?” The father then pulls out a nickel and a dime and holds them out in his hand. “Son, you know that a dime is worth more than a nickel, don’t you?” Bobby nods and responds, “Sure, Dad. A dime is ten pennies and a nickel is only five pennies,” he answers proudly. “So why did you take the nickel when your brother offered you the choice.” Bobby reaches under his bed and pulls out a sock full of nickels. “Because if I take the dime, he’ll stop playing that game with me.”

Bobby is wise beyond his years, because wisdom is all about aligning interests. It’s about using the best means to achieve the best ends. And in his case, the best end was to let the game continue. By sublimating his ego (if he even really has one) little Bobby allowed both himself and his brother to achieve the outcome that *each* desired. That’s wisdom! Knowledge, on the other hand, tries to win. To out-reason, to conquer. Knowledge is one sided. Wisdom works reciprocally. Knowledge is about getting the deal done. Wisdom understands that the purpose of each interaction is to grow the strength of the relationship. I meet a lot of very knowledgeable people in my business travels, but very few wise ones. Most people feel that they have to do all of the talking to prove their

value, and to show how smart and dynamic they are. In fact, the key to building enduring relationships is to forget about you, be attentively silent and help the *other* person feel appreciated and valued.

Why do we forget? Why do we continue to push our agenda, instead of doing what's best for our audience? Because we're in a hurry, goal driven and attention hungry. We're listening to the facts and to the little voice in our head, trying to quickly figure out how to get others around to *our* way of thinking. Instead, we should be listening to *their* feelings. Slow down, relax, be engaged, try to understand, be empathic. Tune out your turbulent thoughts—your techniques, obsessions and personal biases—and tune in your audience's need to be heard, acknowledged and uniquely understood. Thoreau once wrote: "The greatest compliment that was ever paid to me was when someone asked me what I thought and attended to my answer." There is no greater gift you can give others than to be fully present with them, to make them feel that they are at the very heart of things.

Empathic listening is the very first step in making people feel good about themselves and in creating richer relationships and deeper trust. And it's also the first step towards a compassionate heart. And it's compassion that inspires us to improve people's lives with our creativity and resourcefulness. To make them feel loved, appreciated and cared for. In fact, the closer we get to our audience and their problems, the more unbearable we find their suffering. We feel a responsibility to improve their well-being. We are compelled to take action. I love inventor David Levy's "curse method" for developing new products: "Whenever I hear someone curse, it's a sign to invent something." And that desire to improve life is the key to innovation, differentiation and success in today's marketplace.

I suppose you should try to think and act like a shrink. Don't judge. Don't give advice. Listen and question. Let your audience stay in charge of themselves and their situation. It's not an intellectual challenge; it's an emotional one. See, hear and feel with your heart. Connect with your audience's feelings and reassure those feelings.

Solve problems together.
Get at the truth together.

Sure, insights are important. But it's real life that brings those insights. So get out there! Interact. Let people dump on you, free of the worry of being judged or interrupted. Get into *their* drama. And then be driven to improve their drama in everything you say and in everything you do.

Truth Ten: From Rah-rah to Ah-ha!

To flourish in a rapidly changing world you need the ah-has! and not simply the rah-rahs! Success is a by-product of childlike inquisitiveness and rapid experimentation. And it comes from a culture of curiosity and caring, not from a head down, plow ahead mentality.



When they asked Wayne Gretsky, arguably the greatest hockey player of all time, what made him more successful than other players, he replied, “Most players tend to play where the puck is, whereas I play where the puck is going to be.” Or as the professional trend-spotter may explain, Gretsky smartly followed the “drift” or “general course” of the puck. Now, to anyone who has played a game in which hitting or catching a moving object is essential, Gretsky’s insight is absurdly obvious. And to anyone who has developed a successful business from the ground floor up, so is trend-spotting customer behavior (regardless of the fact that major corporations spend a ton of money to frequently have it done for them). Because the truth about trends—and staying ahead—is that it has nothing to do with the future. It’s about being intimately involved with your audience today! Being part of the dynamics of change now!

In his delightfully irreverent book “Management of the Absurd,” Richard Farson writes that receiving advice “is the simplest, quickest response to make when confronted with a problem. It addresses a situation without actually dealing with it. It is easier than understanding, than listening and analyzing.” Yes, we will always rely upon others for information. And yes, we will forever be learning. But we must always go back to the ground floor—the hearts and minds of our audience—and decide the *meaning* for ourselves. Sam Walton used to say, “Whenever you get confused, go to the store. The customer has all the answers.” A profound, yet often ignored, truth. Because it’s your audience’s attitudes *today* that are the best indication of their actions *tomorrow*. It’s their feelings that are the promised land of the ah-has!—those breakthrough ideas that will lift your brand from the shallows of mediocrity into the full and exciting sea of possibilities.

Therein lies the paradox of branding: To stay relevant, your brand must constantly reinvent itself. Your audience will continue to grow and adjust—building on their life experiences—and you must change with them. You have to continuously appeal to their changing predilections with the appearance *and* experience of your brand. It’s an endless game of seduction. It requires vision, belief in collaborative innovation, and a passion for experimentation. Instead, what do we typically get? Routine tasks and a whole bunch of rah-rah, say-nothings

(especially towards the end of the accounting period). Now, please don't think for a second that I'm opposed to the inspirational stuff. Nothing could be further from the truth (I am an inspirational speaker, after all). What I'm against is the rah-rah! mentality without the guiding strategy and insights to sustain it. It's like getting the icing without the cake.

Sure, we all want to be part of a winning team. But more importantly, we want a higher sense of purpose. We want to be uplifted by a worthy ideal. We want to contribute, to be treated with respect, and to be recognized for our contributions. We *want* meaning. We *want* to make a difference. But here's the rub (the biggest issue in our organizations today): we're *disorganized*. There is no unifying perspective that inspires us and guides our actions. We're not clear about our direction, so we end up running around following our own self-serving agendas. There are no fresh perspectives, since our culture stifles creativity and candid discussions. And, in turn, this disorganization leads to passionless team members, uninspired customers, shrinking margins, layoffs, accounting scandals, Dilbertesque cynicism and a vicious—and totally avoidable—downward spiral.

Here's your way out: Your brand! Understand and embrace your uniqueness, that simple, yet powerful emotional idea that distinguishes you and motivates clients. And then use your brand to inspire confidence and risk taking. Use your brand to attract attention. Use your brand to convey order and focus, and to achieve clarity, coherence, and commitment from everyone. Use your brand to instill a sense of belonging among your customers and associates. Use your brand to inspire sharing, open-mindedness and teamwork. Use your brand to bring creativity to life in the form of new and exciting products and services. Use your brand to prevent panic from creeping in during difficult times, and to prevent arrogance from settling in during the good ones.

Let me leave you with one last piece of wisdom that I picked up from, of all places, a bumper sticker. It pretty much sums up today's branding imperative: "Disturb the comfortable. Comfort the disturbed." Never let your brand become bland. Surprise people!

*You're **not** in the "make stuff" and "do stuff" business.*

*You're in the **life improvement** business.*

So use your brand to heal the psychologically wounded, and to bring some excitement to the complacent and uninspired. Remember: Feelings are the only value proposition left in our developed economy. So rediscover your unbridled imagination and idealistic hopes and tap into that proposition and create new and preemptive benefits. Shatter what conventional wisdom tells you that your audience needs. Try wild ideas. Go for the extremes. Stay passionate!

Summary



THE BUSINESS world is like an old dog guarding a meatless bone. It chews on grand concepts like “customer-centric” and “employee-empowerment” and remains hungry. The simple solution is to get back to the basics. Be passionate about your story. Be obsessed with the details. Experience the real world of your audience. And make a difference in people’s lives.

William James wrote: “I am done with great things and big plans, great institutions and big successes. I am for those tiny, invisible loving human forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or the capillary oozing water, yet which, if given time, will rend the hardest monuments of human pride.”

*The time has come for a brand new world.
The time to act is now!*

About the Author



TOM ASACKER has been teaching and inspiring organizations and entrepreneurs for over 20 years. World-class brands including Procter & Gamble, UPS, Hewlett Packard, and G.E. have called on Tom, a renowned speaker and strategic advisor, to shake up their people, fill them with ideas and charge them with inspiration.

He’s the author of critically acclaimed books including *A Clear Eye for Branding* and *Sandbox Wisdom*, and his latest, *A Little Less Conversation*. Visit www.aclareye.com to learn more.