

TOM

The Death of Supremacy

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“Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”— Richard Dawkins

A few weeks ago, about 40 Christian evangelical leaders met in Salt Lake City to discuss a branding dilemma. They believe it's in the best interest of brand USA to nominate a social conservative to lead *their* Republican Party into the upcoming elections. The problem is that they've given up on authentically principled conservatives, like Mike Huckabee and Sam Brownback, because they're too far behind in the polls. To have any chance of beating the amoral Democrats, they'll have to support a morally deficient front runner, like the thrice-married, pro-choice, gay-friendly Giuliani.

It appears that evangelicals are confused, and not simply about how to vote. They're stuck in the age of supremacy, believing that behavior is best influenced through a patriarchal approach. They see the Government as the father, which must create and enforce policy that will ultimately shape the conduct of its children. They hope to grow a strong, socially conservative brand America from the top-down, through edict and control. It reminds me of the antediluvian thinking of many of today's business leaders: brand growth through controlled rhetoric.

Behavior as Communication

In his 1971 book *Silent Messages*, Dr. Albert Mehrabian revealed the importance of the verbal, vocal and visual elements on communications believability. The verbal cues—what was actually being said—were dominant only seven percent of the time, the vocal 38 percent of the time, and the visual cues were the primary carrier of trust and believability, a whopping 55 percent of the time. Communications experts subsequently grabbed those insights and played up the fact that human beings are primarily visual creatures. And that's true. But it totally misses the good doctor's point.

What Mehrabian's research *really* tells us is that people are persuaded primarily by behavior. You know, actions speak louder than words. Unfortunately, as Mark Twain once pointed out, actions speak louder than words but not nearly as often. It's time for everyone to wake up and smell the new millennium. The good old days of influencing by proxy are gone. We no longer dance to the lyrics of rules or rhetoric. We're not enticed by promises nor threatened by precept. We're not impressed by sensory hyperbole. We've lost faith in business, government, and other institutions. Communication sans behavioral evidence, no matter how engaging or factual, is no longer enough to move us to belief and action.

I remember chatting with an older gentleman after one of my speeches, and he told me a cute story about his endearing grandchild. One evening the man's wife was caring for their four-year-old granddaughter, and they had just settled down to watch the animated film *Shark Tale*, for what felt to Grandma like the fiftieth time. As the story unfolded and the film's protagonists approached the screen and bared their sharp and deadly teeth, the little girl reeled back in terror. The grandmother turned to her and asked, "Why are you frightened, honey? We've seen this five times. You know it's not real." With the wisdom of childhood the little girl replied, matter-of-factly: "It's a movie, Grandma. We're *supposed* to be scared."

Exactly! We're *supposed* to believe (or suspend disbelief) while watching a movie, but not while watching the fifth airing of an advertisement for a considered purchase or a message from a presidential candidate. In the real world of real problems and real issues, we're aching for something . . . real. Something grassroots and personal. Something that we can see, hear, smell and touch. We're tired of being told—and shown—what to do, how to do it, and with whom we should be doing it. We want something that *we* can care about, *we* can contribute to, and *we* can influence. Something *we* can actually experience and believe in.

Communicate for Belief

Make no mistake; unless you're an entertainer, the ultimate goal of your communication is belief. Not awareness. Not fear. Not engagement. Belief. Belief leads to experience and experience leads to adoption. If we *believe* you can help us, make us look good, improve our relationships, make us feel good about ourselves, etc., then we'll take your call, stop by your place of business, click on your link, join your organization, or grab your product off of the shelf. If we don't, we won't. We're simply too busy today to act on faith.

So the next time you're compelled to communicate; to send us a message. The next time you feel the urge to preach from the pulpit, make fantastic promises, tickle our funny bones, or entice our eyeballs . . . stop! Stop and ask yourself: How can I bring people together—associates with each other, associates with our audience, and our audience members with each other—to create something real and valuable? How can I elicit belief through behavior? Don't say, "Just Do It," do it with us! Don't tell us that you want to be our friend, be our friend! Because if we do it with you, and with each other, we'll come to believe. And belief is the path to action. Absent belief, you're just another cartoon shark in a very crowded sea.

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