

# TOM

## The Yin and Yang of Marketing

# ASACKER

“Tom, Love your insights and writing, except for one thing that is annoying. I think your style of headlines, e.g., ‘Shakespeare on betrayal,’ ‘Woody Allen on sex,’ is getting stale.

Plus it doesn't tell me enough to want to click through on my blog reader.”

— *Email from a friend about my blog*

Do you see the opposing forces radiating from my friend's “complaint?” “*Tom, Love your insights and writing . . .*” She's referring to the yin of my marketing. The water and earth. The substance. The *content*. But, it goes on, “. . . *your style of headlines . . . doesn't tell me enough . . .*” That's the yang of my marketing. The fire and air. The “packaging.” The *context*. That tension is real, and it's being felt by many as brands continue to get pushed and pulled by the rapidly changing demands and preferences of the liberated and empowered masses.

My particular yin-yang marketing strain may appear to have a simple solution: *Just change the damn headline!* Right. So I suppose the prudent thing for all marketers to do when confronted with a yin-yang conflict is similarly straightforward: “*Just listen to the damn customers.*” Ah, if only the relative and interdependent marketing universe were so uncomplicated. “*Customers want it bigger, smaller, faster, cheaper, etc., so let's do it! Customers want us to be green, so let's get green! Customers want us to blog, so let's blog! Customers simply want the yin, so let's get rid of the yang. What are we waiting for?*”

### **What Kind of Car are You?**

Have you ever heard someone ask this question: “*If your brand was a car, what kind of car would it be and why?*” Consider your answer and then tell me: Where did you get the meaning behind the model you chose? Have you crashed a Volvo and walked away unscathed, thus experiencing the brand's meaning of safe? Perhaps you've driven a rugged Jeep up the side of a mountain, or rolled a ball bearing down the precisely crafted hood of a Lexus? Hmm. I know! You've towed a 10,000 lb trailer up a seesaw ramp with a Toyota Tundra. No? Here's where you got it: Advertising.

During the halcyon days of mass media marketing, advertising created the brand meaning. Consumers referenced those meanings to choose brands like them, and then *they* became the context (Women smoked Virginia Slims. Men smoked Lucky Strikes. Your father drove a Cadillac. You drove a Mustang). Not so much any more. During your

commute to work tomorrow, you'll see Millennials in Caddys, middle-aged women driving Hummers, carpenters in Mercedes, cheerleaders in Jeeps, and accountants on Harleys. The meaning is missing. Where did it go?

The pervasiveness of brand meaninglessness became vividly clear this past summer at a family reunion, when I witnessed my redneck relatives from Louisiana—and I can call them that because I'm one too—wearing cowboy hats, blue jeans and . . . bright yellow Crocs. Crocs! Those multi-colored, plastic, cheap looking sandals on the feet of my rough and rugged, country cousins. I also accompanied them to a local Starbucks, prior to pulling into a Circle K to gas up the pickup and grab a bag of venison jerky.

Today's culture is characterized by constant change and an individualistic, mix-and-match mentality. So, as the cost of production and distribution decreases *and* the mass media audience disappears, brands become widely available, acquiesce to the consumer, get mixed-and-matched, and become meaningless. That's a bad thing for brands, especially when times get tough. With fewer and fewer cultural reference points, people start choosing based solely on the yin—function, convenience and price.

### **What's a Marketer to Do?**

So what can marketers do to create meaning in a world of disintegrating media and demanding consumers? How should they deal with their yin-yang tensions and make their brands stand out in a “me too” marketplace? Simple. Create more balance. That's the paradox! If you're a yin marketer—focused primarily on utility, quality and features—turn your attention towards the yang; the fire! The personality and packaging of your brand. If you're a yang marketer—all caught up in creative communication, promotion and packaging—refocus your energy on the yin; the earth. The performance and usefulness of your products and services.

Truth be told, the real problem with my blog has nothing to do with my yang—the headlines. Rather, it's my yin that's been lacking. If I'm interested in increasing readership, in building my blog brand, I should focus on my content. I should write more and make my writing more valuable. Similarly, Starbucks problem has nothing to do with its yang—its marketing communication. It's their yin that's out of whack. They should forget about advertising and start figuring out how to add more substance to their premium offering. Toyota? Go yang! GM? Yin baby!

Whenever you're getting a tug from customers—or from your inner marketer—in a particular yin-yang direction, resist the temptation to give in and create slack in your brand. It's a sure sign that it's time for you to rebalance your two opposing, yet complimentary marketing forces. Instead, refocus your efforts and pull back in the other direction. Create tension! Without tension, brands become bland.