

# Where there is chaos there is opportunity

I was just watching television and I saw a response to the credit crisis. It is something called Purchasing Power. Apparently, it is a payroll deduction system for paying for stuff you can't afford. So instead of paying a credit card issuer, you have your pay docked each pay period until you pay off your debt. This approach is as old as the hills, but it hasn't been in the public eye before or in this format. This is the perfect time for this company to advertise its services. Americans will continue to want things they cannot afford, so there is an opportunity to step in where credit cards are stepping out.

The commercial for this company was somewhat low-tech. And I don't want to give the company additional publicity by linking to their website, but it struck me that when marketing yourself, you need to find the opportunities, even in spite or maybe due to an economic downturn.

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# Political communication is a two-way street

Well, it finally is here. Election Day. Never before in my lifetime have I seen such a long election cycle, and yet so much interest. We have seen positive ads and negative ads. We've seen staying on message and going off message. We saw how the current economic situation shifted the message. But the bottom line is that each candidate used **MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS** to reach his/her **TARGET AUDIENCE**. Yes indeed.

An election is a real live, measured test of the success of your marketing communications. If you got your message across and people bought, you win. Simple. And the voters get their say today. For the past year, we've heard from the candidates. Today, they hear from us. What we bought and what we didn't buy. In fact, I dare say that political communication is the pinnacle of this field...it uses all methods of communication from simple lawn signs, to expensive TV ads to social media. It needs strategy and it has to appeal to the largest majority. I am jealous of anybody in an American politics class this semester. What a way to see and understand the process.

So, did you vote today?

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## **Is it time for a change?**

There is a pizza joint across the street from my building. It's one of those take-out/delivery places that also serve subs and other greasy food. A couple of weeks ago, there was a sign posted that it was under new managements. And then, the renovations followed. They added floor to ceiling windows, painted the place yellow and added a new sign, using the same name as before but with new fonts and color scheme. So all in all, they have spiffed up the old hole-in-the-wall that needed it. I suspect that there is no new management but rather the realization that when things get tough, the tough get going (excuse the cliché). The pizza place realized it had to make changes, in this case, aesthetic improvements, to attract new customers or lure back former customers. (It remains to be seen how the pizza will taste, and that will be another story)

The same holds true for any business identity. Have you been

using the same logo for the past 20 years? When was the last time you examined your branding effort? Is it time for a change? Does your tagline still communicate what you do? Does your marketing identity synch with your business personality?

In short, if things aren't going well now due to the economic situation, it is a perfect time to take stock of how you are marketing yourself, and decide if you need to make changes. The same old does not always work.

This also brings me to one of the most successful political campaigns in modern times: Barack Obama's. What is his campaign slogan? Change we can believe in. Change is big right now and Obama knows that the public wants a change from the Bush years. As opposed to McCain's slogan of Country First, I think that Obama's slogan speaks directly to what people are looking for and communicates it effectively.

We'll know (hopefully) on Wednesday morning if Obama's slogan won more hearts and minds than McCain's. But regardless of who wins this election, we are in for a few months (at least) of tough economic times. It's time to change, right?

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## Sometimes clever works

And sometimes clever is too clever. But. There are times when that clever wordplay is just right. For instance, MetLife. For the **if** in life. You see, **if** is right there in the middle of the word **life**. And what does MetLife do? It sells insurance, and you get insurance for the what ifs in life. Rarely does something like this work so well. So kudos to MetLife. I love that wordplay. On the other hand, there campaign also centers around Snoopy. Why? Who knows. The big plus is that it is recognizable.

Can you think of other really clever ads? I will try to keep a list.

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## Marketing and Economy

Given the uncertainty in the economy, many people are cutting back on discretionary spending. Restaurants are especially hard hit during economic downturns, as people stop eating out. And in marketing, you can see two extremes: cutting out marketing dollars or excessive/over the top marketing spending. Which approach makes sense?

To cut out marketing completely is really akin to shooting yourself in the foot. Perhaps you keep your shoes, but you will no longer be able to walk very far. It is conventional wisdom that advertising and public relations agencies lose clients during economic recessions. Advertisers look to cut back on something so they go for what seems to be frivolous. But is advertising your business frivolous? How else are you going to get customers? On the other hand, the concept of guerilla marketing is successful because it uses cheaper methods of attracting and retaining customers. But the key to both is that businesses only survive if they have customers and must do SOMETHING to get them or retain them.

To go over the top in marketing is probably unnecessary. And wasteful. As I was thumbing through a women's interest magazine yesterday, I came across an elaborate three dimensional print ad for Fruit of the Loom. It caught my interest but did not make me any more likely to buy than a regular print ad. It got me to thinking that Fruit of the Loom feels it has to do what it can to attract customers. Of course, this ad was probably conceptualized well before our

financial meltdown, but I won't be surprised if we see this type of excessive spending from some advertisers in spite of finances. Christmas will be very telling, as retailers especially look to increase their revenue.

So in sum, a tough economy means that you have to get tougher in looking for customers. Keep marketing yourself, perhaps in different ways. Maybe this is the time to try something different. But don't cut out advertising or go over the top. Neither will help your bottom line.

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## **The Virtues of Staying On Message**

As a marketing communications case, Barack Obama's campaign is the clear winner. The campaign has chosen a message (the economy is really bad because of the Republican's mismanagement of it and Obama can do better) and stuck with it. People are concerned about this message and are responding well to it. The McCain campaign on the other hand has not found its core message. We know that McCain is concerned about mortgages, taxes, and...Obama's association with Bill Ayers. Although all of these are legitimate issues to focus on, the campaign has not crystallized into one overarching message that can be delivered time and again.

McCain may have the ideas and the experience, but his "marketing" is getting muddled. And that may cost him the election. Obama, on the other hand, early on grasped the importance of the Internet in attracting younger voters, has stayed on message and has a flexible ad budget that has allowed him to put money in the states he considers more

important. McCain's most recent ad strategy, in spite of the overwhelming economic news, was to place ads talking about Obama's relationship with Ayers. It has backfired, no doubt. At a campaign stop on Friday, McCain had to spend time assuring the crowd that they shouldn't be scared of Obama, that he is decent (subtext—he is not a terrorist).

The bottom line for any campaign, political or otherwise, is to choose a message that resounds with the target audience and stick to it.

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## Ways of seeing

In the end, as consumers (of products and of media), we see things the way we want to see them. If anything has become clear with this presidential campaign, is that voters (consumers) see what they want to see, and so does the media. There is no such thing as lack of bias. Everyone knows Fox News hangs to the right, and in their eyes, McCain won the debate last night. CNN is considerably more liberal, although they throw in two Republican strategists to their panel for a mix, and they say Obama won. My personal view is that neither candidate did well and that the town hall format was a mess.

It continues to shock me just how different people see the same thing differently. Where some people see patriotism (Sarah Palin speaking about America) other people see racism (her saying that Obama is un-American). If you do a search for Sarah Palin's racist remarks on Google, you will find an AP story about this, along with a great many blogs decrying this. I found a blog today that claims, erroneously, that Obama is a Muslim. And so the social media and the mainstream media can really serve to muddle the facts. Of course, we are seeing an

upsurge in “fact checking” from organizations such as Factchecker.org. But where are those “facts” coming from? Which facts are we choosing to check?

I think that as consumers of media, we need to acknowledge what we are looking for and we need to question the motivation of media outlets. Remember too that media is paid for by advertising dollars and ultimately, that makes the most difference. Remember a few years ago that when Ellen DeGeneres was on the sitcom Ellen and she came out, some groups threatened to boycott the advertisers that advertised on that show? It works the other way too...some advertisers won't advertise on one channel because of bias. And more importantly, some commentators will not interview somebody because they disagree. For instance, Campbell Brown of CNN had a spat with the McCain campaign that led to McCain canceling his appearance on Larry King Live.

Now more than ever we need to understand that what we see is not the whole story. As consumers, we need to find out what the story is and our best chance in the political season at least, is to read each candidate's position papers (via web or campaign) and to watch the debates and perhaps skip the “analysis.” In the end we need to develop our own way of seeing. And the media needs to be more transparent about why they see what they see.

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## **Improve your marketing communications**

Are your efforts working? You advertise and send direct mail but are getting no results. What do you attribute that to?

Chances are you are not communicating effectively. Here are a few things to consider:

1. **Target audience:** Are you sure you are targeting the right demographic? Are you reaching the target effectively?
  2. **Clarity of message:** Are you using jargonese? Using complicated terms? Really saying what you mean to say?
  3. **Timing:** Is your timing on target? Are you giving your audience enough time to make a decision?
  4. **Attractiveness:** As in dating, in communications the visual can take precedence over content. Are your marketing materials designed to be easy to read? Are they attractive and professional looking? What image are you conveying?
  5. **Outside opinion:** Have you shown your campaign/materials to an impartial observer? Have you tested it with a focus group or a potential customer?
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## On knowing your target audience

Knowing your target audience is the primary task of any marketer. How can you craft your message if you don't know who you are speaking to? How can you make sure your potential clients buy your product if you don't where they live, what they like and the other elements that make up your demographic profile? Often, ads don't work because they don't target the right audience. Or, they target the right audience but don't communicate properly. So this brings me to Sarah Palin and Joe Biden during the debate last night. It was very clear that each of them knew who their target audience was and used the

proper language to communicate with it. Palin used her folksiness to establish connection with “Joe Six Pack and Hockey Moms” around the US. She used terms like doggone it and gosh darn it to make the point that she is an average person from Main Street Wasilla. Biden spoke in a more formal fashion, to communicate with an intellectual audience and to those seeking a traditional politician. He threw in references to Scranton and Home Depot to assure “Main Street” that he’s also in touch with them. In the end, I think both politicians understand who they need to communicate to and did so well. I think if you are a liberal Democrat with environmental leanings, Sarah Palin rubbed you the wrong way. But then again, you are not her target. She knows she can’t connect with you. On the other hand, if you are someone who feels politicians are out to get you with their misguided policies, then you loved that Palin spoke to you.

If there is a problem with appealing solely to your target audience during a presidential campaign is that you don’t motivate the other side to vote for you. This debate proved that—neither side did much to convince the other to switch allegiances.

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## **On coupons and reinventing your product**

Clipping coupons is a sometimes denigrated activity which nonetheless helps thousands of Americans keep to their grocery budgets. In this sense, coupons play a significant role in marketing communications. Many people buy the product for which they can get the best price, and coupons (especially in stores that double their face value) can help lower prices.

So, for example, if you are shopping for detergent, and you have a 50-cent coupon for Tide and a 75-cent coupon for Purex, you may decide to buy Purex, either as a trial or because it will be cheaper.

Manufacturers also use coupons to introduce products and to stimulate sales. And, often, I think, they use coupons to experiment with campaigns. After all, coupons are traceable. You can gauge if something is working just by the number of coupons that are redeemed.

Today I saw an interesting juxtaposition of coupons for Palmolive Dishwashing Liquid. One was for traditional Palmolive (you know, the green stuff that claims to save your hands from the harshness of doing dishes) and for "New Palmolive Pure + Clear." This new product claims to have no unnecessary chemicals, no heavy fragrances, non-irritating dyes and no harmful residue on dishes." This is from the same people who manufacture the other Palmolive. Are they saying that regular Palmolive has unnecessary chemicals, irritating dyes and leaves harmful residue???? Do you see how this is dangerous for the Palmolive brand? Although I applaud them for their new product I think that this where branding can be defeated. If you introduce a new product that in a sense contradicts your existing product, you should use a different brand, right? Or, is the thought process that the brand is strong and now they can provide an alternative for people looking for a less chemically harsh dish liquid? Will this lead eventually to a complete change in the Palmolive brand? I really wonder. Also, do people think about the ads or do they just take it at face value?

What do you think?