Social cues

Although I think many people who march to the beat of their own drummer are interesting, some folks are just plain clueless. This past weekend I went on an organized hike. Most hikers were dressed in hiking clothes of one stripe or another, except for someone my friend dubbed “Disco Dan.” “Disco Dan” was attired in short shorts made of corduroy and of a peach hue, to match his multicolored button down shirt. Furthermore, “Disco Dan” was wearing non-hiking shoes. To say the least, “Disco Dan” stood out, and not in a good way.

Although “Disco Dan” was harmless and mildly amusing, it made me think about how people act in a societal context. Most people are adept enough to fit in. Some people, like Dan, either don’t get it or don’t care to get it, and still others are avant-garde, doing today what most of us won’t do for months or years.

How is this a marketing issue? First, responding to social cues is important in personal marketing. If you are trying to get people to buy you, the product, you can’t be out of touch with what is socially acceptable. For instance, if you are interviewing at a law firm and you show up in jeans and a t-shirt, you are saying with your clothing choice that you don’t understand the law firm ethos, or that you are going to do what you are going to do, no matter what.

Secondly, observing and listening to understand what is socially acceptable and what is not, is essential when marketing. I would say that if you have trouble with social cues you are not going to be able to create great ad copy or be in public relations or in event planning. Say you are tasked with writing copy directed at senior citizens. You use the terms that GenY appreciates but that seniors don’t understand. You are being tone-deaf to the needs of your audience. Or a more common occurrence, you go for the

intentionally hip or what you think is really funny, but that your audience just doesn’t get.

Unfortunately, as more people lose the ability to interact directly with other people due to the over reliance on electronic gadgets like smart phones and gps, the less they are able to pick up on social cues. It is common to see people with headphones on walking around in their own personal bubble, and when they are looking for something, instead of asking a live person nearby they go to Twitter or Facebook and ask there.

The bottom line is that we live together in a society, where some things are more acceptable than others. When you want to be like Disco Dan and wear what you want because you want to, you are only communicating to the world that you don’t care or that you don’t get it. Either way, it creates a degree of alienation.

What are your thoughts? Have you noticed an increase in people who don’t react to social cues?

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