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Benjamin Franklin and the Kuala Lumpur Question

Jeremy Bullmore

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Benjamin Franklin and the Kuala Lumpur Question:

“Sometimes A Little Neglect
May Breed Great Mischief”

The city of Florence recently announced the winner of a competition, open to architects throughout the world, for the design of a new railway station. As is the custom in these cases, all the short-listed designs are now on public display, including that of the winner, Norman Foster.

Even to an untutored eye, the time, thought, money, passion, talent and love lavished on every one of them is painfully apparent. To study their brilliant fusion of function and form is to feel a huge sense of sympathy – not just for the losers but also for the members of the adjudicating panel whose job it was to make the final choice. There were to be no consolation prizes. There could be only one winner. How in the name of justice was that single winner to be chosen and the rest confined to oblivion?

I don't, of course, know; but I'm entirely confident that the process can only have been completed by that which in certain advertising circles is known as the Kuala Lumpur Question.*

To understand the implications of the Kuala Lumpur Question, you must first put yourself in the place of any adjudicator faced with the need, as were the Florentine panellists, to make a single choice from multiple offerings, many of which are excellent.

*No slight to Kuala Lumpur is intended. In Malaysia, the Kuala Lumpur Question might be the Grand Rapids, Michigan Question; and in Grand Rapids, Michigan, it might well be the Tierra del Fuego Question.

Let us say that you have in front of you 150 written applications for a single job vacancy and that you must first reduce that number to 10; and later, from that 10, choose one.

You may start by believing that you will scan through those applications and select only the most promising; that you will search for the positive. But very quickly indeed, if you're at all self-aware, you'll notice that a subtle change has come over your assessment process. Rather than taking out your hi-liter pen and emphasising the most appealing characteristics of the most promising applicants, you begin to look for errors and omissions. Rather than looking for reasons for inclusion, your eyes will begin to scan the papers for evidence to justify rejection. You find yourself longing to alight on the small false fact, the typographical error, the relatively unimpressive qualification, the failure to do the most basic homework about your own company. You seize on these often insignificant features with relief and gratitude: with a clear conscience, you may now begin to eliminate; your candidate pile is already down to 149, 148, 147, 146...

The Objective Disqualifier

Advertising agencies, brand consultants and professional advisers of all kinds routinely find themselves taking part in beauty parades, presenting their credentials to potential clients in competition with many others. Understandably, they concentrate on their proprietary skills and their authenticated achievements; so they are not always ready for the Kuala Lumpur Question.

“Tell me,” says the potential client, now half way through the fifth impressive presentation, “Do you have an office in Kuala Lumpur?”

It is possible, I suppose, that access to an office in Kuala Lumpur is indeed of cardinal commercial importance to this client. It is very much more likely, however, that the client is searching with something approaching desperation for an apparently respectable reason for the elimination of at least one of the candidate agencies. However trivial it may be, he needs an Objective Disqualifier.

On receiving the verdict a week or two later, the candidate agency in question reacts with disbelief and outrage. “They loved the work we do for X, they thought our strategy was fantastic, they found the chemistry between us sensational – yet they’ve bumped us off the bloody list *because we haven’t got an office in Kuala Lumpur!*”

The outrage is understandable but the disbelief is naïve. This process of selection, or something very close to it, is inevitable in any competitive situation where there are more high quality applicants than opportunities. The luckless Florentine adjudicators, faced with a great many brilliantly conceived designs for railway stations, must, towards the end of the process, have scrutinised each meticulously made-to-scale model not for evidence of perfection but for evidence of imperfection.

The truth of all this may have been apparent enough to competitive professions for a very long time. A little belatedly perhaps, marketing companies are waking up to the fact that, in consumer markets, too, there are many more applicants than opportunities; more production than consumption; more supply than demand.

As touched on very briefly in last year's WPP annual report essay, greatly increased consumer choice and confidence mean that individuals making brand selections behave more and more like the adjudicating panel of an architectural competition – and for exactly the same reasons. Faced with an array of competitive brands – all known to be functionally satisfactory (which is why they are competitive) and all pleading persuasively for our custom – we have no choice but to eliminate: so “in allocating our loyalty we welcome reasons to reject a brand almost as eagerly as reasons to prefer it.” At some level of consciousness, we search for the Objective Disqualifier, however trivial.

Eliminate the negative

It's been recognised for at least 70 years that few everyday brands enjoy significant functional advantages over their competitors; and that even when they do exist, they tend to be short-lived. The growth of marketing communications over that same period owes much to their acknowledged ability to establish and maintain brands whose distinctive positioning derives at least as much from brand character as from brand performance.

In a future which promises still more over-capacity in production, fierce competition in prices, elusive margins and a consuming public increasingly asserting its democratic right to be picky, there can be little doubt that marketing communications are in for a period of sustained demand. But maybe, in this second stage of consumer enfranchisement, we now need to do rather more than accentuate the positive; however difficult it may prove to be, we'll have to learn to anticipate and eliminate the negative as well.

Conventional research won't help us very much. What do marketing directors value most highly in advertising agencies? The trade press regularly conducts research on this subject, and this is what marketing directors value: an understanding of their business, creativity, strategic insights, good management. Marketing directors will never confess to a researcher that what they are really looking for is an office in Kuala Lumpur; because, of course, they aren't. The ownership of an office in Kuala Lumpur will never, of itself, win you business. The absence of one, however unjustly, may be used to justify your losing it.

Beers, banks and candy bars

Exactly the same set of principles applies to consumers of beers, banks or candy bars. And exactly the same process applies not only to the selection of an option in the first place but also to its subsequent deselection.

What do I want from a bank? I want efficiency, accuracy, availability and security; and – sentimentalist that I am – I'd also like to believe that my bank sometimes thinks of me as a human being.

I'd once had the same bank for about 20 years and felt a general discontent about it. Yet it continued to provide efficiency, accuracy, availability and security: so I stayed with it. Then one day, very politely, I asked them why I was having the occasional problem getting my bank card accepted. Time passed – and I then got a letter from the manager expressing surprise that I had encountered such a problem since he himself was having no trouble whatsoever. And that's all he said.

Something snapped. I'd found the excuse I'd been subconsciously looking for: the Objective Disqualifier. So I fired them. And I have no doubt that they were utterly astonished that such a trivial incident could have prompted me to jettison 20 years of amiable rubbing along in order to embark on the fearful journey of moving my bank account.

There's been a great deal of talk over the last 10 years or so for the need for integrated communications. We are all agreed by now, I think, that our multitude of different brand communications needs to be carefully monitored for coherence and cohesion; that advertising, PR, direct marketing, website design and maintenance, in-store display, promotions and perhaps a dozen other consumer encounters need to complement each other; need to be integrated.

What often seems to be forgotten, however, is that all brand communications, however disparate and chaotic, inevitably end up being integrated anyway. The trouble is, they end up being integrated not by the brand's managers but by the brand's potential users. And the way that consumers conduct this integration is seldom to the benefit of the brand's reputation.

The receivers of brand communications, like all receivers, abhor dissonance. We find it impossible to think as highly of a brand in its totality if just one minor abrasive factor disturbs its polished surface. One small disrupting experience, one jarring note in its communications, one piece of brand behaviour that contradicts the brand's promise: and, in our need to find consonance, we will downgrade our ratings until everything fits again. By the time we've completed integrating its incoherent communications, the brand will be diminished in our minds.

Back to 1758

So two dangerous truths both collide and collude. In trying to make coherent sense of a brand's contradictory signals, the relatively unimportant flaw takes on a disproportionately destructive role; while at exactly the same time, in our quest to make simple, fret-free choices, to eliminate options with a clear conscience, we search for and embrace any evidence of inadequacy. We identify some minor deficiency; then press it into service as our Objective Disqualifier.

In *Poor Richard's Almanack* for 1758, Benjamin Franklin foreshadowed all of this. He urged "circumspection and care, even in the smallest matters, because sometimes a little neglect may breed great mischief." And he reminded us:

For want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe, the horse was lost; for want of a horse, the rider was lost; for want of a rider, the message was lost; for want of a message, the battle was lost; for want of a battle, the kingdom was lost. And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

In modern marketing, the horseshoe nail may be one of a thousand apparently insignificant factors. Many of those factors, organisationally, may be officially outside the province or responsibility of the marketing director. An unresponsive call centre; the failure to correct a faulty product feature; a clumsy letter from head office; a rumour on the internet; a minor change to a trusted product's formulation: to the besieged consumer actively seeking an equivalent of the Kuala Lumpur Question, subconsciously on the lookout for an Objective Disqualifier, each of these trivial occurrences may be enough to lose the brand a lifetime loyalist.

They can't all be anticipated, of course, and they can't all be prevented. But they do need to be identified and they should never take us by surprise. In a world where virtually every brand has some element of after-sales service about it, an ability to recover, apologise and make amends for the inconsequent may become as commercially necessary as the maintenance of basic product quality.

Jeremy Bullmore

Jeremy Bullmore was born in 1929. He went from school to National Service, then to Oxford where he spent two years not reading English. His first job, in 1954, was as a trainee copywriter with J. Walter Thompson in London, and he stayed with that agency until his retirement in 1987. He became successively copywriter, writer/producer, creative group head and head of television; then from 1964 to 1975, head of the creative department and from 1976 to 1987, chairman, London. He was a member of the J. Walter Thompson worldwide board and, from 1981 to 1987, chairman of the Advertising Association.

He has been a non-executive director of WPP since 1988 and was a non-executive director of the Guardian Media Group from 1998 to 2001. He has continued to write and speak regularly about advertising and marketing and is a regular columnist for *Campaign*, *Management Today* and *Market Leader*. He was awarded a CBE in 1985.

He is married to Pamela, a garden designer and writer. They have three grown-up children and live in London and Wiltshire.

Another Bad Day at the Office? was published by Penguin in 2001. The third greatly enlarged edition of his book *Behind the Scenes in Advertising* was published by WARC in March 2003.

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