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The Steak & Kidney Pie That Wasn't

– the end is in sight for Sizzle Marketing



Jeremy Bullmore

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Just about every marketing strategy written over the last 50 years or so contains an introductory section entitled *The New Challenges*.

In it, the author catalogues the astonishing range of obstacles that make the achievement of that year's agreed targets uniquely difficult. The list will include: increasing competition, inflated media rates, attenuated lead-times, adverse exchange rates and – a particular favourite – the increasing sophistication of the consumer. Marketing has been getting more and more difficult for so many years now it's a miracle that we can still function at all.

And now we may expect a new hazard to join the old favourites. As convincingly demonstrated by Barry Schwartz in his book *The Paradox of Choice*, today's affluent consumer is faced with such an over-abundance of choice that a kind of paralysis sets in. "Clinging tenaciously to all the choices available to us contributes to bad decisions, to anxiety, stress, and dissatisfaction – even to clinical depression." "Unlimited choice" may "produce genuine suffering." So here's another setback for those of us in marketing: an excess of choice leading to consumer stasis. We can only look back with envy at our fortunate, carefree predecessors who were lucky enough to be in marketing when marketing was easy.

But in this belief, of course, we delude ourselves. More often than not, that catalogue of *New Challenges* is trotted out as a pre-emptive strike against the risk of failure. There's little meaningful evidence to suggest that marketing today is any more difficult than it was 50 years ago.

When we talk so plaintively about the increasing sophistication of the consumer, what we're really referring to is a past that never existed; to those good old days when all we had to do was instruct the peasants to go out and buy something – and they, with a deferential touch of the cap, would mutely obey. And what we imply (though never openly say) is that, because these newly sophisticated consumers have seen through our strategy, it's getting harder and harder to get away with it.

This implication is curiously insulting to both consumers and marketing. Consumers, as David Ogilvy reminded the world some 40 years ago, have never been morons; and good marketing has never been about getting away with it.

What is certainly true is that we all adapt over time to changes in communications techniques. Compare the editing and dialogue of a good 1954 feature film with the editing and dialogue of a good 2004 feature film. Note the confidence and economy with which today's directors employ hints and clues; trust their audiences to fill in gaps, to understand nuances, to follow story lines. And that confidence is entirely justified: not because today's audience is a smarter audience but because they've all had more practice; they've learnt the language of filmmaking.

In just the same way, people have learnt the language of advertising and marketing; but again, this is not because they're smarter – or indeed, more sophisticated. It's not that they've seen through us; they just don't want to be subjected to old-fashioned marketing any more than they want to wear old-fashioned clothes.

And secondly, of course, these changes in our consumers' marketing literacy – their increased familiarity with marketing's techniques – have an impact not only on us. They apply, with equal force, to every one of our competitors; which makes it logically difficult to argue that the increased sophistication of our consumers presents problems exclusively confined to us. All the time, it's true, the nature of the playing field changes a bit – but it always remains level.

Elmer Wheeler's Legacy

Of all the marketing techniques that consumers are now consciously aware of, there's one we can trace back to Elmer Wheeler. It was this inspirational Depression-era salesman who first exhorted his followers to “sell the sizzle not the steak”. Wheeler originally meant it as a reminder that effective salesmanship concentrates not on an exhaustive list of a product's attributes but rather on the benefits that those attributes deliver. When many years later,

Theodore Levitt reminded us that people didn't want a quarter-inch drill, they wanted a quarter-inch hole, he was making the same durable point. Over time, however, Elmer's adage seems to have drifted a bit in meaning. Today, too often, it encourages marketing people to concentrate on the sizzle to the exclusion of the steak; to believe that the intrinsic quality of a product is secondary to its image. This is dangerous stuff and people – real people – have sniffed it out with growing disapproval.

In a lecture three years ago, Niall FitzGerald, then chairman of Unilever, told the story of their Country Soups. Sales were poor and getting poorer – and he'd been asked to authorise a significant expenditure in order to upgrade the quality of Country Soups' ingredients. On instinct, he asked to see the list of ingredients as it had been 20 years earlier, when the brand had been strong. His instinct was right. The list of ingredients then had been almost exactly the list of ingredients it was now proposed, at considerable expense, to reinstate. In between, a succession of profit-conscious brand managers, believing the sizzle to be more important than the steak, had slowly and furtively whittled away at intrinsic quality, telling themselves that each change was so negligible as to be undetectable. So it was that a soup, calling itself Country Soup, with all the hoped-for associations of rural, straight-from-Mother-Earth reality, had been persistently stripped of the evidence that would have given those associations legitimacy. It did not go undetected.

Don't Try to Fake Authenticity

Over-enthusiasm for sizzle marketing is more dangerous today than ever because there's a growing and clearly detectable popular thirst for what is usually summed up as authenticity. Increasingly, people like to know the provenance of what they buy. Countries of origin and regions of origin provide valued reassurance. Knowledge of a brand's history and the people behind it can contribute a great deal to belief in the brand's worth.

Artificiality is suspect; authenticity welcome: as long, of course, as the authenticity is authentic.

In many countries, this emerging search for authenticity has favoured the rise and rise of farmers' markets and farm shops. A new farm shop opened last year in the county of Wiltshire in England.

The shop was housed in a well-converted old barn. There was a stripped wooden floor, the fruit and vegetables were displayed in wicker baskets and details of local produce were hand-lettered on a blackboard. The place absolutely reeked of authenticity.

The home-made steak & kidney pie looked particularly appetising – so we bought one and had it for supper that evening. The steak inside the pie was meagrely distributed and far from tender. My wife found two small pieces of kidney. I found none.

To many of us English, the steak & kidney pie is the embodiment of authentic, basic country food. No factory, we think, and no hypermarket, could ever replicate its rich abundance, its melting, meaty generosity. And now here, having inflated our hopes and expectations, was this mean-spirited apology for a pie; this mockery of a pie; this shameless rip-off impostor of a pie. And the fact that we'd bought it from a converted barn with stripped wooden floors made its duplicity doubly offensive. Inauthentic authenticity both attracts and deserves more condemnation than cheerful, unapologetic artificiality. All the farm shop's energy and investment had been expended on the sizzle: that, they believed, was all the punters cared about. The steak (and in this case, of course, also the kidney) had been cynically downgraded in pursuit of an extra penny's profit.

We have not patronised that farm shop since.

Brand As Clip-Joint

Over the last few years, whole books have been written about the importance to brands of creating and maintaining Trust. The arguments hardly need reiterating. Leading people to expect authenticity and then cheating them of it is as good a way as any of demolishing trust: it's brand as clip-joint, recklessly forfeiting future custom in pursuit of a quick buck today.

But not all those who write about the value of trust make it absolutely clear what they mean by that word; and here it's helpful to return to Professor Schwartz and *The Paradox of Choice*.

In his opening chapter, he chronicles his experience at his local 'modest' supermarket. "Returning to the food shelves, I could choose from among 230 soup offerings, including 29 different chicken soups. There were 26 varieties of instant mashed potatoes, 75 different instant gravies, 120 pasta sauces." Leaving the supermarket, he steps into his local consumer electronics store and discovers 45 different car stereo systems, 42 different computers, 27 different printers, 110 different televisions and 85 different telephones, excluding cell phones.

Looked at academically, and ignoring for a moment that limitless human ability to cope when confronted with apparently unmanageable complexity, you can see why Schwartz contends that such a bewilderment of choice 'tyrannizes' us. But every day, of course, human beings do manage the unmanageable.

Consumers Out-Source, Too

No general can personally manage an army of 50,000 men. No chief executive can personally manage a company of twice that number in 100 different countries. No reader can make an informed assessment of all 10 million works of fiction in print before deciding which three to take on holiday. Yet generals and CEOs and readers somehow maintain their sanity and their ability to function – because what we all do, of course, sometimes consciously and sometimes instinctively, is delegate.

The general has no more than a dozen people reporting to him. The CEO works with a small executive committee. And readers rely on their experience of a limited number of authors, subjects, reviewers and publishers.

Call it delegation or sub-contracting or out-sourcing: the principle is the same. The management of our lives is possible only through delegation; and delegation is made possible only by the existence of trust.

So in order to make satisfactory decisions, we do not need to have first-hand knowledge of every one of Professor Schwartz's 230 soups, 120 pasta sauces or 45 car stereos. Those who believe that brands are invented by companies and imposed from above on gullible citizens wilfully ignore the obvious truth: that brands (including of course corporate brands and retail brands and media brands) provide an indispensable consumer service. They are our trusted lieutenants to whom we confidently delegate and who impose some sort of order on our otherwise chaotic shopping lists.

So, in the end, it all seems to come together. Marketing conditions change and we need to be aware of those changes. But since those conditions apply to our competitors as well as ourselves, this doesn't mean to say that marketing is getting harder; simply that the prizes for getting things right are even more glittering.

As choice continues to multiply, we will continue to delegate more, to subcontract more, and we will put our trust only in trustworthy names: authentic names, of demonstrable intrinsic quality. The sizzle will still get our nostrils flaring with anticipation – but if we're ever cheated of the steak & kidney, we will be vindictive until the end of time.

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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 was a non-executive director of the Guardian Media Group from 1998 to 2001. Having been a non-executive director of WPP since 1988, he stepped down in September 2004 to join the WPP Advisory Board. He is currently president of the Market Research Society. 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. *Ask Jeremy*, based on his *Campaign* column, was published by Haymarket in July 2004.

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