



## How to make your marketing fail miserably

*Find problems by imagining their outcomes.*

### The ultimate Devil's Advocate

One of C.S. Lewis' best known works is "The Screwtape Letters," an imagined collection of advice from a senior demon, Screwtape, to his demon-in-training nephew, Wormwood. The letters are, essentially, reverse theology.

At one point, for example, Screwtape counsels his nephew to steer the thoughts of his "patient" away from ideas of truth; "Don't waste time trying to make him think that materialism *is true!* Make him think it is strong, or stark, or courageous -- that it is the philosophy of the future. That's the sort of thing he cares about." Each letter is a similarly wonderful lesson in how to avoid God. The point being, obviously, that we should be doing the opposite.

In the business world, we might call Lewis' method "contingency planning through failure identification." It's a planning tool that is, in my opinion, highly underutilized.

### "Not bad" can trump "good."

"What could go wrong?" is an incredibly powerful question. In our daily lives, we practice contingency planning all the time. We wear seatbelts, purchase insurance and set up the VCR in case we're not home in time to watch the 2-hour finale of "Friends." Cookbooks have lists of "substitute" ingredients you can use when you run out of nutmeg. The list goes on.

In many instances, success can be defined simply as failure avoidance. Why learn to swim? If you catalog positive qualities like, "it's fun" or "it's good exercise," you may get some takers. Some, though, will say that they prefer to run and don't like getting wet. OK. What if we describe swimming as "drowning prevention." Hey! Now everyone's got a reason to swim. To the pool!

We run this same risk of "who cares?" in marketing when we present all the "good" things that can happen when we market well. Good is good, sure, but do we really need to do it? Do we really need the exercise? Do we need to have fun? Maybe not. Do we need to not drown? That's harder to refute.

With that in mind, here are a few Screwtapian considerations for young anti-marketing demons. Let us imagine that Evil Uncle Andy is advising his young nephew, Thor, on how to screw up his clients' marketing...

### My Dear Young Thor,

I was delighted to hear from your mother that you have decided to turn your evil intentions towards that most fertile field of mismanagement, the marketing department. As a Gremlin of Waste, you will find ample opportunities in marketing to squander money, defeat intentions and ruin entire organizations. I know your first choice was the Information Technologies area, but after the glut of opportunity surrounding the Y2K phenomenon there are already far too many unqualified gremlins in that field. Be of good cheer; marketing blunders, while subtler than those of a computational nature, have a much greater potential for long-term disaster.

While the entire field of bad marketing will consume your studies and attention for years to come, I will suggest five principle rules by which any and all marketing projects can be blighted.

### ***1. Avoid the appropriate audience***

This is an excellent way to begin, as it will render useless and wasteful an otherwise powerful marketing program. Just think! When marketing misses its target, all positive attributes are wiped away. The creative concepts can be brilliant, the execution flawless, the costs well within budget, and still the program will fail utterly. While it is unreasonable to imagine that you can restrict a client's cat-food marketing solely to dog owners, there are several ways to misdirect programs in subtler ways:

- **Skip it** – Always an excellent suggestion. If your client never even thinks about the audience, never even takes a stab at defining or describing it, odds are she or he will miss it.
- **Overreach** – If your client's definition of audience is overly vague or unspecific, it's almost as good as missing the target entirely. The larger the audience to which the message is inappropriate, the larger the possibility of failure. This also has the added benefit of desensitizing the larger audience to future efforts.
- **Make assumptions** – It's so much easier to speak to an audience that conforms to your imagination than it is to conduct any dreadful research. You were once a child, so of course you know what children want! You have friends of the opposite gender, so you can imagine how they'd respond. You've read about other cultures, so you're fully qualified to speak to them. You get the picture.

And at all costs, keep your clients away from actual targets! If they engage in focus groups, surveys or even casual conversations with their target audience they may learn something truly useful.

### ***2. Rely solely on the past***

There is a helpful tendency on the part of clients to mistake repetition for learning. If something has worked well in the past, many marketers assume that it will work well again. Although this is patently absurd, it is actually easier to encourage than you might think, especially if an earlier success was completely unmapped.

Be very careful, however, that their reliance on the past does not become a study of the present. Tracking of relevant data, measurement of results, analysis of trends – these are all horrible signs of an intention to actually learn. Encourage in them a prideful insistence that they already know everything worth knowing. I've also found it very handy to have them rely on "anecdotal" evidence, even to the point where the anecdotes are ones that they made up themselves.

### ***3. Compartmentalize***

Very often, there is information in one part of a client's brain that would be frightfully useful if matched up with another key piece of data elsewhere. For example, if a client knows that the lifetime value of a customer is \$X, make sure they ignore this fact when the time comes to deliver a program that costs more than \$X per new customer. Help them concentrate on how beautiful the piece is, how much fun it is to spend loads of other people's money and how good this program will look on their resume.

By focusing their attention on details, you can avoid their understanding of the "big picture." Ironically, you can also get them to concentrate solely on this "big picture," keeping them ignorant of important tactical details. The key to managing their failure is to make sure they never link the two.

#### ***4. Take it personally***

Thankfully, humans invest themselves in their work to an enormously unhealthy degree. Whether succeeding or failing, they will take upon themselves a large measure of undeserved pride or woe. This is very helpful to us in our quest to ruin their marketing. For if they see a failed program as a symptom of their own miserable abilities, they will miss out on a chance to learn from their mistakes.

In marketing, which requires risk, failure is inevitable. The danger to our goals is that they will gain an understanding of why they failed and begin making plans to avoid it in the future. Unacceptable! Make sure they equate failure with their own personal worth and it will be impossible for them to improve. Similarly, when they succeed (which will be, we hope, infrequent), make sure they believe that their own magnificence is the sole ingredient of achievement.

#### ***5. Avoid understanding***

So much marketing involves wonderful lists of activities. So much to do. So many questions of “what,” “how” and “when.” Have your clients concentrate on those issues. But never, ever let questions of “why” enter their mental vocabulary.

Asking “why are we doing this?” is the first step towards true marketing mastery. For what is success, except the completion of a goal? If the goal is misunderstood or – even better – not even considered, marketing will not succeed. Indeed, it cannot. But if the word “why” creeps into their minds, don’t despair; there are levels upon levels of complex “reasoning” that can be inserted into any marketing process.

For example, let’s say your client ponders the question, “Why are we running this advertising campaign?” Make sure that they are satisfied with the answer, “To increase our visibility.” Most times, that will suffice. They will rarely ask, “Why is visibility important?” or “Visibility with whom?” or “Is it worth the price we’re paying?” Only very accomplished, very serious marketers will ever attempt to link their activities to the “root goals” of their existence; satisfaction and profit. My hope is that you never encounter such an individual.

#### ***Final thought***

Young Thor, we have it so much easier in marketing than do gremlins in many other disciplines. We are greatly aided by the fact that bad marketing is more expensive and time consuming than good marketing. That means that bad marketing programs actually increase the demand for marketers. A well-managed marketing department can often make do with many fewer employees and a much smaller budget. Since modern executives measure success by size of budget and department, though, you can rest assured that many managers will avoid good marketing like the plague it is.

Bad luck to you and your clients,

Your Evil Uncle Andy.