
The No-Harm Marketing Manifesto

How to Attract Customers and Sell So You Still Like Yourself in the Morning

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“Shop till you drop” is bad for the environment and rots the soul.

Is marketing evil? Some commentators lay the blame for the excesses of our consumer society at the doorstep of marketers. The frenzy of “shop till you drop” is bad for the environment, they charge. It also rots the soul.

“Every new acquisition generates disappointment, restlessness and another round of conspicuous (hence pointless) consumption,” writes Dennis Rohayton in the book *Philosophy History Sophistry*. “This, for many critics, is the dark side of consumer marketing.” One could say the same even when the goods being purchased are intangibles, such as the digital reports, memberships and coaching programs that Internet marketing seminar attendees rush to buy in the back of the room after being worked up into a froth.

Upon giving the matter considerable thought, I decided that marketing is not intrinsically evil. It simply requires conscience.

After reflecting on marketing practices or rationales that make me shudder, I’ve put together some guidelines you might consider adopting if you too feel it’s vital to be able to look at yourself in the mirror in the morning feeling happy about how you bring in customers. I do not name the guilty here, but rest assured that everything objectionable that I mention I have actually seen or heard.

Top No-Harm Marketing Principles

1. Always aim at the best possible match between what you're selling and who it's helpful for. Honestly discourage inappropriate buyers.

Some marketers argue that a low refund rate is evidence that you are “not selling hard enough.” According to those marketers, you should do your best to convince anyone and everyone to buy, because the only measure of success in business is the amount of monetary profit. To them, acting according to the customer’s best interest as well as your own is crazy and stupid.

I disagree. Selling products or services to people who aren't in a position to make proper use of them doesn't benefit either you or them. It may add a little revenue to your pockets in the short-term, but it doesn't boost your long-term customer base one bit.

Sales should be in the buyer's best interest as well as yours.

When someone writes or calls to say, "I'm not sure whether your XYZ course is right for me," you may be tempted to think "Aha! A prospect!" and try to sell them on enrolling regardless of their concerns. However, it's wiser to ask questions about their situation and goals and answer according to what's truly in their best interest.

If someone wants something from you that's not your forte, refer them to someone you trust. Good karma almost always comes your way in return!

It feels good to have raving fans, but I remember more than one instance where I noticed someone taking the same or similar courses from me again and again, and I gently took the person aside to suggest that it was time to stop signing up for seminars and time to start taking action. Again, a move like this can dampen earnings slightly, but it's the right thing to do when looking at the overall health of your business.

2. Use responsible packaging. Reject the argument that complicated packaging discourages returns.

Use environmentally responsible packaging.

Hard to believe, perhaps, but one marketer who has hundreds of thousands of followers around the world once proudly announced that he'd found a clever way to discourage returns of expensive information products: Wrap them into a messy, irregularly shaped, hard-to-untangle bundle of bubble wrap taped together and cram it into a bulky box. Because no one would ever be able to pack it all back up the way it was sent, it would seem too much trouble to return.

Perhaps you're like me, and this argument nauseates you. However, if you sell and ship tangible products, you still need to figure out how to strike a balance between making sure your stuff gets to the customer in A-1 condition and not overpacking in a way that gives an environmentally conscious buyer a headache.

What I do, whenever possible, is to reuse packaging material that came my way – including bubble wrap, Styrofoam “peanuts,” air pillows and discarded, clean paper wrappings. Rarely do I buy any such supplies, so I figure I am not adding to the total quantity of such items on the planet.

I could probably go one step further and insert a little card with the packing materials saying they were recycled and encouraging the customer to pass them along, where possible.

3. Have reasonable return/refund policies that accommodate buyer's remorse to some extent.

People buy things and then change their minds, or they buy and discover they had a misconception about what you were selling. Accordingly, you should have a return/refund policy that allows people to get their money back in at least some circumstances, while also being fair to you when you have sold something that by its nature cannot be resold.

Create guarantees and refund policies that respect needs of both buyers and sellers.

For instance, if you have a live event with limited enrollment, you normally can't fill up seats that have freed up at the last minute or after the event has started. Many event promoters offer a full refund up through a certain date. Others enable participants to attend the beginning of the event and request (and receive) a full refund prior to, say, lunchtime on the first day.

Likewise, a bed-and-breakfast owner with three rooms that are usually booked weeks or months in advance may need to balance fairness to her and to the customer by offering some sort of partial refund up till a certain date and a full refund if the room gets rebooked.

When I sell tangible items, I allow buyers to receive a full refund when they return something in resaleable condition, up to a year after they purchased. Afraid you'd be taken advantage of with a policy like that? Studies show that such guarantees almost always produce a net gain for the seller, as more people risk a purchase who wouldn't otherwise buy than return the item to receive a refund.

In my information marketing course, I teach some steps that reduce refunds because they remind buyers of why they bought and explain how the customer can easily begin enjoying those benefits by getting started with the product right away. If you're aiming at the best possible match between buyers and product offerings, this continues that mutually advantageous relationship.

In contrast, one marketer teaches the precise wording she recommends to induce paralyzing guilt in the mind of anyone thinking about requesting a refund: "I'll refund your money out of my own pocket." To me, her reasoning amounts to twisting the customer's arm with a welcoming smile on her face. The way I see it, it's the customer's money that gets refunded, not the marketer's. Because of the manipulative and controlling intent behind it, I reject this tactic.

4. Appeal to the positive values of customers, not fear or nastiness. In your promotions, don't harangue people for being stupid, inept or losers.

Fear is a powerful motivator. In March 2011, my husband and I were relaxing in a beach condo on Maui when word came that a tsunami was headed our way from Japan, and we had to evacuate to higher ground. Since no one knew how severe any inundation might be, we considered that we might be on our own for days or even weeks during a disaster in an isolated location, without a network of friends and neighbors. So we bought a lot of bottled water – enough for more than a week and much more than we needed, as it turned out – at the suddenly crowded local store before we drove uphill to wait out the alert.

Don't play on trumped-up fears.

Many marketers play a drumbeat of brutal competition to manufacture fear that prompts people to buy – fear of being left out or of getting left behind. Unlike the case of the tsunami, where there was objective danger, marketers who warn that you'll be toast if you don't join their program or that your business will collapse if you don't hop on board a trend are deliberately riling you up so your adrenaline gets you to click the "Buy" button. A groundless, fear-based pitch benefits the seller, not the buyer.

Profanity often conveys hurtful attitudes, beyond its shock effect.

When you mirror and confirm people's worst image of themselves or of others, it's even worse than spreading baseless fear, as far as I'm concerned. "Are you satisfied being a total loser? If so, move on. If not, get my program NOW." That's a rather tame example of the approach I'm talking about. You can also find pitches like "Buy Internet Success Coaching Pro and you'll be able to stick it to your c*nty boss and all those jerks around you who think their sh*t smells like roses." What's wrong there goes much deeper than profanity being used for its shock value. It's a sneering view of life that promotes meanness and spite. A no-harm marketer won't go there.

5. Sell in consumable amounts. Encourage customers to use what they purchased rather than to stockpile it.

When customers buy way more shoes, makeup or information products than they can possibly consume, that's terrific, many marketers say. All good! Well, maybe not. I'm persuaded by the opposite philosophy, that both you and the customer benefit when you encourage them to buy what they need and want – then use it and buy more. Selling in consumable quantities and promoting consumption of what has been purchased makes for a much better long-term relationship between seller and buyer.

For long-range profits, promote consumption as well as purchases.

With consumption by the buyer, you see more referrals and more repeat business. Sean D'Souza makes this point with the analogy of a restaurant. No restaurant gets to be wildly successful by tempting customers in, serving them gorgeous, succulent food and then having customers simply look at it without eating. Likewise, he says, you want your buyers using what they bought from you, loving it and coming back for more and more.

I encountered an interesting example of this point when I interviewed Dan Safkow, who sells customized audio players with pre-loaded content. Although the audio players he sells can hold more than 100 hours of material, he advises his clients not to overwhelm customers. "If we put too much content on a single player, there's a really good chance that the student will move on to something else before they ever finish it all," he explained. "The sweet spot for a single product is 10 to 35 hours because that's what somebody could reasonably consume in 30 to 60 days."

Ponder this when you notice others piling on bonus after bonus, creating a heap of goodies much heftier than even the most avid learner could realistically benefit from. Even though it's digital stuff, isn't it still a waste? Isn't it part of the mentality of "gimme more, more, more"?

6. Don't run your business by numbers. Remember that every buyer – and every non-buyer who follows you – is a person deserving of respect.

When people say, "Marketing is a numbers game," they sometimes mean that it's important to watch such numbers as how many leads (potential customers) you create, what percentage of them turn into buyers and how many of those become loyal, repeat customers. I agree that it's smart to watch those numbers. However, they sometimes mean that such numbers are the only factors that matter. Any change in the business that's not downright illegal that produces an uptick in response or sales is by definition good, in that mindset.

Don't view customers as interchangeable, faceless entities.

Again, I disagree. Marketers who worship at the shrine of conversion rates often use that as an excuse for copy that insults the buyer and service policies that frustrate customers. They view customers as interchangeable, faceless entities whose value starts and ends with how much they spend. This approach encourages businesspeople to perpetuate annoying tactics and techniques that flirt heavily with dishonesty. It tolerates poor treatment of those who are probably not going to be spending money with the company.

For my report, *Marketing in Tune With Your Personality: A Guide for Introverts*, I interviewed successful introverts who rejected much conventional marketing advice to play by their own principles and rules. I was surprised at how many of them volunteered a violent distaste for the notion that marketing is a numbers game. "I prefer to build one-on-one relationships with my customers, prospective customers and advisors. I show that I care and they feel my passion," said one respondent. Another said, "I much prefer quality of connection over quantity of sales."

When you draw lines in the sand beyond which you will not go, you set the stage for monetary success with self-respect. I prefer that to conversion at any cost.

7. Don't trick people.

Keep trust with customers and they'll stick with you.

My mouth fell open when I heard a marketer disclose that he deliberately tells customers there are a certain number of units left when that number bears no relationship with the facts. Implicitly he was recommending that those sitting at his feet should do likewise. Such dishonesty unquestionably breaks trust with customers.

A shadier case is services that allow companies to set up teleseminar or webinar content so it plays automatically at a prearranged time, under the illusion that it's a live session. These services save marketers time, they say. "Host your high-converting webinar as if it were live." "Your pre-recorded webinar looks and feels just like a live event." Clearly they're advocating telling attendees it's a live event –an out-and-out lie. The benefit of "as if it were live" makes no sense otherwise.

Cash-flow consultant Caroline Jordan says she once unwittingly attended this kind of event. "I dialed in at the scheduled time (after rearranging my schedule to do so). The gentleman came on and said he'd be with us in just a few moments, he was gathering up his notes. Then, he came back on, told us because of the number of people on the call, he had us all muted and there wouldn't be time for any questions. He went on to deliver some great information followed by a sales pitch.

"One tiny little problem," Jordan continues. "He wasn't really there. It was a recording. Now, if I had known it would be a recording, it wouldn't have bothered me a bit because the information was good. But, being led to believe it was live, being given a bit of a smoke and mirror show, changed my perception of the man and his products. If this teleseminar was smoke and mirrors, are his products smoke and mirrors, too? Is it all just a slick manipulation to sell products that don't work? Seemingly harmless deceptions create a lack of trust for customers who are

quick to look elsewhere for more trustworthy solutions.”

Review anything you're tempted to endorse.

Another common form of deception is implying that you're endorsing something because you've looked it over and found it beneficial, when you haven't laid eyes on it and you're simply angling for the affiliate commission. I once saw this come back and bite someone I know. He had sent an email enthusiastically recommending a certain product that turned out to be an exceptionally shoddy piece of work. Two days later came another email from him back-pedaling and apologizing, but the damage was done. He obviously hadn't even given it a glance yet had implied so in the first email.

Lying, trickery and carelessness are no way to build a business. Don't get swayed by the fact that numerous marketers do such things without blinking an eye.

8. Disclose back-room deals.

I'm sad to say that some of my otherwise respectable colleagues collect payments for inclusion on their list of recommended vendors without clearly disclosing to web visitors or program participants that their “million-dollar Rolodex” is a money-making vehicle for them rather than a list vetted with the consumer in mind.

Disclose conditions for being listed or recommended.

One seminar presenter requires that anyone on his list of recommended vendors aggressively promote his own program, and he got quite huffy when asked about this policy. “Why in blazes should I promote them if they refuse to promote me?” he said. If that's the deal, OK, but it's deceptive when trusting clients or web site visitors aren't told the condition for being listed.

Such non-disclosures also corrode trust for those who don't participate in back-room deals. I wish I didn't have to post “No one has paid for a listing on this page” at the top of my own list of resources. And although I'm scrupulous about not receiving anything other than occasional complimentary books from those I feature in my newsletter, I once received an email from a long-time subscriber asking me how much it cost to be featured in the Marketing Minute. That was so disheartening!

What About Pricing?

You may have noticed that I said nothing above about “fair pricing.” To me, unless you control a scarce resource like a life-saving drug, pricing isn’t an ethical issue or anything to do with environmental responsibility. I think it’s strictly a matter of business strategy.

Having suffered from a number of \$15 haircuts, I don’t have any problem with someone charging and getting \$300 for their skill in understanding what would be most flattering and also manageable for a client, considering his or her unique hair type, face shape, lifestyle and other factors.

High prices are a legitimate business strategy – as are low or moderate prices.

Luxury items aren’t evil, either, as far as I’m concerned. Not long ago, my husband pointed out a Mercedes in the parking lot of a small-town restaurant near our home. “Look at this, it’s an AMG, hand-made in Germany by one guy who signs the car, the way an artist signs his work. It costs more than \$100,000.” Such a car would be lost on me, but I understand that its creation involves craftsmanship and precision engineering that have meaning and value to some people.

Likewise, I don’t see anything wrong with buying beautiful or unusual objects to display in one’s house, or encouraging people to do so. Although it is not part of my lifestyle to collect things, I appreciate the pleasures some people take in contemplating art and knowing and telling the stories behind the artworks they own. Beautiful objects don’t normally hurt the environment any more than functional ones. No horrible harm takes place due to this passion.

I also see no foul in marketers using their talents to put the best possible spin on an offering. That’s no different from any of us dressing carefully and nicely when we have a job interview or are appearing on TV. Putting your best foot forward – honestly – is normal and smart. Putting a fun branding spin on oneself or a product also falls into the ethically neutral category.

You may disagree with some of my opinions here and if so, I hope you'll go ahead and formulate your own principles. Reasonable people can disagree, and I'm hoping to start a conversation with this report.

*Is offering hope objectionable?
You decide.*

Years ago, when I spoke on a panel at a writers' conference, I explained how and when new freelance writers could "start at the top" rather than paying their dues by working for low-paying magazines for years and gradually working their way up. When I finished my spiel, the next person on the panel, an editor from New York City, lit into me, angrily rebuking me for offering false hope. In her eyes, this amounted to an ethical lapse like the flip side of the scare tactics I've condemned above. Her ferocity took me aback, but she didn't shake my belief in what I'd told the group. After all, it was simply a fact that I'd published my first article in the *New York Times* and had had students who similarly made their freelancing debut in top publications. Those in the audience did have the chance to succeed likewise if they used similar strategies.

Conclusion

Aim at transactions of mutual benefit, and you'll feel good when you look in the mirror.

Looking back through the guidelines and examples I've presented here, I see that they're grounded in the principle of carrying on business in a way that's good for all the people involved, as well as for the planet. Business can consist of transactions of mutual benefit rather than a cut-throat battle rewarding only you, you, you. And while you certainly don't need to reveal all the reasons why you do things the way you do, you can hold your head high by asking yourself whether customers would feel fine knowing your real situation and your real reasoning. Adjust your conduct so you can answer "yes."

Marketing can avoid inflicting harm. It makes possible mutually beneficial exchanges of value for money. By so doing, it can even add to the overall goodness and happiness in the world.

About the Author

Marcia Yudkin's 16 books include *Freelance Writing: Breaking in Without Selling Out*, a Book of the Month Club selection, *6 Steps to Free Publicity*, now in its third edition, *Persuading People to Buy* and more.

Every Wednesday she publishes her pithy Marketing Minute e-newsletter. Subscribe at www.yudkin.com/markmin.htm.

Her consulting and copywriting clients include authors, publishers, speakers' bureaus, media personalities, consultants and Internet entrepreneurs from around the world.

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