

**TRUTH**

**THE NEW RULES FOR  
MARKETING IN A  
SKEPTICAL WORLD**

Lynn Upshaw

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*New Rules for Marketing  
in a Skeptical World*

Lynn Upshaw

**AMACOM**

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*With love, to Maurine Elizabeth and Molly Elizabeth—  
two women of great integrity.*

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# What Was Naive Is Now Necessary

**M**arketing is rolling through one of the most exciting eras in its long history. Marketing is also about to get even tougher to pull off, and it was never all that easy.

While it is far from a science, marketing will soon be experiencing Newton's Third Law of Physics, the one about actions and opposite and equal reactions. The harder we sell, the less likely buyers will listen. The more we try to slide around their filters, the more quickly they will raise their shields. The more buyers wonder if we're telling them the truth, the more likely they will turn to another brand to find out what they've been missing.

If skeptical consumers and cynical business buyers don't believe what marketers promise, why will they be convinced by questionable claims shouted in higher decibels? If they don't think a brand is a good value at any price, why will they change their minds if the price is lowered? If they are bone-weary of being peppered with marketing messages, why will they be happy about marketers finding more invasive ways to get acquainted?

Now that skepticism and doubt have come home to roost in the marketplace, we in marketing are going to have to change the way we market. That change starts with recognizing that skepticism and doubt can best be trumped by marketing that is more honest than loud.

Unfortunately, many marketers do not consider integrity to be operable in their world. Integrity is all too often seen as a backdrop to daily work rather than its bone structure, a lofty standard instead of a necessary tool. And, by placing that standard on the wall as a guideline—and inevitably on the shelf as an afterthought—it immediately becomes *inoperable*.

## How We Sell Is Now What We Sell

The world is full of segments, and some of those segments, albeit a dwindling lot, may blissfully sit still for a while longer as media machines sandblast them

with messages, or they may meekly wait for marketers to tell them what they need to buy next.

But the rest of us want to know what marketers have done for us lately, and can they prove it? Buyers are beginning to judge a brand or company by the way it acts, not just by the product or service it offers. More than 75 percent of those responding to a 2006 Opinion Research survey said they preferred to buy from a company that operates ethically, even if they have to pay more.<sup>1</sup> Even if a large percentage of those respondents do not actually do what they say they will do, that's far too high a number to ignore.

While more and more business leaders are being indicted, it is buyers who are asking the prosecutorial questions: Has this company that keeps asking me to buy something also convinced me that I can trust it to deliver what it promises? Do they offer me a better value or just a lower price? Do I like their brand enough to want to be seen with it? Am I turned off by how they sell no matter how well their product or service performs? Are they telling me the truth?

Sooner or later, the brands and companies that hope to prevail in this marketplace of skeptics will have to demonstrate that they operate and market with integrity. Happily, there should be no need for them to sacrifice revenue or profit to do so. On the contrary, they may find that their integrity will become their strongest competitive advantage.

## Convincing Them Instead of Selling Them

We talk about companies wanting to compete on a level playing field, but that's also what buyers want. If buyers feel they are being treated equitably by a brand or company and are provided with sound products that are priced fairly, they reward the marketers involved. If they see that the company has tipped the field against them, they are more likely than ever to steer clear. And once gone, they are less likely than ever to return.

Two-thirds of the respondents in a 2004 Yankelovich Partners poll agreed that, "if the opportunity arises, most businesses will take advantage of the public if they feel they are not likely to be found out." A total of 61 percent said that marketers did not respect them and one-third said that they would be willing to slightly lower their standard of living to live in a world free of marketing and advertising.<sup>2</sup> When was the last time you heard people *even claim* they would be willing to lower their standard of living?

Yankelovich's president J. Walker Smith once told a group of advertisers that buyers felt the way they did because they saw a marketplace blighted with too much clutter, filled with overly intrusive marketing techniques, and because of inappropriate targeting.<sup>3</sup>

The response of some marketers to these challenges is to throw more money at the problem or to find more inventive ways to slide into a prospect's back door like a professional party-crasher. There must be a better way, since more buyers are making it clear that they are not crazy about being "targeted," brand-ambushed, stealth-sold, guerilla-marketed, or commercially buzzed.

Money and intrusive messaging may work as a stopgap solution for a while yet, but both are likely to fail in the end. That's because our job as marketers is no longer to relentlessly sell until buyers buy; it is to convince buyers that they can trust us to tell them the truth, in the hope that they might consider buying from us. There's a world of difference between those two job descriptions.

## Systematizing Integrity

The state, federal, and industry laws, regulations, and guidelines that are now in place theoretically prevent deceptive or misleading marketing. Yet consumers and business buyers are increasingly voting with their feet as they abandon companies that they perceive aren't being honest with them. That includes otherwise upright, well-meaning organizations, such as any number of food, automotive, and pharmaceutical companies.

In addition, product and marketing integrity problems can create serious revenue and brand equity declines, not to mention attracting unwelcome attention from federal and state regulators and the news media.

It was once considered naïve to believe that integrity was even relevant to marketing effectiveness. Soon, it may be considered the price of entry. When that happens, the companies that have strategically systematized their approach to marketing integrity will hold significant advantages over those that are reluctant to believe that integrity could ever be a driver of choice.

The book you are about to read explains why integrity needs to be integrated as a key working component directly into the very mechanism of marketing. *Truth* calls for retrofitting marketing practices with "practical integrity," a broad-based, integrated marketing methodology that systematizes integrity across the entire marketing mix. The "rules" from this book are revolutionary in that they call for a return to the original fundamentals that strong companies and strong brands were built upon. They are "new" because they have been forgotten by too many, too often.

The book will also explain the strategies and stories of some companies that have rigorously applied various forms of practical integrity to their full array of marketing and selling programs. These companies and others like them have learned that it is no longer enough to produce good products or services and expect that customers will trust you. It may not even be enough to hold the right

corporate values and always try to do the right thing. The future may very well require an ordered application of integrity in all ways that the company and its brands are marketed.

*Truth* is set out in three parts:

- ❑ *Part One* (Practical Integrity) details some of the challenges and strategic solutions for business in general and marketing in particular in this age of skepticism and doubt. This part also examines the critical lessons learned from five companies that are driven by company-wide integrity that dictates their approach to marketing.
- ❑ *Part Two* (True Strategies) describes powerful marketing strategies derived from broad-based integrity. These strategy chapters also include brief sections called “A Conversation,” which are fictional dialogues inspired by real experiences. Other sidebars, boxes, and “What if?” sections briefly spotlight some relevant subjects. Also, most chapters end with a series of recommendations, questions, and “Turn-Offs” to avoid at all cost.
- ❑ *Part Three* (Making It Happen) continues with additional integrity strategies, suggesting some internal marketing, benchmarking, marketing planning, and training that will help put practical integrity strategies into practice.

*Truth* does not focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR) or cause marketing. However, these have become frequent tools of companies that market with integrity. Mostly we focus on how selected companies create stronger marketing programs through their practice of integrity, and how those programs help achieve business goals.

One personal note: This author has worked in and around marketing for many years. On more than one occasion, I have been privy to, or part of, some actions that, in retrospect, could have been accomplished with more integrity. Nothing egregious, but questionable integrity rarely is. The point is, my house has as much glass as anyone’s. This is not a book designed to throw stones, but simply to help marketers rethink what they do before they do it.

## The Business We’re All In

Marketing challenges have to be tackled on multiple levels. The right product or service, the right value proposition, the right marketing communications, the right pricing, the right channel strategies—all of these factors and many more

must come together in perfect synchronization to achieve in-market goals. It now appears likely that, from this point forward, all of these building blocks will be significantly enhanced if they make use of some form of practical integrity.

In a 2005 interview, social scientist and researcher Daniel Yankelovich pointed out that those companies that forfeit the public's trust are losing a critical advantage they can't afford to lose, namely the benefit of the doubt.<sup>4</sup> No one needs the benefit of the doubt in these doubt-filled times more than the marketer.

Integrity is no longer just the business of prosecutors, preachers, and congressional committees. It is the business in which all marketers must now be engaged.

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PART ONE

PRACTICAL INTEGRITY

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# Convincing the Unconvinced

## Practical Integrity and a Better Way to Market

**M**arketing can take credit for billions of transactions annually that keep economies humming around the globe. But if marketers keep selling as if the world wants nothing more than to be sold, the world may not always show its appreciation.

We marketers are doggedly finding new ways of parachuting into the lives of people who are frantically trying to close the skylight. Once there, far too many of us are routinely stretching the facts, or omitting some critical information, or obsessing on irresistible ends to justify any means, and considering it all to be harmless because they expect people to expect it.

What people expect today is just a fair chance to find the truth and buy it. That's become an even bigger challenge than it used to be, thanks to the real world we all call home.

## Life As We Know It, If Not Love It

Here are some of the life changes that are making marketing more difficult:

- ❑ *We May Be Lonely, But We're Never Alone.* The Earth, according to Thomas Friedman, is flattening, and we're getting flattened right along with it. Friedman points to the public offering of Netscape stock on August 9, 1995 as a tipping point because it ultimately made it possible for us to navigate the Web.<sup>1</sup> Netscape and its successors proceeded to open up the floodgates before any of us realized we lived near water.

More than 700 million men, women, and children worldwide were online by the end of 2006,<sup>2</sup> which explains the nine trillion emails that they have to read every year and the billion searches

Google happily makes happen each day.<sup>3</sup> For better or worse, we're never alone—least of all with our own thoughts.

- ❑ *Clockless and Clueless.* Americans spend about twice the amount of time with media as we think we do—a total of 11.5 hours a day—and that's probably at much higher levels for younger people.<sup>4</sup> The number of messages piercing our lives results in a splicing of our attention spans and the degrading of our ability to focus. Time, which Professor Einstein always said was relative, is now becoming difficult to even gauge. Often we seem to stagger through our days like a gambling addict in a casino with no clocks.

With time slipping away, we are being forced to assess options faster than we may understand them, to make decisions more quickly than we want to, and often to buy before we are ready. It's a formula for more aggravation and less satisfaction among both marketers and their buyers, especially as information you can trust becomes harder to come by.

- ❑ *Walter Cronkite Doesn't Live Here Anymore.* In the good old days, say about 1990, you could count on your left hand how many "trusted sources" you needed to check with to be fully informed. Today, trusted centralized information sources are on a one-way trip to the Smithsonian, replaced by blogmasters and peer-to-peer mind melds.

We are becoming a world of sharers, which our kindergarten teacher always said was a good thing. In fact, we share more information during a day than other generations may have shared in a year. But what kept peace in the sandbox is complicating life for communicators.

Information is no longer distributed so much as released into the air. Facts have become negotiable. Messages that stick have to be sliced and diced to make them edible to audiences that want their information cooked with the same precision as their eggs. Marketers are forced to rely on more intermediaries to transmit their messages, and then must hope that the telephone game ends with a message remotely similar to the one they sent out. The only answer, of course, must be to just send out more messages. Right?

- ❑ *Thank You, Sir, May I Have Another?* It may be a pillar of free markets, but commercialism has become a synaptic cholesterol that clogs every waking hour. Depending on whom you talk to, the typical American is exposed to hundreds—and more likely thousands—of commercial impressions every day.

The term “commercial clutter” has become laughingly redundant. So-called *ad creep* is now at a decided gallop. Brazen commercial messages are cropping up in toilet stalls, inside taxi cabs, on the outside of private vehicles, in almost every scene of almost every feature film, all over football uniforms, throughout elementary schools, in Broadway musicals, draped over Monopoly game tokens, and even on some human foreheads, to name just a few venues.

Not that everyone is opposed to the commercial onslaught; there are some—for example, the urban hip—who wear badge brands to spotlight their cool or to show that they belong. But most of us are scrambling to at least filter the flow a bit.

- *Defending Our Lives*. In 1975, we had relatively few ways to receive, process, and store information. Thirty years later, our lives are a blur of cross-communications (see Figure 1-1).

Digital video recorders (DVRs), security software, personalized news services, spam filters, and many other defensive gadgets are finding their way into the welcoming arms of harassed consumers and overworked business buyers. The crush of information alternately stimulates us and drives us back into our cocoons. We spend a growing percentage of our energy checking to make sure the coast is clear.

More than half of the respondents (54 percent) in a 2005 Yankelovich study reported that they actively resist marketing; 69 percent said they are interested in products that can block advertising, and 56 percent said they resist products whose marketing tends to overwhelm them. Even more telling, the manner in which marketing is practiced is more important to these people than seeing marketing in new media outlets.<sup>5</sup>

Naturally, the more consumers push back the more marketers pour it on, like some unrelenting form of torture aimed at breaking buyers if it cannot convert them. Much of the marketing industry is now employing embedded messaging under the theory that, if audiences won't let us come to the party, we'll surprise them with a counter-party while they're in the shower. What some marketers get in return is an audience of annoyed, if not angry, people who thought they were gaining control of one part of their lives, only to find that they were losing it in another.

None of this sounds like fertile ground for business building. It certainly wouldn't be a great time for marketers to be held even more accountable for their end-products. Oops, too late.