



# HOW TO WIN BUSINESS AND INFURIATE PEOPLE

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## 0 Customer, Where Art Thou?

Pick a marketing textbook, any textbook. Have a look. Take your time. What does it say? No, don't show me. I'll tell you. I'm the marketing mind-reader, remember. It says something about customer orientation, right? Maybe customer care. Perhaps customer driven. Possibly customer led. Surely not customer facing. Hmmm, let me think, could it be customer satisfaction, focus, centricity, sovereignty, or, heaven help us, have something to do with relationships? Hold on. It's coming to me. I've got it. It's a neologism. No, an acronym. No, a noun that's been brutally verbed. *Customerize the company!*

Am I right or am I right?

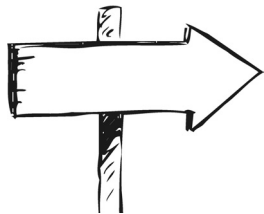
For forty years or thereabouts, marketers have worshipped at the feet of the customer. The customer can do no wrong. The customer is always right. The customer's will be done. The secret of marketing success, so we're told, involves meeting the customer's needs better than the competition. While such a strategy may have worked when customer orientation was a rarity – when customer care conferred competitive advantage – that is no longer the case. Every organization is customer oriented, or claims to be. Every corporation has bought into the customer-first ideology, if only because there's no

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credible alternative. Every business boasts a marketing VP, or equivalent, who has read Kotler from cover to cover and spends many a happy weekend at CRM seminars, short courses and customer hugathons.<sup>1</sup>

In this world of customer-coddling congruence, where everyone bar none claims to be customer centric, how can competitive advantage be achieved and, more importantly, how can it be sustained?



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Most marketers seem to think that the answer is to become *more* customer orientated; to not simply satisfy but *delight* the customer; to not simply delight but *enchant* the customer; to not simply enchant but *enthrall* the customer; to not simply enthrall but *enrap-ture* the customer.<sup>2</sup> Can the customer orgasmatron be far away?

Admirable as this charms race is, it seems to me that marketing is suffering from customer expectations inflation, from adjectival overkill, from a surfeit of superlatives. Long gone are the good old days when satisfaction was sufficient, okay was acceptable and enjoyment an impossible dream. Instead we have a situation where marketers are convinced that *more* customer orientation is the only alternative, that *more* customer orientation is the way to go, that *more* customer orientation is always better.<sup>3</sup>

## Abundance Unbound

More-ness, indeed, is the modus operandi of modern marketing. The sheer wealth of choice in every conceivable product category is

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almost mind-boggling in its more-ness. Whether it be detergents, deodorants, dishwashers, or DVDs; chinos, colognes, cornflakes, or cellulite creams; banks, batteries, bottled waters, or barbeque grills; magazines, margarines, motor bikes, or management consultants; SUVs, sneakers, surfboards, or silicon chips; or toothpastes, televisions, theme parks, and tennis rackets, extraordinary abundance is a defining feature of our time.<sup>4</sup> As *Financial Times* columnist Lucy Kellaway trenchantly notes:

*When I was a child there were two sorts of lavatory paper: hard and soft. Each sort was available in little folded sheets or on a roll. In those days consumers had a real choice, and as far as I was concerned, my parents – who bought the hard sheets – always made the wrong one.*

*Things are not so straightforward now. On the shelves of our local Sainsbury's, loo paper takes up a whole aisle, occupying as much shelf space as the entire contents of the grocer's shop from which my mother used to buy the offending Izal. There is Soft, Super Soft, Quilted, Double Velvet, and Softer & Thicker. There is Economy, Medicated, Recycled, Soft Recycled, Recycled From 100 Per Cent Low Grade Waste, and something called Greencare. Most of these come in a variety of pastel shades: mint green, honeysuckle, snowdrop white, peach, and rose pink. Some have patterns on them and are called things like "bouquet," and "chantilly." In addition, there are wet wipes and a new product offering "advanced personal hygiene."*

*If this is choice, I don't want it.*<sup>5</sup>

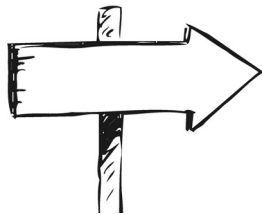
There is, Mark Earls<sup>6</sup> observes, "too much of everything." There is, dare I say it, even too much marketing and commentary on marketing. The average marketer is reminded 3,000 times per day that the average consumer receives 3,000 commercial messages per day. Or perhaps it just seems that way. One hundred thousand MBAs are extruded by B-Schools annually, all of them injected with identical

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marketing ideas from indistinguishable marketing textbooks.<sup>7</sup> The bookstores, moreover, are bunged up with monster marketing manuals, each one bandoleered in bullet points and riddled with boxes-and-arrows diagrams. So competitive is the market for marketing books that they'll come with free gifts before long. Where will it end?

In this world of seemingly limitless choice, the only thing that is scarce is scarcity itself. There is a shortage of shortages. Rarity is rare. One-of-a-kinds now come in multipacks. Increasingly, the marketer's task is to manage in a milieu of more-ness, of oversupply, of superabundance, especially now that the global economy is slowing and gluts are growing.

Contrary to the contentions of copious consultants, commentators, and columnists, however, this management task doesn't require more customer orientation, since there is a surfeit of that as well. More more isn't what we need. There's too much more. A little less more wouldn't go amiss. More isn't always better.<sup>8</sup>



It is possible to become *too* customer oriented and marketing is rapidly heading that way. We have got so close to consumers that we're breathing down their necks.

We are caught up, to put it another way, in what learned marketing philosophers<sup>9</sup> call the Chunky Monkey Progression, where one scoop of Ben and Jerry's signature product is delicious, two scoops are sufficient, three scoops are more than enough, and four means Chunky Monkey chunk-blowing time. Don't ask what happens after five.

Analogously, it is possible to become *too* customer oriented and

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marketing is rapidly heading that way. We have got so close to consumers that we're breathing down their necks. We have invaded their personal space and they're becoming understandably uncomfortable. As far as customers are concerned, CRM stands for Creepily Repellent Marketers, Peeping Toms one and all, people who make obscene phone calls yet remain immune from prosecution.

Fortunately, there is an alternative to the customer-centric standpoint and this book spells it out. Before we get to that, however, it is necessary to step back and take stock of Lesson # 1, the fairly obvious fact that it is possible to make a bundle in business without being customer oriented. After all, our infuriating day-to-day experiences with rapacious realtors, contemptuous maitre d's, fast-talking insurance brokers, never-turn-up-on-time plumbers, electricians and cable guys, still-waiting-for-the-part body shops, security-deposit-pocketing landlords, bump-em-off-the-flight airlines, and dial 1-800-HOSTILE for our couldn't-care-less customer care hotline, routinely remind us that there are other ways to prosperity beside customer sovereignty.



### **Free Gift 1: The Disservice Encounter**

#### ***For Your Inconvenience***

Our topic this week is a feature of modern life that really gets up my nasal passages, namely the way corporations do things to make life easy for themselves and then pretend it's for your benefit. You can usually tell this is happening when the phrase "for your convenience" or "in order to provide a better service for our customers" appears somewhere in writing.

For example, I was recently in a big hotel . . . when I noticed that

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the room service menu said: "For your convenience, a charge of 17 percent will be added to all orders."

Curiosity aroused, I called room service and asked in what way it would be convenient for me to have 17 percent added to my room service charge.

There was a long silence. "Because it guarantees that you will get your food before next Thursday." That may not be the precise form of words the man used, but that we clearly the drift of his sentiment.

There is a simple explanation for why this happens. Most big companies don't like you very much, except for hotels, airlines and Microsoft, which don't like you at all.

I think – though this is a very tough call – hotels may be the worst. (Actually, Microsoft is the worst, but if I started on them I would never finish.) A couple of years ago, I arrived at about 2 p.m. at a large hotel in Kansas City, of all places, having flown in from Fiji, of all other places. Fiji, as you will appreciate, is a long way from Kansas City and I was tired and keenly eager for a shower and a little lie down.

"Check in time is 4 p.m.," the clerk informed me serenely.

I looked at him with that pained, helpless expression I often wear at check-in desks. "Four p.m.? Why?"

"It's company policy."

"Why?"

"Because it is." He realized this was a trifle inadequate. "The cleaners need time to clean the rooms."

"Are you saying that they don't finish cleaning any of the rooms until 4 p.m.?"

"No, I am saying the rooms are not available until 4 p.m."

"Why?"

"Because it's company policy."

Bill Bryson, *Notes From a Big Country*, pp. 299-301<sup>10</sup>

***Herbie Gets a Service***

Today I took my year-old car, with less than 4,000 miles on it, into the

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repair shop at the dealership where I bought it. Why? Seems that every other time I go to start the car, it won't start. I've replaced the starter, the battery, the fuse, the computer chip. But none of that has solved the problem.

When I told the service manager all this, he looked at me with a witheringly vacant stare. "Oh, these new Beetles – they don't start unless you drive them every day."

I thought for sure I must have heard him wrong – after all, he was speaking perfect English. So I asked him again what the problem was.

"You see," he said, shaking his head in pity, "these VWs are run by a computer system, and if the computer hasn't read any activity – namely, you turning it on and driving it every day or so – then the computer assumes the battery is dead or something, and just shuts down the whole car. Is there any way you or someone you know can go down to the garage and start it once a day?"

I didn't know what to say. "If you don't start the car every day, it will die" – what's this, 1901? Am I being arrogant to expect that a car I spent \$20,000 on is supposed to start whenever I put the key in the ignition? There aren't many sure things left in the world these days: the sun still sets in the west, the Pope still says Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, Strom Thurmond still comes back to life whenever there's an ex-First Lady around to grope. I would have thought I could cling to at least one last article of faith: a brand-new car always starts – period!

"Like ninety-five percent of the customers you've sold these new Beetles to," I said, "I live in Manhattan. Do you know *anybody* in Manhattan who drives their car every day?"

"Yes, sir, we understand. Nobody in the city drives a car every day. They use the subways! I don't know why they even sell these cars in the city. It's really a shame. Have you tried writing to Volkswagen? Is there a kid on your block you can get to start it for a few minutes every day or so?"

There's got to be a better way...

Michael Moore, *Stupid White Men*, pp. xix–xx.<sup>11</sup>

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As consumers ourselves, we may not like this antediluvian state of affairs. Hell no. As marketers, we may be appalled by such blatant recidivism. Haven't these people read Ted Levitt? As peace-loving, easy-going, mild-mannered inhabitants of this great nation, we may be tempted to take the law into our own hands. Man's best friend is a tire iron, I always say. But as businesspeople, we have to recognize that ignoring the customer can pay dividends.<sup>12</sup> As businesspeople, we know that even though we're supposed to love our customers, some of them are a pain in the rump. As businesspeople, we can't help admiring celebrity chefs like Marco Pierre White, who throws customers out of his restaurant if they dare complain about the cooking or have the gall to ask for condiments.<sup>13</sup> "Condiments? I'll give you condiments! Ketchup, you say? Heinz ketchup, is it? Where's my meat cleaver?"

### **A Hill of Beanies**

There's no need to rush for the cutlery drawer, however. At least, not yet. Let me give you an even better example of anti-customer orientation in action. I am the proud father of three delightful daughters, who are at a very awkward age. They don't believe in Santa Claus but think that we think they do. Thus they continue to write letters to him in the hope that their adoring parents will buy them more Christmas presents than they ordinarily would. These faux-innocent letters usually consist of charming lists of tasteful toys, like six-megabyte Gameboy expansion packs, and come complete with catalogue numbers and recommended retail prices, as well as the infallible catchall "one or two surprise presents, please."

Anyway, our youngest has a bit of a Beanie Baby habit and, if you've ever had any dealings with Ty Inc., the Beelzebubian organization behind Beanie Babies, you'll know that customer orientation is not part of its mission statement.<sup>14</sup> Awkward orientation, contrary

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orientation, ornery orientation, inconvenience orientation, possibly. But customer orientation? I don't think so.

To the uninitiated, Beanie Babies look like undernourished attendees at the Teddy Bears' Picnic. They are cuddly toys, hewn from the finest velveteen and half-filled with recycled polypropylene. Somewhat reminiscent of old-time bean bags, which loom large in the grade-school memories of many Baby Boomers, Beanie Babies are unfailingly floppy, irresistibly cute, eminently adorable, and blessed with the kind of goo-goo eyes guaranteed to melt all but the hardest hearts. They come in various shapes, sizes, and species, such as Pouch the Kangaroo, Spike the Rhinoceros, Claude the Crab, Ally the Alligator, Puffer the Puffin, Tabasco the Bull, and Smoochy the Frog. They retail at \$5–8 on average. They come complete with name tag, birth date, personalized poem, and bags of personality. They want to be your special friend. They really do.

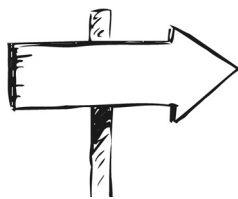
Nothing untoward about that, I hear you say. Behind the seductive smile of the tush-tagged storm troopers, however, lurks a five-star marketing general, a twisted commercial genius, whose sadistic sales strategy puts Sun Tzu to shame. The Beaniemeister is Ty Warner, a 1962 Kalamazoo College grad who spent twenty-odd years as a furry animal wrangler and sometime sales rep for Durkin, the soft toy company. He made his escape in 1980 and, after developing a line of low-price, full-size, plush-wrapped, polystyrene-engorged Himalayan Cats, Ty came up with the Beanie Baby concept in 1993. The first fake-fur covered critters, known to true Beanie Believers as The Original Nine, were released in January 1994, reached critical mass around Christmas 1996, and less than three years later were selling at a rate of 250 million per annum.<sup>15</sup>

Endearing as they are, the success of Beanie Babies is not attributable to their anthropomorphic appeal, nor to the attendant poems, birthdays, name tags, and suchlike. Goo-goo-osity, after all, is a genetic marker of most cuddly invertebrates and personalization has

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been around since at least the early 1980s, when Cabbage Patch Dolls were being “adopted” by softies the world over.<sup>16</sup> Their success, rather, is predicated on Ty’s strategy of customer *disorientation*. It is a strategy that combines a here-today-gone-tomorrow approach to new product development with a distribution policy



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that is idiosyncratic to the point of incorrigible. Production runs are strictly limited. New ranges of toys are constantly introduced and old models ruthlessly “retired” without warning. All sorts of special editions and promotional tie-ins are produced for sports teams, Broadway musicals, and commemorative occasions. Brigadoon, presumably, boasts the principal manufacturing facility.

When it comes to distribution, furthermore, large chain stores, with their EDI-driven ethic of regular supplies, no surprises and guaranteed delivery times, are deliberately avoided in favor of small-time gift shops, independently-owned toy stores, offbeat boutiques, and airport art emporia. Consistently inconsistent and predictably unpredictable, Warner supplies what he wants to whomsoever he wants and, if the retailers don’t like it then they simply do without. Consignments are cancelled, changed, or capriciously completed with whatever Beanies are to hand, irrespective of the original order. There’s no point complaining, since Ty is extremely secretive and notoriously incommunicado. The company’s telephone number is ex-directory; he doesn’t give interviews or throw press junkets; employees are required to sign legally-enforceable gagging orders; above-the-line advertising is expressly eschewed; and, although the

J.D. Salinger of soft toys is alleged to lurk on internet chat rooms, listening in on customers' conversations, this too may be a rumor spread by overenthusiastic Beanieheads.

### **Don't Infuriate, Infatuate**

Be that as it may, the inevitable upshot of Ty's premeditated eccentricity is that his Beanie Baby range is scattered hither and yon. Reason doesn't come into it, let alone rhyme. His tush-tagged treasures can be found in the most quirky, out-of-the-way places, which adds to, rather than detracts from, their appeal. As Stowe and Turkington<sup>17</sup> observe, "When a toy is hard to get, everybody wants it. If it's lying out there in a heap on the shelves like day-old bread, who's gonna care?" Beanie Baby buying is akin to a never-ending Easter Egg hunt, where surprises can pop up in the least expected locations, and secret caches of creatures may be hidden behind the doors of the most unprepossessing retail outlets. For all his Greta Garboisms, it seems that Beanswami Warner has performed the ultimate marketing trick of making brand new, mass produced toys into semi-precious antiquealikes.

More pertinently perhaps, Ty's truffles fetch up to \$6,000 apiece. Fist fights among frenzied I-spotted-it-first fans and analogous Babysnatchers are not unknown.<sup>18</sup> Comparative rarities like Squealer the Pig and Pinchers the Lobster can command \$2,000 plus on the black market. Billionaire Bear, created to commemorate one billion dollars' worth of Beanies sold, is selling for more than \$4,000 at auction. The Princess Bear, issued in memory of Diana, Princess of Wales, is particularly sought after. In a similar vein, McDonald's extra-special, six-week promotion of pint-sized replicas – Teenie Beanie Babies – sold out in less than three days, forcing the company to issue fulsome apologies in all the national news media.

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## **Ty Diet**

“Expect the unexpected” is Ty’s rallying cry and most would agree that capricious pricing, idiosyncratic distribution, eccentric promotion, haphazard pricing, and standards of customer care that haven’t been seen since the lifeboat-lite *Titanic*, are somewhat unusual in the consumer-centric world of modern marketing. Nevertheless, it works. It works brilliantly. It shows that you don’t have to espouse customer orientation to succeed. It demonstrates that there’s more than one way to skin Zip the Cat. As the Beanie genie himself once sagely observed,<sup>19</sup> “so long as kids keep fighting over the products and the retailers are angry at us because they can’t get enough, then I think those are good signs.”

All good things come to an end, however.<sup>20</sup> Warner’s Waterloo transpired in the fateful year of 1999, when he preemptorally pronounced that Beanie Babies would be exterminated en masse on December 31. This soft toy Final Solution, needless to say, precipitated pandemonium among plush puppy patrons, proselytes, and Typhiles worldwide. True, the apocalyptic occasion would be commemorated by a special black Beanie Bear, The End, but this was insufficient recompense for countless millions of disgruntled Beanie lovers. Never one to look Derby the gift horse in the mouth, moreover, the underworld took note of this looming velveteen massacre, recognized the clandestine commercial opportunity that it represented, and set about robbing retail stores and warehouses. A security guard was slain at a depot in West Virginia, though the subsequent police investigation revealed that he didn’t so much lay down his life for Liberty the Bear, as fail to make an illicit delivery to criminal accomplices. Where’s Doby the Doberman when you need him?

Beanie rustlers, clearly, are a ruthless lot, but Ty Warner hardly qualifies as a tenderfoot. Not content with announcing the has-

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beanies Holocaust, he immediately reissued the organization's entire range with a new, "eighth generation" tush tag, which only added to collectors' count-down dementia. Hope, however, springs eternal and it did so in spades when the Mephistopheles of soft toy marketing ostensibly relented. On December 24, a week before Beaniegeddon, he announced an online plebiscite to determine the fate of his hellfire-and-damnation bound menagerie. Should they stay or should they go?

Fast-buck-maker to the end, Warner shamelessly insisted that would-be voters pay 50 cents apiece to participate in the Beanie Baby ballot. The outcome, naturally, was a foregone conclusion, since only the most perverted plushopath would vote for Beanicide or pay to see the innocents immolated. A stay of execution was announced, albeit the rejoicing was short lived. Many enthusiasts had had just about enough and, although Ty's cuddly creatures still smile winsomely at toy store patrons, Warner's end game marked the beginning of the end of the Beanie obsession. Except in my house, unfortunately.

### **Hermèsmerized**

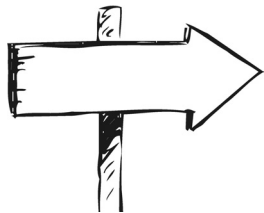
The Beanie bubble may have burst, or deflated at least, but even when it was full of hot air, Ty's draylon-covered dirigible never attained the marketing altitude of the Hermès Birkin. Paragon of purses and acme of chic, the Hermès Birkin is yet another example of anti-customer orientation in action. Up to \$80,000 – enough for twenty Billionaire Bears – is necessary before possession of this apotheosis of accessories is possible and, even then, ownership is by no means guaranteed.<sup>21</sup>

To be sure, Hermès purses can be purchased for as little as \$3,000, and \$10,000 or so will get one that doesn't make you look like a refugee from Wal-Mart. However for die-hard fashionistas the

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Birkin is the purse of purses, the handbag of handbags, the holdall of holdalls, the fashion appendage if not quite to die for, certainly worth undergoing life-threatening surgery. Supermodel Kate Moss has one in denim, Naomi Campbell swears by hers, apparently, and rock star Bryan Adams buys them for friends and fellow travelers. Cheaper than a trail of trashed hotel rooms, I guess.



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Although the House of Hermès, as everyone knows, was established in 1837 as a specialist in saddles and equestrian equipment, it has been making purses for a mere eighty years.<sup>22</sup> Arriviste! In 1922, the wife of the proprietor couldn't find a purse to meet her needs and Emile-Maurice Hermès responded with the Bolide, a sleek valise fastened by the then latest technology, a zipper. Handbag Heaven. A superbrand was born and to this very day Hermès bespoke bags (customers choose their preferred combination of leathers and linings from sample books) are hand-crafted from the finest materials (kidskin, crocodile hide, ostrich epidermis . . . whatever) and sold from the organization's beautifully appointed selection of retail stores (most notably its famous flagship on the rue du Faubourg St-Honoré).

For years, Hermès' best-selling handbag was the Kelly, which got its name in 1956 when the aristocratic actress used one to shield her pregnancy from the paparazzi's prying Pentaxes. However, an accidental in-flight encounter with sexy sixties chanteuse, Jane Birkin, who complained bitterly about the lack of overhead locker-

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proof luggage, persuaded company president Jean-Louis Dumas to create the bigger, bulkier, but still beautiful Birkin bag in 1984. "Career, cosmetic, and carnal needs contained in a single blissful bag," claims one proud owner.<sup>23</sup> What more could anyone ask for?

Well, nothing. Except that . . . except that . . . except that . . . Hermès, we have a problem. Hermès, there is a big problem with the Birkin.

### **Birkin Purdah**

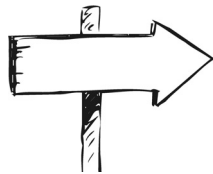
Despite what you might think, the big problem with the Birkin bag is not the price tag, prodigious though that is. Nor is it the agony of anticipating this season's chic specifications. Crocodile hide is so 2002, don't you know! When are they going to make one in Squealer the Pig's skin? Nor, for that matter, is it the waiting list, which averages nine months or so. A pregnant pause, perhaps, prior to product procreation, pocketbook parturition, and post-purchase penitence? The real problem, rather, is getting on to the waiting list in the first place. Birkins aren't just for anyone, the likes of you and me. The Birkin is a beautiful bag for beautiful people. B-list and above. Haut monde only. Hoi polloi need not apply.

The Birkin, in short, is a blue-blood brand, somewhat scarce and very special. Its scarcity and specialness, however, makes the purse particularly desirable and ensures that its price remains steep to the point of precipitous. The rumor mill, moreover, maintains that Hermès' waiting list can be circumvented, provided one's in the know or prepared to pull the appropriate strings. In this regard, a recent episode of *Sex and the City* revolved around Samantha's attempts to get her hands on a Hermès Birkin. PR-person to the superstar Lucy Liu, Samantha exploits her employer's celebrity to leapfrog the waiting list. But when the magical bag materializes, it is delivered direct to the petulant personality. Wild with Birkin-induced

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desire, Samantha demands her rightful property, only to receive a pink-slipped reminder of her position in the socialite scheme of things.<sup>24</sup>

True or not, the possibility of jumping the Hermès queue only adds to the mystique of the marque.<sup>25</sup> It's the commercial equivalent of an urban legend, repeated so often that it becomes part of shopping folklore and the fount, furthermore, of fervid consumer imaginings. At the very least, this line-circumventing rumor increases involvement, infatuation and the intention to acquire the "Hallelujah handbag" (Hallelujah, because that's what devotees say when they finally get their hands on one. Jesus Christ is often invoked as well, usually when the credit card statement comes through).



Hermès, remember, is pretty well versed in crocodilian habits. It has the pelts to prove it.

The company, naturally, is deeply sympathetic toward its disappointed customers. It periodically wrings its hands, sheds a tear or two, and apologizes profusely for the "intolerable" waiting times. It has even lobbied the French government over its restrictive employment legislation, which limits leather workers to a 35-hour week. But, as unattainability is one of Hermès' principal marketing ploys – *the* principal marketing ploy, in point of fact – these ostentatious acts of atonement can only be considered publicity stunts at best or crocodile tears at worst. Hermès, remember, is pretty well versed in crocodilian habits. It has the pelts to prove it.

## Thunderbirds are Go!

Preposterously priced purses are one thing, I hear you say, and

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Beanie Babies are something else again. The former are the preserve of irrational fashion victims, while the latter is a passing pre-teen passion. Both can thus be safely ignored. There's nothing to be learned from either of these objects, you may well be thinking. What you're really thinking, of course, is that you need a more *manly* example of Beanie-Birkin marketing principles in action.

But hold. What have we here? Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Is it a cliché? Yes and no. It's a Ford Thunderbird actually, in the signature turquoise blue, just like the one lovingly caressed by the camera in *Thelma and Louise*. Except this isn't a 1955 original or even one of the later, clunkier models of the 60s, 70s, and 80s. But it looks a bit like the original. More than a bit. It's got the V-8 engine, the egg-crate grill, the decorative hood scoop, the oval, 'luminum-trimmed head- and tail-lamps, the thru-fender, dual-exhaust pipes, the distinctive dashboard arc, and, glory be, the 1955 nameplate on the rear quarter panel. Most importantly of all, it's got the immortal, spread-wing Thunderbird logo on the hood, deck lid, and forward surface headrests of the fluted bucket seats. Man-oh-man-oh-man.

It's a real T-Bird all right.<sup>26</sup> A total head-turner. It even sounds like the original. However, in addition to the heritage 'n' stuff, this one's got traction control, anti-lock brakes, air bags front and side, rear window defroster, dual-zone air conditioning, speed sensitive wipers, cruise control, power steering, windows and door locks, a six CD stereo radio, and five speed transmission, all sitting atop a 3.9 liter, overhead camshaft, 252 horsepower engine, and a shortened Lincoln LS chassis. As two-seater, rear-wheel drive convertibles go, this one's outta sight, round the bend, and burnin' up the freeway. It's almost worth having a mid-life crisis for.

Not everyone, of course, is enamored by Ford's road-hugging, smooth-running, open-topped, perfect tailpipe-pitched, automotive Phoenix. The press corps is carping about its imprecise handling, indifferent performance, uncomfortable seating, tiny trunk, limited

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### *FREE GIFT INSIDE!!*

headroom, low fuel economy, and lack of optional extras, to say nothing of the manufacturer's make do and mend mentality, which involves pulling together parts, pieces and panels from the other cars in the range, including the unspeakable Taurus.<sup>27</sup> But what do they know? There's more to automobiles than chassis numbers and accessories. This is a living legend reborn. The king of the road is back and a supercharged model, the Blackbird, is in the pipeline. Awesome.

You want one? Of course you do! In turquoise? Doesn't everybody! Try getting one. Only 11,000 were produced for 2002 and its 25,000 per annum thereafter. Tops. This is no P.T. Cruiser, where production was increased to meet demand, thereby detracting from its supercool cachet. No sir. There was a 17,000-strong waiting list before the first T-Bird hit the forecourts and it'll stay that way. Unless, of course, you know someone who knows how to get to the head of the line.

As for colors: Well, if you can track down a turquoise one, consider yourself lucky. Thunderbird Blue and Inspiration Yellow are this year's colors – and this year's only – along with Torch Red, Evening Black, and Whisper White. Next year will see a different range of limited edition color schemes and interior design accents. It keeps the concept fresh, they say. It keeps the dealerships in nicely padded profits. It keeps consumers on their toes. But, what the hell, guys. Look on the bright side. No matter what they gouge us for, the T-Bird is still cheaper than the Hermès Birkin or a backpack full of Billionaire Bears. Where do I sign up?

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