

## CHAPTER

## 1

# In Search of the Obvious

*This is the most important chapter in the book. It is simple, profound, and contains a secret that few know of . . . and someone else wrote most of it.*

**W**henever I travel around the world, I'm often asked the same question: "What are your favorite books?" Well, I'm going to let you in on a secret. The best book that I have ever read on marketing is one that was written over 90 years ago in 1916. And here's the good news. It is only 40 pages long, it contains no jargon or graphs or complex research. In fact, it's more like a pamphlet. Now the bad news. It's not easy to find and could be called a collector's item.

The book is titled: *Obvious Adams. The Story of a Successful Businessman* and it's written by Robert R. Updegraff. The book was an instant hit and a reviewer wrote in the *New York Times*, "The young man who is going to seek his fortune in the advertising business should have *Obvious Adams* for a hand-book. Indeed, any young man who is going to seek his fortune in anything might be aided by the common sense and business acumen displayed in this little volume."

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Why do I like this book so much? Because the search for any marketing strategy is the search for the obvious. Consider the dictionary definition of the word *obvious*: Easy to see or understand; plain; evident. With that definition, you begin to see why an obvious strategy is so powerful. It's simple, easy to understand, and evident. That's why it works so well.

Interestingly, when presented with a simple, obvious strategy, many clients are not impressed. They are often looking for some clever, not-so-obvious idea. What I often hear is something like, "That's something we already know. Is the solution that simple?" I then have to go into my "evident speech" which goes like this: "You're right, it is evident. But if it's evident to you, it will also be evident to your customers, which is why it will work."

Updegraff warned of this reaction when he wrote, "The trouble is, the obvious is apt to be so simple and commonplace that it has no appeal to the imagination. We all like clever ideas and ingenious plans that make good lunch-table talk at the club. There is something about the obvious that is—well, so very obvious!"

To give you a taste of Updegraff's wisdom, here are his guidelines in that search for the obvious.

### Five Tests of Obviousness

THE FIRST TEST OF OBVIOUSNESS I borrowed from Kettering of General Motors, who had it placed on the wall of the General Motors Research Building in Dayton:

This problem when solved will be simple.

The obvious is nearly always simple—so simple that sometimes a whole generation of men and women have

looked at it without even seeing it. Whereas if an idea is clever, ingenious, or complicated, we should suspect it. It probably is not obvious.

The history of science, the arts and the great developments in the world of business, is a history of men stumbling upon simple solutions to complex problems. Mr. Kettering's wise proverb might be paraphrased: "The solution when found will be obvious."

THE SECOND TEST OF OBVIOUSNESS is a question:

Does it check with human nature?

If you do not feel pretty certain that your idea or plan will be understood—and accepted—by your mother, wife, brothers, sisters, cousins, your next-door neighbor, the man who works at the next desk or machine, the mechanic who services your automobile, your minister, your barber, the manager of the grocery store where your wife shops, the person who shines your shoes, your Aunt Mary, your secretary, your seat-mate on the 5:29 suburban train, your most outspoken friends—if you don't feel comfortable about explaining your "obvious" idea to these people—it probably is not obvious.

These people will see it in its simple reality, uncomplicated by professional or technical knowledge, and free of the inhibitions that grow out of experience.

Collectively, they are a cross-section of human nature, and human nature makes or breaks any plan or nullifies the solution to any problem. It is the controlling factor in life and business, in science and the arts.

Whether it involves selling things to people, enlisting their support, getting them to follow a particular course of

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action, or inducing them to change a long-time habit, if your way of doing it does not conform to human nature, you will waste your time, money and energy to try to accomplish your purpose.

The public is curiously obvious in its reactions—because the public’s mind is simple, direct and unsophisticated.

THE THIRD TEST OF OBVIOUSNESS is:

Put it on paper.

Write out your idea, plan, or project in words of one or two syllables, as though you were explaining it to a child.

Can you do this in two or three short paragraphs, so that it makes sense? If not, if the explanation becomes long, involved, ingenious—then very likely it is not the obvious. For, to repeat, “When you find the answer it will be simple.”

No idea or plan, no program or project is obvious unless it can be understood and worked by people of average intelligence.

Often the attempt to express an idea or outline a plan on paper will automatically show up its weakness or complexities. Sometimes doing this will show you what is wrong with your thinking, and lead you to a simple and obvious solution. Certainly, putting it on paper is a quick way of showing you what you have—or haven’t.

THE FOURTH TEST OF OBVIOUSNESS is:

Does it EXPLODE in people’s minds?

If, when you have presented your idea, outlined your solution to a problem, or explained your plan, project, or program, people say, “Now why didn’t we think of that

before?” you can feel encouraged. For obvious ideas are very apt to produce this “explosive” mental reaction.

In many instances, from that moment on the whole matter appears to be settled, without further explanation or argument. It is just too obvious to need prolonged consideration. Even with such a reaction, however, it is usually wise to reserve [your] decision for a day or so. For sometimes there are hidden flaws which only show up after a night’s sleep.

If an idea or proposal does not “explode,” if it requires lengthy explanation, and involves hours of argument, either it is not obvious, or you have not thought it through yourself and reduced it to obvious simplicity.

Mental “explosions” are revealed in what people say, in the light that spreads over their faces, in the acceptance that comes into their eyes, when they grasp an obvious idea. It is one of the infallible tests of obviousness.

THE FIFTH TEST OF OBVIOUSNESS is:

Is the time ripe?

Many ideas and plans are obvious in themselves, but just as obviously “out of time.” Checking the timeliness is often just as important as checking the idea or plan itself.

Sometimes the time may have passed, definitely and irrevocably; in which case the obvious thing to do is forget your idea. In other instances its timeliness may be ahead, which calls for patience, plus alertness.

The president of one of the big rubber companies once showed me his “Cupboard of the Future” where were stored many unusual articles made wholly or partially of rubber which were ahead of their time. These articles had

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been developed in the company's research laboratories, but as of then were too costly to compete with the same articles made with other materials. So they were being kept "on the shelf" until the price was competitive, either through the development of cheaper production methods, or through the rising costs of competing articles. (Some of the products in this cupboard have since been marketed successfully and are today quite commonplace.)

Next to the first test—the simplicity requirement—the timeliness test is perhaps the most important check on the obviousness of a plan or program.

"One of the cardinal virtues," wrote Emerson in his Journal, "is timeliness. My neighbor, the carriage maker, all summer is making sleighs, and all winter is making light, gay gigs and chariots for June and August; and so, on the first days of the new season, is ready . . ."

To be ready is to be timely; and to be timely is an obvious requirement.

After having read all that common sense, you might be thinking that it is indeed all too simple for today's times.

Well, the rest of this book will take you for a trip through the current business world to show you that what Robert Updegraff wrote in 1916 is still very meaningful today. In fact, when you consider marketing's mess, it's even more meaningful. But, before that, let's pause and talk about common sense and how it will help you in your search.

### Common Sense Is Your Guide

Abraham Lincoln offered some brilliant advice on figuring out what to do: "You must draw on language, logic, and simple common sense to determine essential issues and establish a

concrete course of action.” Unfortunately, business executives often leave their common sense out in the parking lot when they come to work.

Common sense is wisdom that is shared by all. It’s something that registers as an obvious truth to a community.

Simple ideas tend to be obvious ideas because they have a ring of truth about them. But people distrust their instincts. They feel there must be a hidden, more complex answer. Wrong. What’s obvious to you is obvious to many. That’s why an obvious answer usually works so well in the marketplace.

One of the secrets of the buzzword gurus is to start with a simple, obvious idea and make it complex. A *Time* magazine commentary on a Stephen Covey book captured this phenomenon:

His genius is for complicating the obvious, and as a result his books are graphically chaotic. Charts and diagrams bulge from the page. Sidebars and boxes chop the chapters into bite-size morsels. The prose buzzes with the cant phrases—empower, modeling, bonding, and agent of change—without which his books would deflate like a blown tire. He uses more exclamation points than Gidget.

The dictionary definition of *common sense* is “native good judgment that is free from emotional bias or intellectual subtlety.” It’s also not dependent on special technical knowledge.

In other words, you are seeing things as they really are. You are following the dictates of cold logic, eliminating both sentiment and self-interest from your decision. Nothing could be simpler.

Consider this scenario. If you were to ask 10 people at random how well a Cadillac would sell if it looked like a Chevrolet, just about all of them would say, “Not very well.”

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These people are using nothing but common sense in their judgment. They have no data or research to support their conclusion. They also have no technical knowledge or intellectual subtlety. To them a Cadillac is a big expensive car while a Chevrolet is a smaller, less expensive car. They are seeing things as they really are.

But at General Motors (GM), those in charge would rather see the world as they want it to be rather than as it is. Common sense was ignored and the Cimarron was born. Not surprisingly, it didn't sell very well. (And we're being kind.)

Was this a lesson learned? It does not appear to be so. GM came back with the Catera, another Cadillac that looks like a Chevrolet. Like its predecessor, it didn't sell very well because it made no sense. You know it and I know it. GM didn't want to know it.

As Henry Mintzberg, professor of management at McGill University, said, "Management is a curious phenomenon. It is generously paid, enormously influential and significantly devoid of common sense."

Leonardo da Vinci saw the human mind as a laboratory for gathering material from the eyes, ears, and other organs of perception—material that was then channeled through the organ of common sense. In other words, common sense is a sort of super sense that rides herd over our other senses. It's a super sense that many in business refuse to trust.

Maybe we should correct that. You don't have to just be in business to ignore simple common sense. Consider the complex world of economists, a group that works hard at outwitting simple common sense.

There is nothing economists enjoy more than telling the uninitiated that plain evidence of the senses is wrong. They tend to ignore the human condition and declare that people are "maximizers of utility." In econo-talk, we become



“calculators of self-interest.” To economists, if we all have enough information we will make rational decisions.

Anyone who’s hung around the marketing world for a while realizes that people are quite irrational at times. Right now, we’re overrun by four-wheel-drive vehicles designed to travel off the road. Does anybody ever leave the road? Less than 10 percent. Do people need these vehicles? Not really. Why did they buy them? Because everyone else was buying them. How’s that for “rational”?

The world cannot be put into mathematical formulas. It’s too irrational. It’s the way it is.

Now some words about intellectual subtlety.

A company often goes wrong when it is conned with subtle research and arguments about where the world is headed. (Nobody really knows, but many make believe they know.) These views are carefully crafted and usually mixed in with some false assumptions disguised as facts.

For example, many years ago, Xerox was led to believe that in the office of the future everything—phones, computers, and copiers—would be an integrated system. (Bad prediction.) To play in this world, you needed to offer everything. Thus, Xerox needed to buy or build computers and other noncopier equipment to participate in this on-rushing automated world.

Xerox was told it could do this because people saw the company as a skilled, high technology company. (This was a false assumption.) People saw it as a copier company.

Twenty-five years and several billion dollars later, Xerox realized that the office of the future is still out in the future. And any Xerox machine that can’t make a copy is in trouble. It was a painful lesson in technical knowledge and intellectual subtlety overwhelming good judgment.

Finally, some thoughts about a business school education, which seems to submerge common sense.

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By the time students finish their first year, they already have an excellent command of the words and phrases that identify them as MBA wanna-bes. They have become comfortable with jargon like “risk/reward ratio,” “discounted cash flow,” “expected value,” and so forth.

After a while, all this uncommon language overwhelms critical thought and common sense. You get the appearance of deliberation where none may exist.

Ross Perot, in a visit to the Harvard Business School, observed, “The trouble with you people is that what you call environmental scanning, I call looking out the window.”

To think in simple, commonsense and obvious terms, you must begin to follow these four guidelines:

1. *Get your ego out of the situation.* Good judgment is based on reality. The more you screen things through your ego, the farther you get from reality.
2. *Avoid wishful thinking.* We all want things to go a certain way. But how things go is often out of our control. Good common sense tends to be in tune with the way things are going.
3. *Be better at listening.* Common sense by definition is based on what others think. It’s thinking that is common to many. People who don’t have their ears to the ground lose access to important common sense.
4. *Be a little cynical.* Things are sometimes the opposite of the way they really are. That’s often the case because someone is pursuing his or her own agenda. Good common sense is based on the experiences of many, not the wishful thinking of some.

Executives should trust their common sense. It will lead them to the obvious.