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# WHAT ANY FOOL KNOWS

A large billboard with the title "WHAT ANY FOOL KNOWS" mounted on a metal structure. The billboard is white with black text. The structure is dark and industrial, with various pipes and supports visible. A large, faint watermark "UNPROTECTED MATERIAL" is diagonally across the image.

**Y**ou probably know that a ten-ton iron ball falls to earth at the same speed as a half-pound iron ball dropped from the same height. But in earlier times, most people “knew” that the heavier object would fall faster.

*How* they knew is instructive. Scientific questions in those days were not a matter of hypothesis and testing, but of philosophy. It was true that heavy objects fell faster than light ones, scholars reasoned, because any fool knew they did. Thus this pseudo-fact, canonized by none other than Aristotle himself, reigned for over a millennium.

To change things, it took a skeptic by the name of Galileo to say, and I paraphrase, “Oh yeah? Let’s see.” Then he did something revolutionary for his time: He devised a test. He took two iron balls, one considerably heavier than the

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other, climbed to the top of a tower (possibly the Leaning Tower of Pisa), and dropped them together.<sup>1</sup>

I'd like to tell you that from the moment the iron balls simultaneously reached the ground a new theory prevailed, but that's not what happened. Instead, for this and other groundbreaking findings—like proving the earth orbits the sun—Galileo ended up in big trouble with thought leaders of the day for daring to challenge prevailing beliefs.

And *that* is also instructive.

### ENLIGHTENED AGE?

Today we have the scientific method, thanks to which we no longer believe that flies spontaneously generate from decaying meat, fresh air is bad for us, or the sun circles the earth.

But even in our so-called enlightened age, people still jump to unwarranted conclusions and cling to individual pet notions that fail to stand up to scrutiny. Or, rather, that would fail to stand up if anyone bothered to scrutinize. Witness the many savvy and successful people you know who consult their horoscopes before traveling or dating,<sup>2</sup> wear magnets to ward off arthritis,<sup>3</sup> believe that cold causes colds,<sup>4</sup> abstain from chocolate to prevent acne,<sup>5</sup> or wear a lucky hat when golfing.<sup>6</sup>

Do not try telling these people that their conclusions are unscientific, much less erroneous, unless you're in the mood for a long and fruitless argument. You'll find they don't much care what the evidence says. Or, that they counter with anecdotal "evidence." Or, that they become belligerent and defensive.

Millennia have passed since Galileo's experiment, but people still don't like it when you challenge what any fool knows.

## NOT SO HARMLESS

With the possible exception of abstaining from chocolate, many unfounded beliefs are arguably harmless.

But some are not. It's one thing to wear a silly hat to improve your golf game. It's quite another to stake your company's advertising budget and possibly its future on an unproven campaign because your ad agency says the campaign is "truly creative," "stands out," "will get noticed," "takes a risk," "will be remembered," and "has CLIO Award potential," and because you've always heard that these are the qualities that make advertising successful.

Yet every day, CEOs, marketing VPs, and other corporate decision makers do just that. They commit huge marketing budgets to advertising with little more to recommend it than the ad agency's saying, "Trust us because we're the experts and we think this will work." But the fact is, most marketers—on both the client and the agency side—don't really know if their advertising is selling anything or not.

They may *think* they know. If sales are up, if they're proud of their campaign, if the advertising garners awards, if neighbors enjoy the ads, and, in the case of the few who conduct pre- and post-campaign research, if awareness has increased—many a marketer concludes that the advertising must be selling.

All it takes to call that conclusion into question is a bit of critical analysis. It's as simple as stepping back and saying, "Just a darn minute. What does the evidence *really* show?" And, for that matter, "What *really* constitutes evidence?" A sales increase could result from factors other than advertising. Pride in your campaign is nice but, as evidence goes, irrelevant. Awards aren't conclusive, since both effective and ineffective ads win them. Feedback from neighbors

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isn't statistically valid. And high awareness doesn't ensure marketing success. (Consider that failed products like Yugo, Edsel, and New Coke *still* enjoy high awareness.)

Sadly, one rarely encounters this kind of critical analysis in marketing. For one thing, marketers on both the client and agency side are often more interested in defending their work than in challenging it. For another, good critical thinking skills come neither easily nor naturally to people in general, let alone to marketers. Our hunter-gatherer environment shaped our minds to act, not to pause and question. The predilection kept us safe. Hunter-gatherers pausing to analyze whether a ferocious roar indicated a hungry lioness or a parrot with a sense of humor stood a lesser chance of survival than their peers who simply ran.

We changed our environment faster than our minds evolved to keep up. Despite living in a relatively lioness-free world, we are still predisposed to draw conclusions fast and take action. Thinking things through remains an option that most of us decline more often than we realize.

To be fair, the act-don't-analyze predisposition continues to serve us well fairly often in our modern world. That we need touch a hot burner only once to learn never to touch it again is a good thing. And there is often no harm when the predisposition happens to mislead us, as in the case of someone who decides that belching cures hiccups, because after several good belches the hiccups eventually subside.

But sometimes the predisposition misleads in costly ways. A seemingly harmless folk cure can result in serious consequences when chosen to the exclusion of a proven medical treatment. And marketers can waste big dollars by continuing to fund campaigns they believe to be effective when a critical look would reveal otherwise.

There are plenty of books on building marketing plans and writing ads. With *Prove It Before You Promote It: How to Take the Guesswork Out of Marketing*, my objective is the next step: subjecting cherished marketing practices to critical thinking and to the scientific method so as to discover and do more of what works, and avoid wasting money on what doesn't.

Expect a hue and cry from marketing and advertising people everywhere. Like carnival psychics who balk at testing because "the spirits won't cooperate when there's a skeptic in the room," many marketers will tell you their craft is an art, a gift that defies analysis. Just trust their creativity, they'll tell you, for true creativity produces sales as a matter of course in some ethereal, inexplicable way.<sup>7</sup> In so saying, they elevate marketing not just to an art, but to a form of magic. And amazingly, like marks who pay fortune-tellers for news of the departed, one business decision maker after another hands over the marketing budget. Tell them or their advertising agencies that award-winning creative work has not been proven to sell any better than non-award winners, and they will flatly deny it. Show them the numbers, and they'll disqualify them. Or, they'll counter with handpicked award winners that correlate with, but cannot be demonstrated to have caused, a sales increase.

But the inescapable fact is, if your marketing will work in the marketplace, it will stand up to valid testing. It follows that when marketing doesn't stand up to valid testing, you can be reasonably sure it won't work in the marketplace either, no matter how passionately you defend it, no matter how attached to it you may feel, and no matter how creative you find it to be.

Imagine how much more productive your marketing would become if you could set aside traditional notions of

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how to market, dismiss what gut intuition tells you, and instead test and evaluate a campaign—before you launch it—the way a scientist tests a hypothesis before proclaiming it law. Suppose you could prove successful campaigns in advance and then roll them out with confidence, while ferreting out unsuccessful ones and quietly retiring them without costing yourself and your company embarrassment or money.

Fortunately, for close to two centuries, there have always been a few renegades here and there who were willing to carefully test, measure, and observe the effects of their marketing. Chances are they didn't realize they were applying the scientific method to marketing and advertising, but that's exactly what they were doing. Their collective findings provide a vast body of knowledge about what does and doesn't work in marketing, most of which still applies. Successful marketing, they have repeatedly shown, isn't a question of opinion or taste, but of what can be consistently demonstrated to do a better job of leading more people to buy more often.<sup>8, 9</sup>

Another more recent, equally helpful effort has been gaining a good deal of momentum lately. I refer to a growing movement of modern scientist-writers who have dedicated themselves to debunking pseudoscience.<sup>10</sup> Fortunately, their work is increasing in popularity. (The success of the TV show *MythBusters* is a good example.) It turns out we marketers could learn a lot from them.

In the chapters that follow, I'll draw on insights from both camps, as well as on observations from my own experience with tested marketing. Chapter 2 tackles head-on one of the leading causes of untested, bad marketing decisions: the boss who makes idiotic marketing calls based solely on gut intuition. The chapter will balm the wounds

of any marketer who cringed at the sound of the boss saying, “My gut is never wrong.” If this book shows up on your chair anonymously bookmarked at Chapter 2, you are said boss.

Chapter 3 draws upon psychology and statistics to reveal common logical fallacies we all commit, why we commit them, and how marketers are not immune. My hope is that you will avoid making such leaps yourself. A particularly beguiling leap—that of confusing correlation with causation—is so disastrous for marketers that I committed the entirety of Chapter 4 to it. This leads nicely into Chapter 5, wherein the evidence soundly debunks the old advertising notion that “true creativity” is all you need for a successful marketing campaign. In Chapter 6, I turn a critical eye on the legitimate practice and rampant malpractice of branding. Critical, but not cynical. I discard the branding hoopla bathwater, but I rescue the baby with a look at the characteristics and power of a rock-solid brand.

If those chapters fail to offend, Chapter 7 is sure to do the trick. This is where I reveal why your favorite marketing books may provide useful food for thought but should never be accepted as blueprints for success. With few exceptions, marketing books are anecdotal, not scientific, and are not reliable predictors of what works in the market.

Chapter 8 borrows from neurological and behavioral science to show why most predictive research is nothing of the sort, whether qualitative or quantitative. But don’t despair. I’ll rescue you in Chapter 9, where I show how to conduct predictive research that’s actually valid and reliable.

Most of *Prove It Before You Promote It* starts with marketing and subjects it to the rigors of scientific testing. Chapter 10 turns things around. It starts with scientific findings about

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human behavior and then explores implications for marketing. Cognitive science, it turns out, can tell us much about why some marketing approaches seem to work better than others.

In Chapter 11, I show you how to map out a marketing strategy within which creativity can be properly nourished and disciplined.

Finally, with sound critical thinking and good science under our belts, we are ready in Chapter 12 to address the proper role of intuition in marketing. It turns out it really does have one.

Throughout *Prove It Before You Promote It*, I'll show you what people who measure marketing and advertising know, along with how they know it, so you can evaluate and even test their conclusions for yourself. I'll show you what science tells us about common errors in human thinking, how we unwittingly impose these errors upon marketing, and how to avoid doing so in the future. I'll share some of my own adventures from a career of subjecting marketing and advertising to the rigors of valid testing. I'll expose how selected, time-honored, universally accepted marketing practices fail to hold up in the face of critical thinking. And I'll invite you to empathize with me from time to time as I beat my head against the wall because of those who just don't get it.

Not that I intend to leave naught but destruction in my wake. In the process of debunking, I also reveal what all this tells us about doing marketing the smart way: scientifically and with projectable results.

My hope is that you'll emerge committed to marketing based on sound judgment and real evidence instead of marketing folklore. Perhaps you'll even become a debunker yourself. We could use a few more.



A word of warning: effecting change isn't easy. The more people invest themselves in a belief, the more likely they are to defend it, even in the face of facts proving the belief wrong. Psychologist Leon Festinger found that people who commit time and resources to provably erroneous beliefs—from investment schemes to UFOs—tend to remain resolute.<sup>11</sup> Rather than admit defeat, they prefer to disqualify the facts ("I lost money but the system works") or modify the original claim ("the aliens didn't visit Earth as predicted because the media were there"). It's all too human, it seems, to do anything but face facts when something we've pursued long and hard turns out to be unsupportable. Marketers aren't so different when it comes to letting go of cherished practices.

So don't expect the information you're about to pick up to make you many friends. It's good information, but it is largely overlooked—in fact, *disdained*—by well-respected marketing and advertising authorities who prefer to do things they way they've always done them. Prepare to ignore the mainstream while you go on to success. There's no need—or excuse—to bet the marketing budget on a whim or a hunch.

Critical thinking and the scientific method brought the rest of the world out of the Dark Ages a millennium ago. It's time marketing caught up.

#### SUMMARY POINTS FROM *WHAT ANY FOOL KNOWS*

- People do not readily give up cherished beliefs, even when proven wrong.

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- Betting a marketing budget on tradition constitutes an unwise and unnecessary risk.
- There is a vast body of knowledge about what works in marketing, thanks to over a century of scientifically tested marketing approaches. Marketers ignore it at their peril.
- Ongoing scientific discoveries about human behavior can provide useful information to marketers who care to read between the lines.
- Successful marketing isn't a question of opinion or taste but of what consistently leads more people to buy.
- You can use both critical thinking and the scientific method to improve marketing success and minimize loss.
- There's no need—or excuse—to bet the marketing budget on a whim or a hunch.