

Transparent Marketing™

How To Earn The Trust Of A Skeptical Consumer

OK, marketing pro, let's take a quick test. The following sales copy is excerpted from the Altoona Tribune. **Just how effective do you think it could be?** Is it persuasive? What is your instant reaction to the tone of the message?

“Modoc Oil – The greatest medicine on earth. It has no equal. It relieves all pain instantly: Toothache in one minute – Headache in one minute -- Earache in ten minutes – Sore Throat in one night – Neuralgia in from three to five minutes. “

“Modoc Oil can be used internally as well as externally without the least danger. It has never been known to injure anyone young or old. One of the most valuable properties of this oil is its adaptability in painful diseases of children. Should your babe show any symptoms of pain in the stomach or bowels, wet immediately a flannel cloth and lay it on the seat of pain. Relief will certainly follow in less than ten minutes.”

“Modoc Oil is a sure and speedy cure. Every family should have a bottle within reach. It's a doctor in the house.”ⁱ

Brash, isn't it? Would you rush out and buy a bottle of this miracle cure? Would anyone? **In 1885 the demand was so strong** that the Oregon Indian Medicine Company had to build a new plant encompassing an entire city block of Corry, Pennsylvania. As late as 1912, the Company was still in full production with a popular price point of fifty cents per bottle.ⁱⁱ

What about today? How would such blatant copy be received in our cynical marketplace?

Researchers at *MarketingExperiments.Com* recently **endeavored to place the very same ad in the Altoona Mirror (The Tribune is no longer published)**. But the Mirror wouldn't accept the copy, and neither would any other major metropolitan newspaper.

A fairly predictable result — but it demonstrates a vital point. This original ad worked only because people **trusted and believed** its message. Not anymore.

With each passing nanosecond, consumers are growing more and more jaded. It is difficult to fathom just how skeptical this generation has become... skeptical and wary.

The average person is assaulted with a barrage of 577 new marketing messages per week.

If we could somehow wire the mind of the consumer as they sift through the conundrum of emails, snail mails, banners and commercials... we would probably hear a resounding response:

“I don't have time to listen, and I don't believe you anyway.”

Indeed, experts tell us that people sort their mail in order to find an excuse to trash it. And even if by chance, a message somehow escapes this ruthless purge... it probably won't be remembered.

Statistics indicate that we retain less than 1% of the marketing messages we encounter.ⁱⁱⁱ

That means that this very week, your company's pitch is just one of another 577 being hurled at the prospect. You may be #11, or you may be #450, but whatever number you are, it is imperative to win a place among **the fortunate 1%** that are actually "heard" and remembered.

And this is only half the battle... somehow you must be believed.

In the first quarter of 2000, our colleagues and competitors burned nearly two billion dollars in online advertising. This is **182% more** than the first quarter of 1999. And this is despite the fact that only a fraction of these monies will ever purchase a trusted first position.^{iv}

Here's the bad news:

The Post Modern Consumer just doesn't believe us anymore. They have endured too many empty promises, too many exaggerated benefits, and too many artful disclaimers.

The word "sales" has become synonymous with the word "hype".

What are we as marketing experts to do? How can we continue to invest against these diminishing returns? How can we be heard? And most importantly, how can we be believed?

While these questions are challenging, they also afford a major **opportunity**.

Most companies are churning out traditional sales jargon laced with vague adjectives and "me too" claims. A visionary (even if small) firm who learns how to communicate in a new way could achieve **instant credibility**.

Credibility translates into trust; trust translates into relationship, and relationship can translate into sustained sales.

But what is this "new way to communicate" and how can we learn it? Here's one place to begin.

This article contains 2591 words. You have already read 747 of them. It will NOT answer all of your questions. It is very limited by it's length and by it's medium, but it will disclose **five key principles** that could truly help you penetrate the venerable defenses of your target market. It utilizes two research studies, it contains eight quotations, and it references seven sources. It is tightly focused on a single question:

How can we get this skeptical generation to accept and respond to our marketing message?

The answer can be found within a simple set of principles that embody the core philosophy of **Transparent Marketing™**.

As we race into the new millennium, the rules are changing; people are changing. The "old school" methods of selling products are growing stagnant. Social Scientists call this new era **The Age of Post Modernity**.

And the Post Modern Consumer will not tolerate multiple "closes", self-promotion, or invasive mail. He doesn't even like "suits and ties".

Technology has empowered this new generation with far more options than in times past. **Marketers are often held hostage by a single click**. And whether the weapon of choice is a mouse or remote, we have but seconds to initiate a relationship.

There has to be a more effective way to communicate.

Transparent Marketing™ offers a discreet new philosophy based on a collection of historic values.

The British poet, W.H. Auden once said:^v

“The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind in order that I may love myself is very different from the image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me.”

In **Transparent Marketing™**, both images are one and the same.

To understand the application of this new philosophy we must fast forward from 1885, to some 115 years later.

Here is a modern (if subtle) version of “snake oil copy”. It is actual sales text extracted from the high traffic web site of a major company (the name has been changed).

“Led by one of the finest management teams in the industry, MediWidgets has consistently demonstrated a keen understanding of the industry and a strong vision for its future. This vision translated into a concept of a superior system - of how patients should move smoothly through a logical healthcare system that offers highly technical, less-invasive, cost-effective procedures.”

What is wrong with this piece? Is it too long, too short, or too direct? If you were the expert hired to revise it, what changes would you make?

Transparent Marketing™ suggests a different way to analyze this sample copy. Here are five key principles:

1. Tell (only) the (verifiable) Truth

“Write the truest line you know.” When Earnest Hemingway^{vi} penned this famous advice, he could not have known that it would have such lasting impact. His words still resonate today. If the new marketer is to succeed in persuading the Post Modern Consumer, he must embrace this maxim just as eagerly as the aspiring author.

The task is challenging. First, we must strip our ad copy of **every last info fragment that is not absolutely accurate**. Then we must go back and strip it again, this time of every fragment that is not absolutely verifiable.

Here is a direct quote from the mission statement of HealthWidgets.Com:

“We consider respect, trust and integrity to be essential in all our dealings. We expect honest, ethical behavior from ourselves, and we encourage it in others.”

Fine sounding words, but despite the noble tone, their message will likely be discarded. If the Post Modern Consumer can't **instantly verify a claim** he will assume that it is false.

2. Purge all vague modifiers.

Let's take a pair of surgical scissors to the MediWidgets pitch. Let's cut away the subjective adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases.

“Led by _____ management teams in the industry, MediWidgets has _____ demonstrated a _____ understanding of the industry and a _____ vision for its future. This vision translated into a concept of a _____ system - of how patients should move _____ through a _____ healthcare system that offers _____.”

Question: What do we have left? Answer: Not much.

What is this copy saying? How will it impact a prospect?

Here is a paraphrase of the remaining paragraph, along with the likely responses of a weary decision maker as he scans for meaning.

- **Info-Fragment 1:** MediWidgets is led by a management team. (So what. So is every other company)
- **Info-Fragment 2:** MediWidgets has demonstrated an understanding of the industry and it's future. (Yeah, yeah, yeah. Says who? How have they demonstrated this "understanding"?)
- **Info-fragment 3:** MediWidgets has designed a system for moving patients through a healthcare system. (What are these people talking about? What do they really do? How can they help me?)

If these responses seem harsh, they are probably not harsh enough. While this writer has no desire to demean the work of another professional, the Post Modern Consumer couldn't care less. He actually **despises hype and anything else that insults his intelligence.**

He is armed and dangerous. With a **single click**, he can **terminate** a company's opportunity.

3. Let someone else do your bragging

To the Post Modern Consumer, nothing is more nauseous than the sound of someone singing their own virtues. If you must convey subjective information about your product, then **do so through the voice of your customers, peers, or reviewers.**

In our sample copy we deleted the following modifiers: *finest, consistently, keen, strong, superior, smoothly, less invasive, cost-effective.* Anyone of these colorful words could be acceptable, bracketed within the quotes of an unbiased third party, but they will not work when we declare them for ourselves.

As King Solomon, advised his son, some 3500 years ago, "Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth".^{vii}

4. Substitute general descriptions with specific facts

The Post Modern Consumer demands to be respected as a capable decision maker. They despise **thinly veiled sales pressure**, but they appreciate simple, direct communication. Give them the resources they need to make an intelligent comparison; then politely "step back" and allow them to make their own evaluation.

Let's see how this second principle applies to the first two key points of the sample copy.

- Info-fragment1: MediWidgets is led by a management team

This fragment does not offer any substantial meaning. If the goal is to persuade the reader to trust the company, then we need to provide **specific facts that clearly imply the effectiveness** of the Team.

This goal can be accomplished with a hyperlink to more information, and/or with a single inclusive statement of "ipso de facto" qualification.

In the limited space of the above copy, it is probably best to focus your prospect on the qualification of one team member. Here is an example:

MODIFIED INFO-FRAGMENT 1: Jan Vincent, the CEO of MediWidgets.Com, was formerly the Technology Director of the **Mayo Clinic**. She holds dual doctorates in **Computer Science** and in **Nuclear Medicine**.

- Info-Fragment 2: MediWidgets has demonstrated an understanding of the industry and it's future.

This fragment makes a bold proclamation, but **does not offer a shred of evidence**. It is not difficult to imagine how sarcastically this nebulous claim will be received by the reader as he slashes through the dross.

MODIFIED INFO-FRAGMENT 2: In the past seven years, the R&D staff of MediWidgets.Com has developed six new **software applications** and eleven new **patented, patient care procedures**. According to "Medicine Today", **62% of all U.S. Hospitals** utilize at least one software solution created by the MediWidgets Research Team.

5. Admit your Weaknesses

The Post Modern Consumer is not looking for perfection. He is looking for honesty. He wants to build a relationship with someone or with some company **that he can trust**. Best selling authors Jack Trout and Al Ries espouse this vital principle.

*"Why does a dose of honesty work so well in the marketing process? First and foremost, candor is very disarming. **Every negative statement you make about yourself is instantly accepted as truth**. Positive statements, on the other hand, are looked at as dubious at best."*
viii

When a company is humble enough to admit a weakness, they immediately distinguish themselves from the competition. It opens the door for a trust relationship.

The consumer is all too aware of the fact that we are not perfect. To pretend otherwise, only serves to raise their suspicion. Tell them what you can't do, and they'll believe you when you tell them what you can do.

As Emily Dickinson^{ix} has said, "The truth must dazzle gradually".

Let's see how the principles of Transparent Marketing™ work together in the sample copy

For the sake of clarity, we have divided it into two paragraphs.

*MediWidgets.Com **helps people access their personal medical records** from their home computer. Jan Vincent, the CEO of MediWidgets.Com, was formerly the Technology Director of the **Mayo Clinic**. She holds dual doctorates in **Computer Science** and in **Nuclear Medicine**.*

*In the past seven years, the R&D staff of MediWidgets.Com has developed six new **software applications** and eleven new **patented, patient care procedures**. According to "Medicine Today", **62% of all U.S. Hospitals** utilize at least one software solution created by the MediWidgets Research Team...*

These paragraphs reflects a new approach to the MediWidgets marketing message, but they could be improved still further... In fact, they would be more web compatible, if they were organized in an easy-to-scan **list format**. The message, itself, could be strengthened, if it were complimented by a simple set of **decision tools**. These include:

- A customer satisfaction rating **reflected in real time**, on the web site.

- A symbol beside each feature that reveals the percentage of **current customers who agree** with its claim. *This information would be gathered in a simple agree/disagree poll taken from customers who have used the product for six months.*
- A simple, **easy-to-scan chart** that (politely) compares the MediWidgets solutions with its competitors.
- A “What Are Your **Limitations** Section?” that would allow the prospect to learn in advance the product’s inherent weaknesses. *This section would have a (moderated) forum that let customers add their own comments and observations.*

In the final analysis, it’s not the prose; it’s the principles. **Transparent Marketing™** is about values not sentence alchemy. It asks that we treat the customer with the same integrity that we would expect to be treated.

Its simple approach to a complex problem can best be captured in the words of an anonymous rhyme:^x

A lion met a tiger
As they drank beside a pool
Said the tiger, “tell me why...
You’re roaring like a fool.”

“That’s not foolish;” said the lion,
With a twinkle in his eyes,
“They call me king of all the beasts
Because I advertise!”

A rabbit heard them talking,
And ran home like a streak.
He thought he’d try the lion’s plan,
But his roar was just a squeak.

A fox, who happened on the scene,
Had a fine lunch in the woods.
The Moral? When you advertise,
Just be sure you’ve got the goods.

ⁱ "Modoc Oil - The Greatest Pain Medicine On Earth (Adv.)," *Altoona Tribune* (Altoona, PA), January 29, 1884.

ⁱⁱ "The Oregon Indian Medicine Company," English, <http://www.bottlebooks.com/oregon.htm>: Digger Odell Publications.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kam Wai Yu and Derek Lee Armstrong, book, *The Persona Principle* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

^{iv} Web Release, "Internet Advertising Revenues Pass \$2 Billion in Second Quarter 2000," English, <http://www.iab.net/news/content/adrevenue100200.html>: Pricewaterhouse Coopers Internet Ad Revenue Report.

^v Auden, Wystan, Hugh 1907-1973. British-born American writer and critic whose poems, published in collections such as *The Dance of Death* (1933) and *The Double Man* (1941), established his importance in 20th-century literature.

^{vi} Hemingway, Ernest, Miller 1899-1961. American writer. A World War I ambulance driver, journalist, adventurer, and expatriate in Paris during the 1920's, he wrote short stories and

novels, such as *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), that concern courageous, lonely characters and are marked by his terse literary style. He won the 1954 Nobel Prize for literature.

vii *The Holy Bible - Authorized King James Version.*

viii Al Ries & Jack Trout, book, *The 22 Immutable Laws Of Marketing* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1994).

ix Dickinson, Emily Elizabeth 1830-1886. American poet who was virtually a recluse at her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she wrote more than a thousand verses infused with emotional depth and subtlety. The first volume of her poetry was not published until 1890

x Dan Kennedy, book, *The Ultimate Marketing Plan* (Holbrook, MA: Bob Adams, Inc., 1991).