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“I’m Sorry – You’ve Lost Me”

Five Words No Brand Should Ever Have to Hear



Jeremy Bullmore

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2008 may be remembered as the year when numbers finally lost their capacity to shock. At the beginning of the year, two billion dollars was a lot of money. By the end of it, two trillion dollars was rather less: or so it seemed. Logically, the fact of a corporation facing losses of 100 billion should be four times more chilling than one facing losses of 25 billion – but logic doesn't come into it. There comes a moment when numbers so distance themselves from personal experience that comprehension snaps. And when comprehension goes, so, more worryingly, does any sense of personal involvement. Unimaginable vastness is so remote from anything we've ever seen or touched that it simply doesn't connect. It's like being told that Planet Earth is just one of several million other planets out there. I'm sorry – you've lost me. If we were told that we were one of just five, that would be a different matter altogether. As it is, we shrug – and think of something else.

Children may get their heads round money by relating it to their pocket money or to the price of a candy bar. Their parents may try to keep one foot on the ground by mentally relating money to salaries or house prices. But two trillion? How many houses could you buy for two trillion? How much R&D could you finance?

I'm sorry – you've lost me.

As governments around the world finally and grudgingly acknowledged the existence of recession – and in most cases many months earlier – companies everywhere began ransacking their records, their lofts and their memories: what were the secrets of weathering recessions – even of coming out of them with greater strength? There are more than 150 published papers on the subject, spanning more than 70 years.

Most analyses agree. Tough times make people think more. When people think more, they re-assess their behaviour. Those companies who've confused customer habit with customer loyalty quickly discover that they're not the same. Price:value relationships slither about a bit: price, which is both objective and quantifiable, becomes a lot easier to hang on to than something called value, which is neither. Unless underpinned by intrinsic quality, 'added value' begins to seem little more than fancy packaging.

In times of recession, the kaleidoscope is given a mighty shake.

The point of all this, and demonstrated over those last 70 years, is that the most successful recession marketers are those astute enough and nimble enough to find new patterns amid the confusion and seize the new chances. Every brand's new chances will be slightly different and all gains made will be at someone else's expense.

But probably the biggest single risk facing recession marketers is exactly the same as the biggest single risk that faces successful companies at all times – but with a frighteningly higher level of intensity: and that's the risk of losing touch with their ultimate users. Success brings growth; greater size demands delegation and the introduction of departments; and real people stop being real people and become demographics. It needn't happen but it does. Brands – and the companies behind those brands – slowly and imperceptibly come to seem as remote from reality as trillions of dollars do. And the ultimate consumer response is exactly the same: I'm sorry – you've lost me.

As many of those published papers demonstrate, it's easier to lose users in times of recession than at any other time. Tough times make people think more. When people think more, they re-assess their behaviour. And if their brands have drifted away from them into some de-personalised stratosphere, it's now that they'll notice – and do something about it.

Suddenly, they're lost; and as everyone has always known, to retrieve a lost user takes a great deal of time and a great deal of money.

However, there's some surprisingly good news. Despite the continuing growth of marketing companies and their brands, it's more possible now for them to keep in sensitive touch with their ultimate users – and to close any gaps that may have developed – than during any previous recession. Not simpler, certainly, and no cheaper; just more possible.

Two great interlocking things have happened to marketing communications since the last recession of this scale. We seem to have developed a rather deeper understanding of how the most persuasive marketing communications work. And there are now many more ways to engage with any given audience.

To simplify perhaps unfairly: there was a time when mass communication was thought to be something of a monologue. Transmitters transmitted and receivers received. The ability to transmit was limited to those in the possession of relatively few transmission facilities: just media owners – and advertisers who could afford to rent those facilities. The receiving public, that overwhelming majority, had little choice but to receive – and remain silent.

Unfortunately, their enforced silence was interpreted by many as passivity. A style of mass commercial communication developed that was often didactic, at times almost hectoring. Claims of product superiority were repeatedly asserted and consumers were instructed to consume.

Defendants of this style point to its effectiveness. Sales went up, they rightly say. Of course they did. Paid-for brand publicity has always contributed to brand fame. And brand fame has a simple competitive value.

But what this style of communication never managed to achieve, and never will, is that willing complicity between sender and receiver that's the mark of all the most effective persuasion. In the words of Arthur Koestler, "The artist rules his subjects by turning them into accomplices."

Receivers have never been passive. No receiving brain accepts claims and assertions without challenge. Every receiving brain filters such messages through its own experience and its own prejudices – and reaches its own conclusions.

And just as this long overdue insight (always intuitively understood by the best natural communicators) became more generally understood and legitimised, along came the internet. And suddenly, hallelujah, it wasn't just media owners and advertisers who had access to transmission facilities. Anyone with a computer and internet access was now a potential publisher. And publish they did, in their millions – and so they will for evermore.

The myth of the passive obedient consumer, however attractive to a certain kind of marketing mind, has been blown for good. And in its place is an infinitely more complicated but altogether healthier state of affairs. For companies deeply concerned not to lose touch with their users – wherever they may be and however disparate – things have never looked better. Through one set of lenses, the fragmentation of media is an advertiser's nightmare; and so is the ability of lowly consumers to answer back. Through another set of lenses, both developments offer an amazing new potential. After a century during which corporations got bigger and bigger, more and more global, and almost inevitably more and more remote from their ultimate users, the trend has begun to turn.

The pattern is far from fixed and even the vocabulary seems still to be in development stage. We'll probably look back on this time and realise that 'old' media and 'new' media had more in common than we realised and that 'digital' was a curious word to have emerged as the name for a form of mass communication that gets closer to conversation than anything before it.

And we'll maybe even come to see that interactive media, with their ability to involve real people with real things and real ideas, have much in common with those most primitive of communications devices: demonstrations. Whether in market squares or jungle clearings, showing, involving, achieving participation and responding to feedback remain as powerful a way of keeping in touch with those all-important people out there as they ever have.

It won't be tidy. But there really shouldn't be any excuses, during recessionary times or not, for brands to lose their followers through becoming too remote. ■

Jeremy Bullmore

Jeremy Bullmore was born in 1929. His first job, in 1954, was as a trainee copywriter with J. Walter Thompson in London, where he stayed until retirement in 1987. He became successively writer/producer, creative group head and head of television; from 1964 to 1975, head of the creative department; from 1976 to 1987, chairman. From 1981 to 1987 he was a member of the JWT worldwide board and chairman of the Advertising Association.

From 1988 to 2001 he was non-executive director of the Guardian Media Group and, from 1988 to 2004, a non-executive director of WPP. He is past president of Nabs and past president of the Market Research Society. He is currently a member of the WPP Advisory Board and a columnist for *Campaign*, *Management Today*, *Market Leader* and *The Guardian*. He was awarded a CBE in 1985 and the Advertising Association's Mackintosh Medal in 2011.

His publications include: *Another Bad Day at the Office?*, Penguin, 2001; *Behind the Scenes in Advertising Mark III (More Bull More)*, WARC, 2003; *Ask Jeremy*, Haymarket, 2004; *Apples, Insights & Mad Inventors*, Wiley, 2006.

He has three grown-up children and lives with his wife Pamela in London and Wiltshire.

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