Book review

All Marketers Are Liars: The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World

Seth Godin

Penguin/Michael Joseph, London, 2006; ISBN: 0 718 14865 7 (hb); 186pp.

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The cover of this book, Seth Godin's seventh in as many years, features the shaven-headed marketing maven sporting a Pinocchio-style false nose. The image sums up the thesis of the book. Lying is what marketers do. Well, that's not quite the truth (what would you expect from a marketer?). A glance at the back cover reveals that marketers aren't really liars, they just tell good stories. But calling marketers storytellers is hardly going to get your book talked about, as revealed on page 135. And getting talked about is the sink-or-swim test of today's marketers. The frequently reiterated message of the book is that you need to decide what your story is, find a group of customers with whom it resonates (and who will bring their peers on board by sharing it) and then tell it with conviction.

Godin's 'riffing' style, rapid-fire anecdotes and aphorisms, rife with capitalisation, italics and bold type, is clearly meant to exemplify this advice. The resulting ratio of paradoxes to paragraphs can get wearing, even in a book this short. But it has its moments. I chortled at the characterisation of the recent history of marketing as a move from making things to making things up. Production is something the sassy marketer outsources these days, the better to concentrate on storytelling. You won't find the B-word in his index here, but Godin's celebration of hype-driven marketing comes across as a euphoric counterblast to Naomi

Klein's millennial hammering of the empty vessel of contemporary branding.

Godin differentiates between two levels of terminological inexactitude in marketing — the fib and the fraud. Fibbing is basically OK. Limited to honest liars, like a wine-glass manufacturer who claims wine tastes better from his products in spite of 'scientific' research, this is all about telling customers what they want to believe. Fitting in with their world view enhances their experience and your business, so everybody's happy. Fraud, on the other hand, is when customers' long-term interests are squashed in the service of short-term profits by marketers abusing their storytelling power. The usual corporate suspects are invoked here — from fast-food merchants to tobacco giants. Godin reserves particular rancour for Nestle, whose infant-formula marketing in developing countries he accuses of having spun a deceitful story of the benefits of Western technology over traditional breast-feeding. He insists that it's not good enough to invoke the doctrine of consumer sovereignty when marketing's grand narratives can be so seductive. Yet, a few pages on he argues that: 'Marketing isn't the problem. Marketing is just a tool. **People are the problem.**' (p. 105) It's not only unscrupulous marketers but customers 'who refuse to spend a few minutes understanding side effects and buy a story instead.' If Nestle are (or, at least, have been) the

arch-fiends of marketing mendacity, then SUV-drivers are the gas-guzzling supervillains of consumer culpability in Godin's analysis. He has that, at least, in common with the Mayor of London.

To separate fibs from frauds, Godin recommends that buyers spend their few minutes asking two questions of sellers. First, if we knew what you know, would we buy what you're selling? Secondly, in time, will we be glad we bought into the story? The problem with questions like these is that stories don't exist in isolation, and — at least in real life — they are open-ended and vulnerable to new information. Stories are nested and enmeshed in a complicated web of received wisdom and commonsense understanding which itself is changing and developing in ways difficult to understand or predict. George Lakoff, the UCLA linguistics professor listed by Godin as one of his influences, has argued that by adopting certain common metaphors we unwittingly spread stories which — were we to think about them — are diametrically opposed to our interests (are you against 'speed cameras' or for 'safety cameras' for example?). The difference between fib and fraud is thus highly contestable, depending on which story you are in.

Godin is in a North American story — which is one of the reasons his book is of interest to those of us elsewhere. We find him writing in coffee shops, musing on the success or otherwise of his fellow storypreneurs (often personal friends) in a post-industrial economy, citing nationally

based US businesses as commonplaces, and, very American this, appearing not to know who Rula Lenska is. It's easy to hold fibs innocent in a sophisticated self-ironic culture where wants rather than needs set the marketing agenda. But widen the lens to a global marketplace and sooner or later the truth will out.

Godin sets this book against his previous efforts, most recently *Purple Cow* (2003). While consistent with that book's doctrine of the need for marketing to be remarkable (and therefore talkable about), this one widens the context of such talk to storytelling (to others and ourselves). Yet it is still a context that appears to have rather arbitrary cultural and social limits. For example, if marketing infant formula is based on a lie in the developing world, does that make it any truer for mothers and their babies in the West? Anti-Nestle campaigners have always argued it doesn't, and that baby milk powder is as redundant (and noxious) a marketing proposition in the developed world as it is elsewhere. Yet Godin's argument about sophisticated customers suggests that a fraud in one place might just be a fib in another. As markets continue to globalize, with concomitant long-term shifts in economic power, the 'wants/needs' balance fuelling marketing's fibs and frauds is likely to tip towards a more literal understanding of needs. When that happens, marketers had better have their story ready.

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