

Forever in blue jeans

 By [Mike Abel](#)

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In Neil Diamond's classic hit, he begins with the lyrics "Money talks, but it don't sing and dance and it don't walk". He goes on to say that's why he'll forever be in blue jeans. These words have been plaguing me of late, since I chanced upon them some weeks back, hidden on my iPod.



I guess I'm a bit old fashioned when it comes to relationships.

All relationships.

I like decorum, I like openness and I like to believe. I also like fun, mischief and banter. But when you get down to it, the fundamental basic for any sustainable relationship is trust.

I'm in an industry notorious for bad behaviour - advertising.

Ad folk are the self-proclaimed rock stars of the marketing industry. It is a reputation not entirely unfounded. A lot of the guys are rebels, sometimes funny, badly behaved and super-smart. They are, in many ways, the best and worst of our industry.

Broader relationships

But this article it is not about them, it is about broader business relationships, those between clients and agencies.

I have this unfortunate saying: "he who holds the wallet is king". This is generally true of all business relationships. Yet I would argue that money is often the least important ingredient in sustaining successful relationships.

People mistakenly believe that it is the most effective tool rather than a form of tender. I refer to Neil Diamond's opening prose above.

In the movie, Shrek turns to Donkey when he comes across Prince Charming's enormous castle and says "I think he's trying to over-compensate for something !" Later we discover the good Prince is very short and indeed, may also have a small one.

Many relationships are bedevilled by a similar over-compensation. Personal insecurities become insecurities that play out in interpersonal relationships.

Trust

When people feel secure, they trust. They believe. And with this, a whole world of opportunity presents itself. Light shines through the rafters and the birds return to the garden. Colours are brighter and the aromas magical. Unfortunately, the converse is also true. Without trust, the sun hides behind storm clouds. The windows are firmly shut and a cold wind creeps under the doors. The fruit trees stay barren and bare.

People like to believe that trust is earned.

I think that this, again, is one of the most useless belief systems in business.

I understand it when it comes to picking up hitch-hikers or leaving your windows unlocked.

In business, the possibilities would be far greater if trust were to be given upfront.

People that don't trust are usually judging others by their own standards.

I have found this to be true. The negative traits they themselves possess, they expect to find in others. The people's whose trust is hardest to earn, are usually those that should be least trusted. The so-called virtuous professions and callings, often bear witness to this.

So where is this all going? Be patient. Trust me.

Back to the advertising industry.

There is no commercial relationship as intense and usually long-term, as that between client and agency. Think about it.

You only see your lawyer, if you are not the litigious sort, once or twice a year, if that. Your accountant, maybe monthly, maybe just around tax return time.

You see or talk to your ad agency every day.

Commercial psychologists

And what agency and client are discussing is important. The consumer's perception of their brand. The very thing that differentiates their product from their competitors. The reason why you should buy their stuff versus the other stuff available.

True marketers are meant to be commercial psychologists. We need to understand what makes people tick. What turns

them on. What surprises and delights. What creates and sustains desirability.

Enter the famous philosopher, Blaise Pascal who said: "the heart knows reason that reason knows nothing of".

If this is true, then it's all much trickier than we thought. He is essentially saying that people behave mostly based on emotional rather than rational thinking. Even if they think it is rationally based, it is still informed by the emotion.

I have to agree.

Not because it suits me. Lord knows it would be much easier to ply my trade if empirical data and market and customer information were the guarantee that you'd know what to say in your ad, and by doing so, hit the sweet spot. Unfortunately, however, the very stuff that usually makes an ad jump off the page or screen is the highly subjective and emotional component.

It has been said that great advertising "makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange". It is often this "familiar strangeness" that gets you to sit up during an ad and think &*\$%\$#! I believe the polite term would be "Gosh!"

Research

Let's discuss research. A strategic planner I once worked with said "opinions are like assholes, everyone has one". Clients often don't trust their agencies (or most likely, themselves) sufficiently to go with their recommendations without researching them.

So they get a whole lot of people (usually about eight to 10, I'm told this is the magic number), and they put them into a room to decide whether the ad is good or bad.

This gathering is called a focus group, a form of qualitative research.

It mostly happens after hours. Complete strangers are herded into a fluorescent-lit room with a one way mirror (duh - they don't know you're behind it). They are fed stodgy sarmies, over-cooked chippolottas, warm beers and tepid wine and paid to offer their opinions on a rough advertising concept.

There is a saying that "if you want to see how the lion feeds, don't go to the zoo".

So what am I missing here?

The Client doesn't trust his own, or the agency's opinion. So he creates a totally unrealistic, intimidating environment at the tired end-of-day and asks herded strangers to comment on a yet-to-be-magically-infused advertising concept. Bizarre.

Human nature as it is, the strangers feel they have to add value (an awful term) and "put something back in". Just to say "I like it" would be like the proverbial boy in the emperor's new clothes shouting "he's naked". So everyone sits back and waits for the person with the loudest voice (frequently not the smartest) to start criticising and then the feeding frenzy begins. Not always, but usually this is how it goes.

Butt crack

I want to talk about Angelina Jolie's bum. In a recent *Vanity Fair*, The Hollywood Edition, the editor is talking about what it was like to work with Tom Ford in creative directing this particular issue. He distils the essence of this experience into one story. He describes walking into the room where they are doing the page layouts and on the photo of Angelina Jolie is a post-it note with the words "Leave in butt crack - TF".

I naturally start paging furiously through the publication to find the commented upon picture. Angie's lying in the bath,

tummy down, tattooed and glorious and the picture is cropped just beneath the start of her said "butt crack". What shows Ford's genius in this regard, is that if you crop the picture so as not to see the crack, she looks like the rebel we all know. But because of just this little bit more, we see her femininity and vulnerability. The difference is huge. It is not rude, or impolite. It is real. And beautiful.

Now I would argue that in most creative presentations, the butt crack is always the first thing to go. The very thing that may indeed give the ad its x-factor is the thing that through the process of adding value, is done away with. And if you want to keep it, research it. I must publicly state that I am not against all research. It does have its time and place. But the focus group methodology, inter alia, I find generally laughable.

Back to the trust word. If clients and agencies trusted one another more, there would indeed be a few mistakes. There would also be much less wallpaper. There would be far better ideas percolating through. There would be greater retention of talent. And far more goose-flesh.

Exponential profit

I have had the honour of working on a lot of the bluest of blue chip business and I promise you one thing. The relationships with trust at the centre profit exponentially more than those with doubt. Partnerships bound in friendship, truth and honesty, deliver miracles. The ones shrouded in distrust, fear and scepticism, produce nothing but the ordinary.

So, my challenge to all those serious about marketing is to get rid of the nay-sayers, the doubting-thomases and sceptics. The managers that lead by fear. Journeys begin with the word, yes and end with no. I would argue that today most organisations wouldn't hire the very mavericks that founded them. They'd probably "fail" the psychometric testing, the Myers-Briggs analysis or not adhere fastidiously enough to the research-led brand essence and subsequent architecture.

The best relationships are casual, open and un-guarded. If you don't agree with something, there may be not be a right or a wrong. Just different opinions. Let talent and opportunity dictate what should be done. Ideas are the things that sing and dance and walk. Choose your partners, give them your hand, your trust. And alacazam!

ABOUT MIKE ABEL

Mike Abel has been MD of Ogilvy Cape since 2001. During his 15 years in the industry, Mike has handled some of the bluest chip brands in South Africa. In 2006 he was awarded Agency Leader of the Year by the *Financial Mail*.

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