



When You Fling Mud at Competitors, You Get Dirty, Too



By Charles H. Green, Contributing Editor

Can you just come out and say you're the best without look self-serving? Can you point out a weakness in your competitor without it looking like bragging or mud-slinging? And if the client really needs to know something less-than-perfect about the competitor, can you point it out?

I rarely cite politicians, but one piece of received political wisdom works in business, too: if you're in the lead, don't debate the challenger.

Politics offers another lesson: mud-slinging poisons the well. Negative campaigning works—in the short run. In the not-very long run, it doesn't work for anybody, including the slinger and the public. No wonder politicians rank so low in trust.

Competitive Disadvantage

In recent decades, business has focused heavily on competition. Try completing this sentence: "The purpose of a company is to..." Too many people are channeling Ayn Rand these days, by saying "...make money."

Peter Drucker, esteemed business guru, finished the sentence this way: "...create and serve customers." Drucker is still respected, but his statement is quoted more than it is acted upon.

In selling, there has always been this tension between a focus on competition and on customers. Is winning a byproduct of customer focus? Or is winning the goal and customer focus simply a means to the greater end of winning?

Consider romance: is the best strategy for seeking a partner to disparage his/her other suitors? Or is it better to focus on your intended? I vote for number 2.

True Client Focus

You may be thinking, "Don't I have an *obligation* to politely show my client how we're right and my competitors are wrong?"

Well, what does the client hear when you disparage a competitor? Of course, they *may* hear what you intend—that on some important dimension, you are better. But there is collateral damage.

They will also hear, "These folks are focused on winning, not on helping me. How do I know I can trust their critique? What are they not telling me? It's my job, not theirs, to make the judgment. Should I give the competitor a second chance to explain? Why are they sticking me in the middle of a technical dispute?"

Be careful also of thinking, "I'm not mud-slinging. I'm being professional, objectively pointing out important risks. I'm helping them."

Too bad motives aren't everything. Motives won't change those unspoken client questions. The more you insist how clean your motives are, the more they're suspect.

The Long Term Is Not So Long Anymore

Reputations spread like wildfire on the web. Worse yet, reputations are no longer based on carefully crafted

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positioning statements but on suddenly public daily corporate life.

Non-marketing actions like customer service, lead screening, purchasing processes—and comments about competitors—suddenly drive brand image. He who tells a lie gets known as a liar. He who slings mud gets known as a mud-slinger—much faster, and much more broadly, than ever before. What goes around comes around—just a lot faster.

Be careful what you wish for: you may (or may not) win the particular argument, but you will definitely create a lasting impression—and not a good one.

The Good News in All This

The good news is the "right" thing to do increasingly looks like the smart thing to do. Focusing on your client, not on your competitor, is the trustworthy thing to do. And when trust in businesses is declining, those who act in a trustworthy manner differentiate themselves. Isn't that what you want?

What used to look like an ethical dilemma—to do the "right" thing and lose or do the "wrong" thing and win—may be getting easier. The odds of winning *because* you do the right thing are improving.

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Reader Feedback

Very true! I would take your comments one step further. It's great if you can be "objective" about how your product or service is better than the alternatives. An example of being objective is to use customer testimonials whenever possible. Your customers are credible in that they're not seen as self-serving, and they will use words that are relevant to other customers.

They'll also focus more on the tangible results that they achieved rather than attributes of your product or service. In other words, the best way to convey your message is to focus on customer results and use the customer's voice to tell your story. This can be done in a variety of ways—the method you choose (e.g., email, mail, video, presentation, seminar, webinar, podcast, article, website, quotes, etc.) depends on your target audience and the best way(s) to reach them.

—Beth Zonis
Principal, Eco Marketing LLC

In line with the Drucker quote, the best way to create and serve customers is to develop relationships. It's hard to develop a relationship with a customer if you're putting attention and resources into dissing your competition.

—Molly Gordon
Owner, Shaboom Inc.

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