

UNITED WISDOM

Good and Evil in Marketing

Freedom and Action

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Good and Evil in Marketing

On usefulness, manipulation, and the price of an ethical choice

United Wisdom

Imagine someone deciding to create a philosophical community: a place to discuss difficult questions, read good books, disagree, and gradually come to understand one's own life better.

He finds writers, prepares meetings, and gathers a small audience. But people are slow to arrive. The venue must be paid for, and so must the facilitators. He has to beg for attention from a world where something brighter happens every second.

One day someone suggests changing the advertising.

Instead of “Let's try to understand why we find it difficult to understand one another,” write: “You are being controlled. Discover the truth they are hiding from you.”

Suppose the second version really does bring more clicks. An argument breaks out in the comments. People become indignant, forward the post to friends, and sign up for a meeting.

The founder now faces a question that was absent from the original business plan: how much fear is he prepared to manufacture in order to sell people understanding?

Almost the entire ethical problem of marketing fits into this small scene.

Marketing begins with the ability to see another person: to notice what they lack, what they hope for, what embarrasses them, and what they fear. That knowledge can help us create a useful product and explain its value. It can also reveal the point at which someone is least able to protect their own interests.

The same audience research can become the beginning of help or a manual for exploitation.

“Finding the customer's pain” has long been a working expression. There is something perfectly reasonable behind it: before offering anything, we need to understand the difficulty a person lives with.

Parents struggle to find a reliable babysitter. A business owner loses hours to confusing paperwork. An older person finds an app awkward to use. Good marketing helps identify these difficulties, turn them into a problem for a business to solve, and show people an appropriate solution.

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Sometimes it helps name a need that a person has never been able to articulate. They had grown used to treating an inconvenience as inevitable, until someone offered a more convenient way to live.

But there is an ethical distance between discovering pain and pressing on it.

You can explain to a parent how babysitters are vetted. Or you can make them feel that, without an expensive service package, they are putting their child in danger. You can describe opportunities to learn. Or you can suggest to an adult that failing to earn a certain income at their age amounts to personal inadequacy.

Sometimes the product stays exactly the same. What changes is the state into which the seller deliberately brings the buyer.

Moreover, marketing does not have to find pain that already exists. It can create it first: declare a normal feature of the body a defect; turn an ordinary life into evidence of failure; persuade a person that everyone else has long since moved ahead while they alone remain outside the door.

And then offer an admission ticket.

This produces a particularly profitable arrangement: a company first helps a person feel inadequate, then sells temporary relief from that feeling.

At its best, good marketing reduces the distance between a need and an appropriate solution. Bad marketing can make money by ensuring that the distance never quite disappears.

Here, however, it is easy to draw an excessively convenient boundary: to declare everything useful and spiritual good, and everything sexual or entertaining evil.

That boundary does not survive contact with reality very well.

A person has the right to want pleasure, beauty, laughter, and rest. A light comedy can honestly fulfill its promise: an hour and a half of joy after a difficult week. It is not required to turn its audience into philosophers.

Sexual interest in itself does not amount to vice either. An ethical assessment of an erotic or pornographic product requires separate questions about consent, the conditions in which it was made, access, promotion, and the consequences of consumption. The name of the genre alone cannot answer them.

Meanwhile, a philosophical club may perfectly well trade in vanity. A spiritual project may trade in the fear of being “unawakened.” An educational program may sell the hope of joining a superior category of people with a single payment.

Imagine a community that promises growth but explains every doubt a member expresses as their ego resisting. Every unsuccessful outcome means they did not trust enough. Every new level of understanding requires another payment.

An elevated subject becomes excellent protection for a low way of treating people. The promise is hard to test, and responsibility for its failure can conveniently be shifted to the buyer.

So the question “What are we selling?” needs another alongside it: “What kind of relationship are we creating?”

Are we giving people more room to understand and choose? Or making them increasingly dependent on our judgment, our approval, and our next promise?

The word “vices” itself also calls for care.

Marketing can exploit greed, envy, or the desire for superiority. But loneliness, exhaustion, confusion, concern for loved ones, and fear of losing a job can become targets just as easily. Calling all of these vices would mean blaming people simply for being vulnerable.

A buyer is not obliged to be a focused analyst around the clock. They may read the terms late in the evening, be in a hurry, get distracted, or not understand professional language. These are ordinary circumstances of human life.

This is where an imbalance arises. A company knows its product, its terms, and the ways its offer can be presented. The buyer is encountering them for the first time. The company can study the buyer's behavior and refine its methods of influence repeatedly.

That advantage can be used to make choosing easier. It can also be used to make refusal harder than agreement.

The US Federal Trade Commission's report *Bringing Dark Patterns to Light* describes practices such as hidden terms, difficult subscription cancellation, and additional products slipping unnoticed into a shopping cart. What unites them is a design of choice that helps a company secure a decision that does not match the buyer's intention. Manipulation here exists at the level of buttons, screen sequences, and the accessibility of information. FTC, 2022

Marketing of this kind can have a perfectly polite voice. It does not even need to lie openly. Sometimes it is enough to make an important term hard to notice, agreement simple, and refusal exhausting.

The most uncomfortable part of the conversation begins when we have to acknowledge that some of these techniques work.

In the authors' abstract of *Shining a Light on Dark Patterns*, Jamie Luguri and Lior Strahilevitz report that, in one of their experiments, participants exposed to moderate manipulative techniques agreed to a dubious service more than twice as often as the control group. With aggressive techniques, they agreed almost four times as often. The moderate techniques did not provoke the pronounced negative reaction associated with aggressive ones. These findings concern specific experimental conditions; they do not measure a business's long-term profit. But they make it impossible simply to dismiss manipulation as ineffective advertising. Luguri and Strahilevitz, 2021 — research abstract

This is what gives the choice its real weight.

If treating people honestly always made more money, business ethics would almost coincide with instructions for increasing profit. All we would need to explain to entrepreneurs is that they were doing their sums wrong.

Yet an ethical boundary becomes tangible precisely when honoring it costs something: abandoning a technique that works; receiving fewer inquiries; not selling someone a product they are ready to buy because you understand that they need something else right now.

Such a choice involves a real loss of potential income. A pretty phrase about goodness inevitably paying off cannot erase that loss.

At the same time, the statement “evil marketing is always more profitable” goes further than the available grounds allow. It conflates attention, purchases, revenue, profit, and business sustainability.

A provocation may attract many views and bring in almost no money. High revenue may come with high expenses. A small professional community may remain sustainable even though its reach will never approach that of mass entertainment.

Comparing a pornographic channel with a philosophical society requires data about particular projects: who pays, for what, and how much audience acquisition, content creation, and ongoing operations cost. The mere sense that one attracts attention more easily than the other does not answer the question of profit.

A more precise, and more troubling, proposition is this: **under certain conditions, a business can earn additional income from the very vulnerability in a person that conscientious help would try to reduce.**

If you make money from anxiety, a customer's peace of mind can become a commercial problem. If you sell a sense of being special, you benefit from sustaining contempt for

everyone else. If you promise final release from a sense of inner inadequacy, the disappearance of that feeling can put the next sale in doubt.

Here the conflict is built into the source of income itself.

Nor can we confidently count on the market to eliminate this arrangement by itself: deceived buyers will leave, and honest companies will win.

In their paper on shrouded product attributes and limited consumer awareness, economists Xavier Gabaix and David Laibson describe theoretical conditions under which information remains hidden even amid strong competition. Their model shows why revealing the less obvious costs of add-on services to buyers may not benefit competing companies. This is a model of a particular market arrangement, not a universal law; nevertheless, it deprives us of the comfortable certainty that transparency will automatically prevail. Gabaix and Laibson, 2006 — author summary

Imagine an honest company that shows the full cost of a service from the start. Beside it, a competitor displays an attractive initial price, while necessary extra charges emerge later. In a superficial comparison, the honest company simply looks expensive.

Its ethical problem then becomes a problem of business design as well: how to explain the difference, find an audience capable of appreciating it, and survive slower growth.

Sometimes shared rules are also needed to limit the advantage that can be gained from hidden terms. Otherwise all responsibility falls on the buyer, who must become an expert in everything, and on the individual business owner, who must single-handedly pay the price of being conscientious.

But a useful project has a convenient excuse of its own: declaring its inability to interest people proof of its moral elevation.

“What we do is profound, so almost nobody understands us.”

Perhaps. Or perhaps the offer is vague, the writing dull, participation inconvenient, and the practical purpose known only to its creators.

Good intentions do not remove the obligation to do good work.

A philosophical community also needs engaging subjects, strong stories, clear invitations, and convenient payment. It can speak about loneliness, difficult decisions, and the fear of living someone else's life. It can use humor, beauty, intrigue, and emotional recognition.

Emotion is a normal part of human choice. A moving story does not automatically become manipulation. A limit on places may be real. A vivid headline may accurately convey the content.

Drawing the boundary requires attention to what follows. Does the content live up to the promise? Can people examine the terms calmly? Do they retain the right to doubt? Does declining to buy turn into an accusation of cowardice, stupidity, or insufficient love for their family?

A useful project needs to learn to be attractive. It also has to accept that there are ways of attracting people it will refuse to use, even when they work.

The balance of good and evil in marketing, then, hardly resembles a search for an acceptable dose of deception.

It passes through a more difficult task: creating a business that benefits when its customers get a good result.

For an educational project, that result might be a skill acquired. For a professional community, useful connections and a worthwhile conversation. For an entertainment product, the promised pleasure without a hidden bill. For a service, time saved and a problem solved.

Repeat purchases are entirely natural in this arrangement. Someone may pay for music, learning, or membership in a community for years. What matters is that continuing the relationship has understandable value and that leaving remains a real possibility.

The practical question for a founder is almost unpleasant: what happens to our income if the customer becomes more confident, better informed, and more independent?

If the business grows stronger along with the customer, their interests may align. If the business needs people to keep feeling ashamed of themselves, confused by the terms, or afraid to live without our guidance, good intentions are no longer enough.

The same question is useful when applied to measures of success. The number of payments tells us that money was received. By itself, it does not explain what someone understood, what they received, or whether they would make the same decision with full information.

Let us return to the founder of the philosophical community.

He now has two advertising texts in front of him, and he understands why the second may work better. It contains more threat, more promised superiority, and less uncertainty. It offers a pleasing role: soon you will be among those who see what is hidden.

But the community itself changes along with the advertising. A promise of secret knowledge brings people expecting secret knowledge. A promise of superiority brings people needing to feel superior. To retain them, the organizer will have to confirm the expectations he created.

At some point he will discover that it has become difficult to invite them into a calm conversation in which nobody possesses the final truth.

That is how marketing can gradually rewrite the meaning of the enterprise it was supposed to support.

The question of good and evil therefore arises long before outright deception. It appears the moment we understand what a person responds to and decide what to do with that knowledge.

An honest choice does not guarantee high income. Manipulation does not guarantee collapse. The space between these two circumstances is the space of responsibility.

We cannot always choose how easily our business will earn money. But we can decide which states in people it will sustain in order to keep existing.

And perhaps the strictest test of marketing begins after the sale: does the person understand their life better, or is it now even harder for them to manage without the person who promised to improve it?