



Chapter 9

Be more interesting—conversations, passion, and an honest point of view

Two events that happened within the same two weeks show the far left and far right of conversational marketing. One demonstrated just how much people want to have a say and what they'll do to provoke conversation. The other highlighted how the “learned lectures” communications approach falls flat, even for the most intelligent, articulate people.

Michael Esordi, a graphic artist living in Connecticut, decided to sell his soul, auctioning it off on eBay, another first for the online bidding site. My first thought was, “What’s up with this guy? Is he some kind of religious nut?”

After a little digging, it became clear that Esordi’s real purpose was to provoke discussion and get more people thinking about spirituality. “Behind the seller of a soul is simply a smoke screen,” wrote *Providence Journal* reporter Bryan Rourke, who interviewed the soul seller. “What Esordi really wants is to be a provocateur of public discourse.”

“My idea is to put the idea out there and step back,” Esordi told Rourke. “It gets people to think and maybe believe in

something. Souls are sold in small and large ways every day. Often, it's something that happens little by little, almost unconsciously because we've become inured."¹

In other words, Esordi's point of view was that we take our souls for granted and perhaps we shouldn't.

Esordi created a framed certificate of his soul, a piece of expressionist art work if you will. It reads: "The Soul. Does it exist? What is it worth? Can it be sold?" In addition to the certificate, Esordi created a Web site, www.canitbesouled.com, where the highest bidder could explain the reason for buying the certificate for a soul.

This soul selling shows just how much people want to have a say and how far they are willing to go to provoke dialogue and get more people talking about ideas they see as meaningful.

When the auction ended, forty-eight people had bid on Esordi's soul. The certificate sold for \$65.

Learned lectures fail to connect

As one soul was auctioned off, another was honored when mourners gathered to pay their respects to Coretta Scott King at her funeral in Atlanta. More than three dozen people spoke at the service including President George W. Bush, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, poet Maya Angelou, former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Bill Clinton gave an inspiring, emotionally charged, off-the-cuff speech, peppered with one-liners that the audience boisterously applauded, including "You want to treat our friend Coretta like a role model? Then model her behavior."

According to many observers, Senator Clinton's remarks were more formal than her husband's, delivered in a measured, re-

strained, and deliberate style. The contrast between the two Clintons was vivid, as was the audience's reaction. They welcomed Bill like a returning hero, while they respectfully listened to Hillary.

"I think Bill Clinton delivers inspiring addresses," explained Theodore C. Sorensen, one of John F. Kennedy's best-known speechwriters. "Hillary is more likely to deliver learned lectures."²

A few years back, I had lunch with the late MIT professor Michael Dertouzos who had just returned from the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where he had heard Mrs. Clinton speak. "She was absolutely brilliant," he said. "Her understanding of complex issues and her ability to get up and talk about those issues was remarkable. I don't think anyone else at Davos came close to her in being able to articulate such cogent perspectives on today's social, political, and economic issues."

Yet, because Mrs. Clinton speaks formally, in full paragraphs and with little emotion, it's often difficult to see things from her point of view and to connect with her as a person. Like many CEOs and marketing programs, Mrs. Clinton's knowledge is substantive, but because her style lacks emotion and the language of conversations, it often fails to move us.

"It is telling that during her 2000 Senate campaign, Mrs. Clinton's advisers were struck by her tendency to speak in perfect paragraphs," wrote *New York Times* reporter Raymond Hernandez about the differences between the Clintons' communications style. "In the end, they urged her to use the kind of sound bites that would be easier to digest."³

To succeed in a conversational world, marketers (much like Hillary Clinton) need to reset our style so people can more easily understand our points—and get who we are as people. Although we may be interested about certain ideas and want to tell everyone everything, no one is likely to be interested in everything we might want to tell them.

McDonald's provokes meaningful conversations about McJobs

Conversational marketing doesn't just inform and tell, but in true meaning-making style it is relevant, frames ideas within existing contexts, shows patterns, and, most important, creates an emotional connection with the people.

McDonald's is a company that largely understands how to do this. CEO Jim Skinner recognizes the need to talk with people—customers, community members, shareholders, and employees—all the time, especially about highly relevant and potentially controversial issues. “Business is like life. We are never finished. The dialogue continues as it should because we continue to listen to our stakeholders and adapt to the evolving changes of the world in which we live.”⁴

When Merriam-Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary* released its 2003 edition with the term “McJob,” defined as a low paying and dead-end job, McDonald's challenged that assumption and opened up a highly public discussion about the fast-food company and its employment practices. (Note that challenging assumptions is one of the nine things people like to talk about.)

In a letter to Merriam-Webster, McDonald's then-CEO Jim Cantalupo said the term was “an inaccurate description of restaurant employment” and “a slap in the face to the 12 million men and women who work in the restaurant industry. More than one thousand of the men and women who own and operate McDonald's restaurants today got their start by serving customers behind the counter.”⁵ McDonald's also e-mailed the letter to the media and has continued to publicly challenge assumptions and engage in conversations about the topic, using all of the principles of meaning making.

At the 2005 Business for Social Responsibility Conference, Skinner provided context around the issue. “Three of our seven CEOs, including me, started as restaurant crew members at McDonald’s as did nearly half of our top fifty executives in the organization today. There are tens of thousands of stories about opportunity I could tell you. Like Jan Fields who joined us as a young mother working her way through college in 1977, and today is president of one of our U.S. divisions, managing 4,400 restaurants in twenty-four states with annual sales of \$8.2 billion.”

He also explained why the topic is relevant. “We took this debate worldwide because in many of our countries, a job at McDonald’s is a highly coveted position. We realized that those of us that provide jobs which serve as a springboard to successful careers need to stress the opportunities we provide, the value of first jobs, the value of training and experience, and the value of achieving advancement through hard work.”⁶

One last note: When you listen to Skinner talk about this issue, his passion draws you into the discussion. The emotion behind the words turns information into meaning.

**Attract interest, create
understanding, build trust**

Marketing is about being interested enough to attract interest, creating understanding, and building trust. McDonald’s, Sun Microsystems, Women & Infants Hospital, Dove, CEO Lou Piazza, architect Chuck Dietsche, and many of the other companies featured in this book recognize that having something interesting to talk about—something of interest to customers—is a powerful way to engage them.

If people don't trust companies, as the research in Chapter 1 shows, they are less likely to buy our products or services. No matter how much we've invested in product development or how large our marketing budgets or how creative our marketing approaches. James Carville famously remarked during the first Clinton presidential campaign, "It's the economy, stupid." Adapted for us marketers, "It's the customers, stupid."

How do we earn more trust? We can start by doing the following:

- * Delivering products and services that provide value to customers.
- * Making it easier for people to get to know our companies and feel good about doing business with us. Relationships are based on good product experiences as well as understanding "who" a company is, on both a rational and emotional basis.
- * Communicating with honesty, transparency, and good ol' forthrightness. In this hyperconnected world, companies have no control. Information gets out and people talk about our companies all the time. If we want to improve our brand perception or reputation, we have to be more involved in customer conversations and make it easier for people to talk about our companies and products with other people.

By conversing with customers, we begin working *with* them and they with us. We're collaborators working together to create mutual value, instead of opposing teams in an "us-against-them" environment. When you open communication channels and listen, really listen, marketing gets easier because customers *want* to tell us what they want—and what they don't want.

Four steps for creating interesting things to talk about

Points of view exist in every organization, and they are potent ways to jump-start conversations. The first step in finding them is through ear-to-the-ground research, such as:

- * Listening to customers in new ways—not for just what they’re saying but also for the emotions behind what they’re saying.
- * Tapping into the beliefs of people within the company. What do people believe that would be interesting to talk about? What industry or issue points of view might help customers make sense of choices?
- * Tuning into the market conversation in new ways, using new tools to better understand the big picture context, determining what issues are becoming more or less relevant, and evaluating how people feel about certain topics.

The second step is to put the beliefs and views through the Nine Block Conversation Planner™, which helps to synch the ideas up with the nine topics people most like to talk about: aspirations and beliefs, David versus Goliath, avalanche about to roll, anxieties, counterintuitive/contrarian, personalities, how-to, glitz and glam, and seasonal and event-related.

Third, bring conversations to life by talking (and writing) like a real person talks in all communications, even the written ones. Be casual. Be brief. Be passionate. Make it easy for people to talk back. Create more conversational programs that open up two-way dialogues between customers and people in the company, as well as customers with other customers. Cut back on the one-way all-about-us promotional material. (SAP, the third largest

software company in the world, slashed sales collateral and increased its sales.)

Fourth, make sure conversational marketing is someone's job—or incorporated into everyone in marketing's jobs. Hold people accountable for adding points of view into the basic marketing tool kit and reward them for creating multiple ways for everyone inside and outside the company to talk about those ideas in ways that build understanding and meaning.

Figure 9-1 shows how all these steps work together to help marketers move beyond the buzz.

The conversations are the work

Marketing's primary purpose is no longer “producing” things, like ads, press releases, and brochures. The purpose is helping people understand our organizations and products in ways that are meaningful to them. Two overlooked ways to do this are listening to customers and making them feel heard; and making it easy and interesting for people to talk about ideas, issues, and points of view. Through these conversations, people become more involved, and involvement is the prerequisite to action, whether it is making a decision to buy, advocating on an organization's behalf, or just changing a perspective about an issue or product.

Poet David Whyte often speaks to business executives about leadership and change. One of his points of view is that leaders need to help employees feel that they belong, and conversations are an important way to do this. He once remarked, “Leaders' conversations are not about the work, they are the work.”⁷

To help bring customers into our companies, we marketers too should realize that marketing conversations are our work.

1 ear-to-the-ground research

- Tap into CEO's beliefs
- Listen in new ways
- Run a point-of-view workshop
- Hold a clearness committee
- Think more narrowly
- Explore new metaphors
- Go on a walkabout

points of view

Aspirations and beliefs

David. vs. Goliath

Avalanche about to roll

Anxieties

Contrarian/Counterintuitive

Personalities and personal stories

How-to

Glitz and glam

Seasonal/event-related

PUTTING BEYOND BUZZ TOGETHER

2

conversation-worthiness filter

3

That's interesting. Tell me more.

True

Relevant

Genuine

Fresh

Connects with strategy

Memorable

Talkable

Leggy

Likable

MAKES MEANING • CONTEXT • RELEVANCY • PATTERN MAKING • EMOTION

straight talk style

4

How a real person talks

First person vs. anonymous third person

Sincere and straightforward

What's the point?

Stories. Sound bites. Questions.

Kill the buzzwords, empty adjectives

5

applying to marketing functions
and conversational programs

Figure 9-1.