

The Wombat Report

Lessons in Marketing from the Unlikeliest Places



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"Beware of the Wombats"

I've referred to Mrs. Wombat often in my newsletter over the years, but I've never told her story. To anyone, actually.

Yes, Mrs. Wombat was a real person, and she gave me my first lesson in marketing - in the 4th grade.

The woman who was supposed to teach that year was sick, and they brought in a substitute to cover for her. Her name was Mrs. Hasbrouck. Years later, I saw a picture of a wombat and thought, "***That looks just like Mrs. Hasbrouck.***"

She's been Mrs. Wombat ever since.

She was a nice enough woman, until you asked a question or disagreed with her. She could become quite cranky when challenged, in the way that only women in their 80's can get away with. She spent the entire day, every day, telling stories of her extensive travels and teaching English.

Stories and English. Just that. And, as it turned out, the woman she was substituting for was sicker than anyone thought.

We had Mrs. Wombat for the entire year.

You can imagine our glee.

It was actually fun for the first two weeks. Then the stories started to repeat, and the English got more advanced. After the first month, we began to notice that *you could almost hear the punctuation* when she spoke.

As it turns out, Mrs. Wombat's previous employment was as a post-doctorate level instructor of advanced theoretical grammar at Anal-Retentive U.

Rumor has it that she was nominated for a Nobel prize in physics when the committee mistook her diagram of a multi-page sentence from an old German philosophy book for a working formula for cold fusion.

She wouldn't have hesitated to cut off your participles, if you were careless enough to dangle them in public.

She'd have charged e. e. cummings with capital murder.

Mrs. Wombat was a stone-cold Grammar Cop.

The First Heresy

Her stories were fascinating, in a CIA World-Factbook kind of way. A cold listing of details and happenings, with all the romance and excitement of an almanac.

She often told us of the book she was writing about her travels. She was always *"Almost done. Just a little bit to fix yet."* She knew there was something missing, but she couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Mrs. Wombat's darkest secret was that she failed, miserably, every communications course she ever took.

....

If you're going to write for the popular market, you need to understand your audience. That's marketing, and Mrs. Wombat had the worst characteristics it is possible for a marketer to have.

Her first mistake was that she was a perfectionist. A mindless, if expert, follower. Like most followers, she had no tolerance for those who thought or acted differently. She strictly observed the rules of grammar, true, but she never really understood its purpose.

Here's a little preventative aspirin for your next session of Grammar Police brutality:

***The purpose of grammar is to help ensure clear communication.
If grammar gets in the way of getting your point across,
toss the rulebook out the window.***

And don't let anyone make you feel bad about it.

Yes, grammar can get in the way. For some audiences, slang can be clearer than more "accepted" forms of speech.

More commonly, a strict adherence to grammatical correctness and the expansive use of extended vocabulary can lead to awkward, if not incomprehensible, sentence structures, which can distract from the successful conveyance of your message.

Kind of like that last sentence.

This doesn't mean you should be sloppy. Just be aware of what you're doing. Message first, always.

Rule # One: Git 'er Done

Almost 40 years later, I'm sure she'd still be working on that book. (I'm assuming she's not still kicking around. She'd be roughly 128 years old.)

Perfection is the second greatest enemy of success. (*Doing nothing is the first, but it was a near thing. Inaction picked rock to Perfection's scissors in the last round of the finals.*)

How many promising projects do you have sitting there that need "just a little more work," but haven't been touched in ages? Or that you keep polishing, hoping to make them "good enough?" (*Mea maxima culpa...*)

You can't fix what never gets done. You can't build on a project that's 99% ready.

If you write a book and it's not perfect, so what? Get an editor and get it closer. But get it done.

If you have to do it in parts, that's fine. That's what I have to do sometimes to get a project out and complete. (I have more ideas than time, and often change between projects more often than a teenaged girl changes shoes.)

Finish first. Polish second.

How do you know when it's done?

Look at your sales letter. If the product delivers what the letter promises, it's done enough to start selling. If not, either add enough to the product to make that happen, or subtract something from the sales letter.

Haven't written the sales letter yet? Excellent.

Write a letter selling the product as it is right now. If you've got enough benefits to make it worth buying, snip the loose ends and get it out to market.

You see, **your prospects don't have a set idea in mind of what you're supposed to be offering.** They don't care if you can think of things that might make it better.

They have a problem NOW, dammit, and they don't want to wait until you're 128 years old for a solution!

Compound Disinterest

Mrs. Wombat's second problem is that she didn't understand personal communication. At all. She assumed it was nothing more than data exchange.

Bzzzzt! Nope. That's what encyclopedias are for.

If you're going to communicate with people on any deeper level than they could get from Funk and Wagnall's, you need to connect with them. That means talking about things they care about - right now - in terms they understand.

You already knew this, of course.

The real question is, do other people know you know it?

Do your messages talk to them in their language, about their concerns? Do they feel a connection with you? Or a real desire for your product?

Do you reach them where they live?

You can tell by what they do after reading or listening to your message. If you draw an emotional response (*and it isn't pure hatred*), you're connecting.

If not, you'd better start working on it.

Spawn of the Dead

Mrs. Wombat wasn't alone. There were thousands of her. There was probably one in your school. They spawned an army of Grammar Zombies - people who exist for the sake of rules they don't understand.

And they're everywhere. In every field.

Beware of these people. Avoid them at all costs.

They will suck the life out of you, your products, and your pet turtle - if you let them.

They'll quibble over the tiniest things, and insist that you not only take them seriously, but that you come back from the Dark Side and follow the One True Path of Grammatical Goodness.

They'll see a misspelling in your ad for a book on restoring antique vehicles. They will assume, beyond all reason, that this is proof that you don't know anything about car repair. (*Really. Remember, these people are nuts.*)

They'll hammer you with silly comments like, "If you have typos in your work, no responsible person would buy from you." (*Yes, I've heard that. Often.*)

They'll scream if you use a whole colon, when a semi-colon would do. (*Okay. I made that one up. But it could happen.*)

They will micro-focus to the point that they miss everything that matters, to satisfy their need for universal conformity to arbitrary rules.

Grammar isn't the only weapon they'll use. It could be their opinions on web design standards, or file formats, or operating systems. Whatever fuels their mania. And they don't have to know what they're talking about to behave this way.

The real experts at least have the benefit of Clue. They can, occasionally, be helpful despite themselves.

Dog save us from the didactic newbie, who knows nothing and is determined to make sure that we know it too.

Literally. Dog save us.

Cujo, come home!

Know The Enemy

I'm not suggesting that you assume that anyone offering criticism is a Grammar Zombie. Far from it. If people don't point out ways you can improve, you usually won't. And it's a safe bet that you won't see every possible problem that exists.

If the criticism is valid, swallow your ego and fix the thing. Then say "Thank you, sir or ma'am, may I have another?"

Grammar Cops and Zombies don't really offer criticism to help, although they often claim that's their goal. They're nitpicking to show they know more than you. This usually happens when you're doing something they can't - making a profit and making a difference.

Do not spend time on these people.

Do not argue with them.

Ignore them.

I repeat: Ignore them.

Do Not Debate With Them!

If they can suck you into debate, that proves to them that their ideas are worthy of consideration. From there, it's a small leap to believing that you're only disagreeing with them out of ego.

At that point, they will never let go.

They have the potential to make you doubt yourself when you shouldn't, to make you work when it's not useful, and to steal your life if you let them.

I mean that literally.

More than one person has lost the will to live life their way by listening to these people and buying into their nonsense. They become convinced that they're just not good enough to succeed, so they quit trying.

At that point, you're a Zombie. Your only purpose will be to create more Zombies. And, just like the George A. Romero flicks, you'll only be able to survive by sucking the brains out of real, living people.

(For the really attentive folks, no. There was no "in" missing in that last sentence.)

There's only one thing you have to remember to avoid this problem:

"Zombies suck."

The Never-Ending Story

Mrs. Wombat's Tale doesn't end there. Not precisely. Every hero needs an anti-hero, and over 30 years later, I met him: the Anti-Wombat.

At the time, I lived in town. The east side of the city of Erie, Pennsylvania, to be exact. A very mixed neighborhood, in every way you can imagine. I love it.

There's a store down the block that had posted pictures of people shoplifting. Pretty clear shots of "customers" putting stuff inside their jackets and moving for the door.

The thieves were suing the owner.

One day I head down the block to pick some stuff up from the store. I see this tall blonde guy in front of the place, with a camera-man, a \$400 trench coat and a \$75 hair cut. He's trying to talk to the kids walking home from school.



Have you ever stuck your finger in a stream when a school of minnows was swimming by? You know how those minnows make a wide and nearly perfect circle to avoid your finger?

Those kids reacted to this guy just like that.

So, I get to the corner and head for the store and the guy stops me. *"Do you know about the pictures inside, and do you have any opinions on them?"*

Opinions? I have a pocketful. Why no, I don't mind sharing.

He gets the okay to interview me and the camera-man starts recording.

(It's relevant that, at the time, I was wearing black jeans and shirt, black cowboy boots, a black leather duster and a black Stetson.)

He starts off the interview with:

"So, Mr. Myers, do you live in the 'hood?"

L o n g p a u s e . . .

I looked him up and down slowly and asked the obvious question:

"What is a middle-aged white yuppie doing asking a middle-aged white redneck if he lives 'in the 'hood?"

After he finished stammering and the camera-man was done laughing, we re-did the interview.

I pointed out that there were a lot of people in the neighborhood who couldn't afford cars, and how important that store was to them. The next closest was four blocks away.

I talked about the fact that the employees all lived in the neighborhood. I remarked on how they all treated the customers with more respect than you ever got from a chain grocer. I commented on the tradition, as this is the oldest grocer in the city.

I mentioned that the owner was a good neighbor, keeping his place clean and his prices low and watching out for the folks who lived nearby.

I asked him what the alternatives were: Raise prices or go out of business?

In short, I spent two minutes on the things that made that store important to the people who lived near it.

Yes, I laughed at him for the "in the 'hood" remark. But the interview got picked up as far away as California, and it brought a crew from Good Morning America out to Seraphin's Grocery the next week.

The reporter did okay.

He didn't deserve it.

I mean, this guy is supposed to be a professional communicator, and he asks something that stupid?

The Anti-Wombat.

All style, no substance, and totally inappropriate use of slang to boot.

Completely clueless.

The story got picked up because it was news. There are millions of people in this country who live in neighborhoods just like that, and millions of store owners facing the same challenges.

That's stuff that people care about.

That brings up a perspective you might find useful:

If your product solves a problem, your salesletter is news.

The lessons?

- Your market is a community, with their own concerns and language. Talk to them in their language, not yours.
- If you're going to speak your market's language, be authentic. Talk to their concerns, don't try to make yourself one of them by mimicking them. That's just insulting. Even the little kids knew, that guy didn't belong "in the 'hood."
- Make life better for your customers, and they'll tell the world about you.

There are lots of lessons that can be drawn from these two stories, but I've rambled on long enough.

If you only take two things from this, it should be these two:

- **Do not waste time debating with Grammar Cops (or Zombies).
No matter what their grammar of choice might be.**
- **If your product solves a problem for someone, your salesletter is news.
People want to hear that kind of news.**

Enjoy!

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