

A templative tale from
Mischief Marketing

Mischievous Random House Founder
Bennett Cerf

[excerpted from Chapter 4 (print edition) ...]

... It was for a good reason that the marketing community borrowed the word “mission” from the field of evangelism. In evangelism and theology, the word “mission” is very powerful. The word itself carries what psychologist Carl Jung called numinosity.

In other words, ‘mission’ is something — more than a word; almost a symbol, really — that ‘glows’ (becomes numinous) in your imagination. It’s a kind of placeholder for your vision.

So if you can craft a mission statement that deeply reflects who you are and what you and your company are up to — then it will carry you over the rough spots of your daily grind, and reunite you with your vision.

Your Constitution, Should You Decide to Accept It

Your mission statement describes what you’re really about. And if you’re a publisher or a reporter, what you’re often really about is not just manufacturing sound bites — but defending the First Amendment of the Constitution.

Random House founder Bennett Cerf often took a mischievous tack when it came to (a) marketing his then-new publishing company, and (b) fulfilling his First Amendment mission at the same time.

For instance, after he met James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* had been banned for obscenity in the United States, Cerf sued the U.S. government on Joyce’s behalf.

In order to spark publicity for the lawsuit (and therefore the book) Cerf persuaded an envoy to bring a copy of *Ulysses* from Europe through U.S. Customs — and to forcefully insist that the Customs agent search the bags and confiscate the book. This the agent obligingly

did. And so, amid a flurry of bureaucratic fuss, Cerf's legal show, right on schedule, had hit the road.

What few knew, however, was that beforehand, craftily, inside the book, Cerf had pasted reviews that proved *Ulysses* was regarded as a great work of literature.

Now, in those days, such reviews would not normally have been admissible as evidence. But because they were literally pasted into the contraband volume, they went along with it for the ride to court, and so instantly slipped into evidence.

The company won the highly-publicized lawsuit, *Ulysses* became a bestseller, and Random House found itself well on its way from quirky upstart to major player (and champion of free speech).

— Adapted from John Tebbel's "History of Book Publishing in the United States."
As cited by Anna Bray Duff in Investors Business Daily of 3/17/1999.

~ Idea Joggers ~

- What can you do to enlarge your mission so that it concerns something greater than simply whether or not you'll make a ton of money?
- Are you passionate about the emergence of a new form of capitalism, for example? Then how can you incorporate that larger vision into your mission?
- Before you even think about mischief marketing, ask yourself, "What genuinely inspires me? What makes me feel as though my life has meaning?"

That having been said, and all kidding aside (really) here is ...

The Real Mission Statement of Mischief Marketing

Okay, here's the actual, no-kidding-around Mission Statement for this book:

"*Mischief Marketing* is designed (**A**) to find its way, some lonely night, into the hands of *one particular reader* who has a significant business-related mission to fulfill in life, but who's currently too young; too old; too poor; too marginalized; too burdened with depression, illness, addiction, pain; too contemptuous of our greed-based culture; or just plain too tired to get started on the path to the fulfillment of that mission. And (**B**) to provide that person with the marketing tools he or she needs to stop making excuses, and please get started already."

For more on mission statements, check out MischiefMarketing.com.

Setting Goals and Alternative (Knight-Fork) Goals

Setting Goals

Once you have your mission statement, you can start setting goals.

But again, there's a difference between setting goals in conventional marketing, and setting goals in mischief marketing.

In conventional marketing, most of your goals will be obvious, and they will usually be financial in nature. In other words, they'll tend to look like this:

- To increase revenue 75% by this time next year.
- To reach the Generation Y (or whatever) market without necessarily appearing to be selling anything at all.
- To change the perception of your business.

In mischief marketing, however, your goals will tend to look more like this:

- To have a blast.
- To make disadvantaged people aware of the fact that, if they don't get more involved in politics and marketing very soon, their situation will only get worse.
- To meet some rich celebrity at a rehab and marry them, thereby instantly narrowing your own gap.
- To make and market a film, as the directors of *The Blair Witch Project* did.
- To have a blast. (Did I mention that?)
- To convey important social or moral concepts, as Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa did.
- To reach a market considered impossible to penetrate, as Estee Lauder did.
- To market some truly important ideas by appearing to market trivial nonsense.
 - (Animators and cartoonists do this all the time, by the way.)
- To encourage your kids to do their homework.

Please sit down with me here for a moment while I elaborate a little on that last one, because I know it looks out of place, and yet it isn't.

How can mischief marketing — of all things on earth — help you encourage your kids to do their homework? Isn't mischief marketing primarily about business, about selling things?

Yes and no. Again, remember: mischief marketing is as much about “selling” ideas and values as it is about business. In fact, discussing business is just the vehicle — the Trojan Horse, if you will — that makes it possible for you to be reading this book in the first place.

The moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS. That—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word success—is our national disease.

— William James.
The Letters of William James, vol. 2, 1920.

The language of the marketplace has eclipsed all other forms of rhetoric. Don't worry, they're saying, we're not going to ask you to even think of community and civic responsibility or anything that is not in your direct, economic self-interest — and, somehow, a nation that we can be proud of will materialize.

— Conservative columnist Arianna Huffington.
Salon.com. 9/16/1999

But anyhow, forget all that for now. Here are some ideas for marketing the value of homework to your kids:

- Do your kids admire a particular celebrity? Then launch a mischievous letter-writing campaign to persuade that celebrity to call your kids up and encourage them to do their homework.

No, I'm *not* kidding. Not a bit. Do you realize that one phone call or one short letter from someone like Michael Jordan can turn a kid's life around — in a matter of literally minutes? Of course you do.

Aren't your kids worth the effort of a concerted mischief marketing campaign that points them in the right direction in life? Or would you rather just waste time hollering at them, and putting up a big, phony *front* about how concerned you are?

If you really love your kids, you'll do *whatever it takes* to help them get off to a good start. So, hey: try some mischief marketing, okay?

In particular, read about psychiatrist Milton H. Erickson, who was a genius at the *personal* application of mischief marketing principles and methods.

- Do your kids admire a particular kind of music? Then encourage them to learn something about how that music is made.

Target a campaign to the chief engineer at a major recording studio, and make it your goal to persuade him or her to let your kids sit in on a recording or editing session.

Let your kids see for themselves that far more transpires behind the scenes than they might have imagined. Maybe, if you're lucky, that revelation will interest them in some other aspect of the music business.

If your campaign works, your kids will also realize that you can't (say) operate sound editing or video equipment very well, or easily, if you can't even read.

- In short, take *advantage* of the worship of fame that dominates our culture. Craft mischief marketing campaigns that will help put our society's grossly overpaid celebrities to work — at least on helping your kids.
- That is, with your kids — or just in general, with any of your prospects — *turn the machinery of the mass media culture to your own advantage. Judo it.*

Culture Jamming

Writer Mark Dery and artist Joey Skaggs are among the proponents of a mischievous and potentially very useful and educational activity called "culture jamming."

Culture jammers point out that our behavior — and even the way we think — is controlled by the mass media (especially advertisers and marketers). Of course, we can't detect the

hype/nosis they foist on us any more easily than a fish can detect the presence of water. But it's there, and we swim in it.

Culture jamming, therefore, is about using mischievous techniques to expose how giant corporations puppeteer us. It's about ripping open the curtain to expose the frail, little old man behind the smoke and mirrors, as Toto did in that famous movie.

Is there a way out of ... the society of the spectacle? Yes. You can take charge of your mental environment, and become a culture jammer. Culture jamming means semiotic jujitsu — using media power against itself. The Adbusters' Media Foundation does this all the time with famous spoofs of the Absolut Vodka ads ("Absolut death," etc.) Other culture jammers often take commercials or TV programs and replace the dialogue and soundtrack with something subversive. Yet others take to billboards or road signs and cleverly rearrange the letters to say something different. As one activist suggests, "where critique is no longer a possibility, parody is always an alternative response."

— Steve Mizrach

In the quote above, Mizrach is talking about parodying and spoofing our media-crazed culture. But those aren't the only ways to do culture jamming. Which brings us to the following.

When you're designing your mischief marketing goals, ask yourself:

- How can my product or service help educate people about how they're being manipulated, especially by my competitors — competitors like, oh, I don't know ... Microsoft, say. Or Sun Microsystems.
- How can I get the United States Attorney General to make my kids do their homework?

[... Chapter 4 (print edition) continues at this point ...]

Know anybody struggling to get started on a shoestring budget?

Why not help them get started?

Tell them about *Mischief Marketing!*

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