

A templative tale from  
**Mischief Marketing**

## Mischievous Home Depot

[ excerpted from Chapter 8 (print edition) ... ]

... The point is this: **We human beings tend to take a lot of things personally that are not fucking personal at all.** So those are the types of things we're going to discuss now. We're going to talk about factors that affect your ability to be creative, and that you probably happen to mistakenly believe are personal factors — somehow specific to you — but that are actually generic factors that affect *anyone* who tries to do *anything* creative (including, of course, mischief marketing).

And of these psychological factors, the most important one you need to be aware of is **The Gethsemane Effect.**

### Confronting the Gethsemane Effect

In the following story about Home Depot, notice how the founders of that hugely successful chain suffered through an early period in which they felt betrayed and snubbed.

#### Home Depot Founders Betrayed, Snubbed, Get Rich, Get Even

*Over the past 20 years, Bernard Marcus and Arthur Blank have transformed a few ragtag stores in Atlanta into the nationwide profit-making empire known as Home Depot Inc. Now the emperors of home-improvement retailing have decided to tell their tale, pay tribute to colleagues — and settle a few scores.*

*In Built From Scratch, ... the two self-described regular guys swing a 2-by-4 at Sanford Sigoloff, a corporate turnaround artist who dubbed himself Ming the Merciless after a character in a Flash Gordon movie and proved the point by firing Messrs. Marcus and Blank from a company he once ran. They berate bankers who refused loans to Home Depot in the early days. ....*

*More gently, they tweak Ross Perot's ears for blowing a chance to invest \$2 million in 1978 for a 70% interest in the company — a stake that would be valued at more than \$60 billion at today's stock price. ....*

*In the early days, cash was short. Store employees used empty boxes to create the illusion of fully stocked shelves. ....*

*Mr. Perot doesn't dispute the book's account. "They love to tell that story," he says cheerfully. The entrepreneur and sometime presidential candidate admits that he missed a rare investment opportunity but doesn't sound bitter about it. "I've been more than blessed in terms of financial success," he says. "I'm not just seeing how many marbles I can pile up before I die."*

*Messrs. Marcus and Blank have piled up plenty of marbles. Mr. Marcus's 2.6% stake in the company is now valued at about \$2.4 billion, and Mr. Blank's 1.4% interest at \$1.3 billion. Both are giving large amounts away to charities. They even find a charitable word for their former nemesis, Mr. Sigoloff. "Without Sandy," Mr. Marcus writes, "where would we be today?"*

— James R. Hagerly  
Wall Street Journal 2/19/1999

## Tailoring the Tale

There are, of course, countless stories like this. Stories that tell us about how a company got started, how hard it was to get funding, how nobody believed in them for a long time, and so on — you can collect business yarns like these by the basketful.

Sure, there's a mischievous little "trick" embedded in that Home Depot story — about the empty boxes they piled up to make the store look well-stocked. But what do all stories of this type really teach us? To pile up empty boxes? Of course not.

They teach us that whenever you do anything interesting in mischief marketing, in business — or in the plain, everyday business of living, period — you are probably going to experience the **Gethsemane (geth SEM a nee) Effect**.

That is, you're probably going to experience loneliness. You're probably going to feel abandoned or betrayed by friends and family. And you're probably going to wish you never got yourself into whatever business or enterprise or project or job or marriage or partnership or marketing task in which you happen to be engaged.

Oh, you won't feel such haunting things all the time, of course. But you will feel them often enough to make you want to throw in the towel.

The Gethsemane Effect takes its name from the following story about **a famous rabbi who successfully marketed — both mischievously and otherwise — a number of ideas that are still healthy and vigorous for millions of people even today**, thousands of years after the rabbi engaged in his campaign:

*They went to a place called Gethsemane, and [the famous rabbi who marketed many important ideas] said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."*

*He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."*

*Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.*

*"Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."*

*Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing.*

*When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.*

*Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough!"*

— Mark 14:32-41

Enough! That's what you, too, will feel like saying at certain key moments in your quest or project. Enough!

## Evil Mischief Marketing — CREEPing

**CREEP** = CRedibility Erosion through Extremist Positioning.

One of the most effective (but least morally acceptable) ways to market your offering is to knock the offering of your competition. And one of the most powerful, and deeply cunning (and *certainly* immoral) ways to knock your competition is to become a CREEPer for the competition's views. **This is especially true in the marketplace of ideas.**

A CREEPer is a sort of mole. You become a CREEPer whenever you adopt a position on an issue that is so ridiculous and extreme that it embarrasses everyone who holds a more reasonable position on that issue. In that way, you can successfully erode the credibility of the entire enterprise.

**For example:**

- If you wanted to CREEP the pro-life movement, you would shoot innocent people in an abortion clinic. That would effectively erode the credibility of the *entire* pro-life movement.
- If you were a CREEPer for the Bible, you would shout repeatedly that anyone who doesn't take it literally is doomed to spend eternity in hell. That would deter people from the Bible better than almost anything else you can do.
- If you're CREEPing feminism, you would preach that all men are hateful scum, try to ban everything they're interested in, and declare that all little boys have Attention Deficit Disorder. That would effectively discredit feminism in general.
- If you're CREEPing the gay rights movement, you would "out" famous people against their will, or advocate vociferously that older men should sleep with boys. That would go a long way toward eroding the value of gay rights in the marketplace of ideas.

And so on. It is more difficult to pull this trick off in the marketplace of products and services (business), however, because people in business are familiar with tactics of this kind, and they will stop you.

For instance, if you "officially" work for Coca-Cola, but you're really a mole for Pepsi, and if you insanely attempt to CREEP Coca-Cola by declaring it the "Official Drink of Abortion-Clinic Killers" — Coca-Cola will simply fire you.

So CREEPers tend to confine their tactics to politics and religion, where they work magnificently.

Needless to say, CREEP activity violates many (if not all) of the commandments, and so cannot under any circumstances qualify as mischief marketing.

*Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good — above all, that we are better than someone else — I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil.*

— C.S. Lewis

Anyway, where were we before we bolted off the topic and started barking at the dog next door for no good reason?

Oh yes. The Gethsemane Effect.

👍 **When you are on the verge of doing something important but difficult, people around you will often fail to recognize or appreciate what you're doing. That's the Gethsemane Effect.**

This will often particularly be true of family members — like your mom or dad.

The famous chemist **Kary Mullis** tells a story that illustrates this. Kary invented the technique that makes it possible to multiply tiny quantities of DNA in order to make accurate identifications of samples.

When you hear people talking about DNA evidence, and in particular when they start blathering about how amazing and wonderful the latest technology is, they're usually talking about Kary's.

In the following passage, Kary is describing what happened the day the press announced he had won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry.

*Friends began arriving with Champagne, and the party began. That afternoon I finally reached my mother. I wanted to tell her to stop sending me articles about DNA, since I had now won the Nobel Prize for my expertise on that subject. My mother often mailed me articles from Reader's Digest about advances in DNA chemistry. No matter how I tried to explain it to her, she never grasped the concept that I could have been writing those articles, that something I had invented made most of those DNA discoveries possible. She probably hoped that winning the Nobel Prize might enable me to be published some day in Reader's Digest.*

— Mullis, Kary.  
*Dancing Naked in the Mind Field.*  
New York: Pantheon Books. 1998.

But the Gethsemane Effect is not restricted to manifesting through your mom or dad, of course. It could show up through your husband, your wife, your kids, your best friend, almost certainly through your co-workers, your boss. **It could show up through anybody you know.**

In the case of Federal Express founder Fred Smith, for instance, it showed up through his sisters who (goaded by their lawyers, no doubt) banded together soon after the 1973 launch of FedEx, and sued Smith for misinvesting the family money.

But whoever happens to become the vehicle for this phenomenon in your life, the end result is the same: you're quite possibly going to feel at least a little bit betrayed and abandoned — by somebody. It's a simple fact, like gravity. **It's just the way it is.**

*When Christ said: "I was hungry and you fed me," he didn't mean only the hunger for bread and for food; he also meant the hunger to be loved. Jesus himself experienced this loneliness. .... The same hunger, the same loneliness, the same having no one to be accepted by and to be loved and wanted by. Every human being in that case resembles Christ in his loneliness; and that is the hardest part, that's real hunger.*

— Mother Teresa

In the case of the founders of Home Depot, it was their boss who betrayed them; and the people who abandoned or ignored them were prospective investors like Ross Perot.

My dad used to tell a story that illustrates the Gethsemane Effect. After years of promoting his music (he was a songwriter), he finally got a chance to appear on TV.

Now, television in my dad's era (the late 1940s) was an exciting, new medium, and it was very rare for anyone you knew to appear on TV. So of course my dad was thrilled about this opportunity. And of course he expected my mom to watch the show on which he was appearing.

Unfortunately, she missed the whole thing. Why? **She was too busy vacuuming the living room floors. Yup. Hadda vacuum those fucking floors right that minute.**

My mom wasn't being mean, by the way. She was simply embodying this phenomenon — it's what they used to call a "test of faith" in the old days— for my dad at that moment. If it hadn't been my mom proctoring the test of faith, it would have been someone else.

That's how the Gethsemane Effect works, and it occurs far more commonly than you might think. In fact, the most important thing you need to know about it is — guess what? *That it's perfectly normal.*

This point is so critical that we really should put it in big, bold letters:

👉 **Mischief Marketing Preparatory Tactic: (“Accept the Gethsemane Effect”). Realize that it’s normal. Don’t take it personally. Simply accept it.**

The Gethsemane *Effect* is a normal phenomenon. It happens all the time. **And it happens to everyone who tries to accomplish anything**, whether it’s raising kids, starting a business, or passing a law to stop people from playing Chopsticks. Don’t take it personally. It would be like taking the behavior of a teenager or a drunk personally.

Here’s another example. When a woman is delivering her first child she is very likely to be subject to the Gethsemane Effect. She’s struggling to bring this new life into the world, and no one can help her do it. She is essentially on her own. Though doctors, drugs, and a husband’s hand to hold may be of some aid and comfort, she’s the only one who can bring this new project to life.

*[... the chapter continues in here ..]*

The birth of any person or thing — child, business, social movement, scientific idea, work of art, music, literature — tends to traverse and recapitulate the natural stages of conception, gestation, pregnancy, labor, labor, more labor, feeling like you have to pee every ten minutes, delivery, celebration, and nurturing.

Then of course, after all that work, come the teenage years. This is when your child — more or less, but always to some degree — essentially becomes Jeffrey Dahmer and eats you alive, if only psychologically. No matter what you do, it’s all there in the cycle. That’s how it goes. It’s how it *always* goes.

*[... the chapter continues in here ..]*

Confronting your destiny — sweating out life crises or transitions (even happy ones) — will sometimes be an excruciatingly lonely, crucifying state of affairs that no one close to you can fully understand, or not at first, anyhow. That’s what the Gethsemane Effect is about.

*Be good and you will be lonesome.*

— Mark Twain

And the next time you think, “But I hate when that happens!” just ask yourself the following question:

If even that famous rabbi was subject to *the Gethsemane Effect*, can we really expect to be excused, you and I, from having to grapple with the syndrome? Why should you and I be exempt when even someone like this was not? I mean, this guy was one saintly Jew, to say the least.

So try to accept it. Oh, I know it’s hard. Of course it’s hard. But in a way, it’s not hard at all. Because ....

*[... Chapter 8 (print edition) continues at this point ...]*

Know anybody struggling to get started on a shoestring budget?

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