

## A selection from *Mischief Marketing*

(about filmmaker Michael Moore)

*Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt.*

— Shakespeare



Forget about mischief marketing. Forget every theory you've ever heard about marketing, or gardening, or fishing, or pitching, or writing, or exercising; every theory about making music, making art, making love, making money. Forget it all. The only thing you really need to know about how to be good at anything in the world is this:

### **Never give up.**

Relax, take a break, sure — but never give up. Meditate, pray, hand over your sorrows to a Higher Power. Absolutely. But never give up. Fail once, twice, three times, fifty times. But never give up. Never. Get used to failing. Learn to love it. Or don't get used to it, and hate it. Get sick and tired of trying again and again. Or try something else. But never give up.

Yes, try a new approach, have a bout of depression, try another new approach, have another bout of depression, lose your enthusiasm, get mad, scream "I can't take it anymore!" — and never give up.

Let people make fun of how often you keep trying. And never give up. Get mad at authors of books like this who say over and over ("It's easy for YOU to say") that you must never give up. And then never give up. Just never. Be irritatingly persistent.

Would you like some help with this? Listen to the music of Beethoven.

Get a recording by a good conductor, by the way. Don't get a cheesy version by the Slobovian National Restroom Orchestra, on sale for \$2.99. Would you get a rendition of



your favorite song as performed by William Shatner? Of course not. Spend the money and get something decent. Get Shatner with the Vienna Philharmonic.

Beethoven is one of the most repetitious, Never-Give-Up composers in the history of the universe. Listen to Beethoven, especially the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> symphonies, until you're sick of hearing the same notes played over and over. Then listen to it all over again.

*If anyone has conducted a Beethoven performance, and then doesn't have to go to an osteopath, then there's something wrong.*

— Simon Rattle

Remember, this is the music of a deaf man, much of it. Now honestly: If a *deaf* man can make incredibly brilliant music like this, can't you make happen what you're trying to accomplish in your business, or in your life?

Of course you can. You just need to know how to never, ever give up. Beethoven will show you how.

So please, if you get nothing else out of this book, rip out these pages, and stick them up on your wall. They're the most important pages in the entire book.

*Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education alone will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.*

— Calvin Coolidge

*How could they tell?*

— Dorothy Parker

Upon hearing of the death of "Silent" Calvin Coolidge

By the way, if you want to read a great story about not giving up even after you've failed miserably — in fact, a story about how to turn your failures the way a martial arts master flips an opponent — check out the story of Ralph Hayes elsewhere in this book.

## **X: Thou shalt be not a phony rebel.**

John Hinckley. Remember him? John Hinckley was the crazy guy who tried to win the heart of Jodie Foster — by shooting President Reagan. We can either laugh or cringe (or both) at the logic of someone like this. But the truth is that sometimes, in our own lives, we do much the same thing Hinckley did.

Hey, where are you going? Stick with me a minute. I promise this will make sense.

Many of us are natural mischief marketers. We just don't know it yet. But instead of applying our mischievous talents to good goals, we apply them to bad goals — without meaning to. Maybe this doesn't apply to you, but it applies to many people who could be doing very well in life, but instead are doing poorly.

This is called inauthentic (phony) mischief marketing.

You see, by shooting the President, John Hinckley was trying to impress Jodie Foster with his bravery. That seems ridiculous to most of us. We look down on a guy like that, and we judge him — and rightly. He was being inauthentically mischievous. He was nuts.

But do we really have the right to judge him? Admit it: Isn't what Hinckley thought and did really just an exaggerated version of what a lot of us do, or have done?

How many of us, for example, have engaged in supposedly daring acts that were secretly meant only to impress someone (or ourselves) with our stamina? Oh, we may not have tried to shoot the President, but how many of us have tried to act “brave” by consuming dangerous quantities of alcohol, for instance? Or drugs? Or by making life hard for ourselves? Is this really so different from what Hinckley did? Sure, it's different in degree, but not in kind.

When you do *authentic* mischief marketing, you must be willing to search your soul deeply. You must be willing to discover (and admit to yourself) the difference between authentic and inauthentic mischief marketing.

In other words, don't be mischievous just for the sake of being mischievous. Don't be rebellious just to show off how rebellious you are. That's kid's stuff at best, and crazy stuff at worst. Instead, walk the tightrope. Find precisely the right balance between being

too bold on the one hand, and too timid on the other. And do it for yourself; because you always wanted to.

It's like being on a first date with someone. Should you be bold? Or should you be gentle? When should you push, and when should you back off? Should you be more silly than serious? Or more silly than silly? (Sorry.) More quiet and cryptic? Or more talkative and open?

Nobody can make these decisions for you. All of life — in business, in art, in politics, in marketing — is a courtship. Like being on a first date with all of humankind.

And all the mystery and weirdness and awkwardness; all the sparkling moments and the insipid ones, too; all the torments and raptures; thoughtlessness; all the home runs and the strikeouts; all the stupid arguments about “Don't eat your soup with a fork!” and “It's over! Forget it! We're through!”; then sudden praise the next day, and tenderness; in short: all the crazy Tilt-A-Whirl things that happen in love and courtship also happen in mischief marketing. When it's authentic.

Which means that, ultimately, in mischief marketing, as in love — and it doesn't matter whether you're talking about love of “his first person”; love of business; of science, music, poetry, math, La Femme Nikita — there is no easier, softer way.

You need to be honest and you need to be real.


### **XI: Thou shalt know thy prospect well**

In an earlier chapter, we talked about how to learn as much as possible about your prospect — how to “profile” them the way an FBI psychologist might.

For instance, we learned the strange but true fact that, very often, people famous for running corporations (say) are usually prouder — much prouder, in fact — of how they cook lasagna (or play golf, or sing, write poetry, bowl, play cards, or whatever) than they are of how they make the big business deals for which they're so well-known.

Weird, huh? But it's true.

We also learned how to apply this odd fact about human nature to the process of crafting a precisely targeted mischief marketing campaign that will help you win the attention of such a prospect. But that's for later.

 **For now, let's simply say this: the more you can learn about your prospect, the better your chances will be.**

Get inside your prospect's mind, see the world from her point of view, walk her walk, and talk her talk — the more you can do these things, and do them without sacrificing your own identity or your own principles, the more potent your mischief marketing efforts will be. Find similarities between you and your prospect. Use those to better relate to your prospect. If you do this thoroughly and genuinely, why, all the better to see them, my dear.

## **XII: Remember thou the power of the simple truth**

Sometimes, the most mischievous thing in the world you can do is tell the truth. Period. The following story illustrates this in a way that doesn't require much explanation.

### **Hall's Barbecue Sauce**

When Tim Hall and his dad started a barbecue sauce business (PitStop), their recipe had already won a slew of top awards in several statewide cooking contests, including the prestigious California State Fair. So they knew it was good stuff. Superior quality was not the problem.

The problem was whether they could sell it in large enough quantities to make a living from the business (gourmet food is a tough field) — and whether they could charge the premium price they'd have to set for such a high-quality product.

One day they got a big break: an appointment to meet one of the buyers for the huge Costco chain.

The buyer took one look at their proposal and said, "Who would want to spend so much money for barbecue sauce? Why, just this morning I had a meeting with a guy who was selling a barbecue sauce for 20% less than yours." He wanted to know what made it so special, what made it a "gourmet" item. "Why should I buy your sauce? Why should anyone spend 20% more for a product nobody ever heard about?"

Tim sat still and said nothing. He sat still because he had brought along a sales professional, and the sales pro had told him to keep quiet during the important meeting. Now came the time for the pro to do his job.

The pro explained all kinds of things to the buyer. He showed him charts, numbers, projections. He talked about the market; he used psychology; he used every selling tool in his arsenal to try to persuade that buyer to give them the account. He was an excellent salesperson.

But the buyer was unmoved. He'd heard it all before. He just couldn't see what made this sauce so good that it deserved a premium price.

Finally, Tim spoke up. Instantly, the sales pro shot him a glance, because Tim wasn't supposed to say anything. But Tim couldn't sit around twiddling his thumbs and watch his dad's offering get drowned in a sea of sales chatter.

What Tim said to the buyer was this: "Do you have that bottle of sauce that competitor brought to you earlier?" "Yes," said the buyer. "Then would you mind going to get it? And get me two small paper cups, too. Okay?" "Sure."

A minute later, the buyer was back with the competing sauce and the small paper cups. Tim started with the cheaper sauce; he poured it into one of the cups. "You see this sauce? See how watery it is? How it's like ketchup?" The buyer nodded.

Then Tim took his dad's sauce and poured it into the other cup. "Now — you see how much thicker our sauce is? Look at these big, juicy chunks of pineapple. Look at how slowly the sauce eases out of the bottle. Taste it. Taste both of them." The buyer did.

They got the account.

Such is the power of one of the most mischievous marketing tactics in the world — telling the simple truth.

If you really want to know something about the power of the simple truth in the mischief marketing of important social or political ideas, watch a video sometime about the civil rights movement.

### **The Big Rock of Power vs. the Little Rock of Truth**

In 1954, for the first time in the nation's history, the Supreme Court ruled that blacks could go to "all white" schools.

So in 1957, when nine black students tried to attend Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, white racists fluttered in from all over the South to stop them. But the events that followed were recorded by unblinking television cameras that "simply" broadcast the evils of discrimination to the world, and to history.

As the Arkansas national guard tried to stop the kids from going to school, the television cameras simply rolled. As white mobs mocked and pushed and screamed at the kids, the

television cameras simply rolled. As one thousand paratroopers from the 101st Airborne platoon, sent by President Eisenhower, marched down the street to protect the students, flanking them, as though folding them under the wings of the United States Constitution itself, the television cameras simply rolled.

The TV commentators didn't say much. They didn't have to. The simple truth spoke volumes for them. All they had to do — and it was an *extremely* mischievous thing for television to do in 1957 — was “simply” keep those cameras going. Here is how one commentator put it:

*In a story of this moral intensity, John Chancellor and [TV reporters like him] were, in fact, modern day prophets. And he might as well be saying, while the camera is rolling, 'This is a sin. This is a sin. This is a sin.'*

— David Halberstam

### **XIII: If thou perpetratest a hoax, thou shalt reveal it as such thyself.**

What this commandment says, essentially, is that if thou perpetratest a hoax, thou shalt reveal it as such thyself..

#### **Anti-Social Sokal**

Did you ever see a picture of millions of sperm clamoring to fertilize one ovum?

In such photos, we glimpse a miracle of nature that invites us to reflect upon our origins, contemplate the profundity and mystery of life itself, and exclaim “Ew,” because it's a truly disgusting sight, isn't it? All those little buggers squiggling around. Blech.

But never mind that.

Even in science, if you want to get across a fundamental truth, you sometimes need to penetrate through a singles-bar thicket of confused, wiggly, misshapen pretenders. In the world of ideas, one classic way to accomplish that is the way of parody.

*Sokal, a physicist at New York University, caused an intellectual row ... when he fooled the editors of a modish academic journal called Social Text into publishing a sham article he had written. Bearing the title “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” the article was meant to be a parody of what is loosely called post-modernist thought. It was crammed full of meaningless references to esoteric ideas in mathematics and physics, from which it leapt, in one breathtaking non sequitur after another, to radical conclusions about politics and society. ....*

*It was a good joke. .... But Sokal was up to more than mischief. The purpose of his hoax, he declared, was to reveal the fraudulence of much post-modernist thought, especially as it abused science.*

— Holt, Jim. "Is Paris Kidding?" *New York Times* 15 Nov 1998

## Chapter Eleven v5.1

### *Applying The Ten Commandments*

#### **The Ten Commandments in Action**

Let's talk about the comedic activism of a guy who usually illustrates quite well how these commandments work in practice — Michael Moore.

Filmmaker, journalist, and television star Michael Moore is a genius at mischief marketing.

True, he's also a dyed-in-the-wool, card-carrying liberal, which means that, like many liberals, he tends to hold exactly the same set of opinions as most of his colleagues. But he's a mischief marketing genius nevertheless.

Moore is best known for his satirical documentary, *Roger & Me*, for his award-winning television series, *TV Nation*, and for the newer series, *The Awful Truth*.

Specializing in defending the economically and politically downtrodden, Moore's hilarious approach to political and social activism — the marketing of ideas — has attracted critical accolades and legions of fans.

If you really want to know how to do mischief marketing, and specifically how to use comedy as a weapon in the service of social reform, watch one of Michael Moore's films or TV shows. And as you're watching them, notice how Moore fulfills all the mischief marketing commandments. Well, virtually all of them. You may not always agree with his ideas, but he does present them quite mischievously well.

Here are some examples. We'll take the commandments one by one.

**1. Thou shalt not implement a Mischief Marketing strategy unless thou canst look upon thy work and say, yea, It is good; verily, I like it.**

Moore's offering is almost always superb. He doesn't usually deal with trivial stuff. He usually addresses real problems involving real people.

For instance, he once successfully (and hilariously) embarrassed a tight-fisted healthcare company into granting one of its policyholders the money to get a life-saving pancreas transplant. Now, you can't have an offering much more qualitatively superb than one that saves a person's life, can you?

## **2. Thou shalt not irritate thy prospect.**

Moore never irritates his prospects. Oh, he irritates *other* people, all right. He annoys the hell out of other people. But not his *prospects* — who happen to be the members of the viewing public (namely you and me) enjoying the show or film.

The people he does annoy, and very amusingly indeed, are politicians, bureaucrats, and corporate fat-cats who collect millions of dollars in unearned compensation and bonuses while cheating or otherwise abusing hundreds of thousands of people (us).

These are often the same folks, by the way, who huffily criticize the gambling industry — while they themselves gamble daily with our livelihoods, and even our lives. Isn't that interesting? No, I didn't think so, either, but I thought I'd mention it.

## **3. Thou Shalt Have Fun.**

Moore always has a good time. During the Clinton impeachment craze, he carted a bunch of "Puritans" in full period dress to the Capitol, and had them enact a frenzied, realistic, Salem-style witch hunt complete with hysterical screaming, fainting, and rolling around in hallways outside the politicians' offices.

## **4. Thou shalt not bear false witness for thine offering.**

Moore never lies about what he's doing. It is always clear that what he's doing is comedy. Scathing, biting comedy, yes; but comedy nevertheless.

## **5. Thou Shalt Be Humble and Honest.**

Moore doesn't always do this particular commandment very well, so I'll just skip over this one very quietly and hope you don't notice.

**6. Thine shalt make even thine execution of a Mischief Marketing strategy elegant and flawless.**

Moore's production values are often excellent. He sometimes goes all out with lighting, sound, casting, staging, costuming, editing, musical scoring — you name it.

For instance, in the case where he helped the pancreas patient, Moore printed up colorful “invitations” to the poor guy's supposedly impending funeral, and presented these ridiculous cards to many people — including the insurance company jerk who at first didn't want to help the dying man get his transplant. (The company did relent, eventually. Humana now covers all such cases.)

**7. Know well the rules before thou breakesthetheth them.**

Moore knows the rules about television and video reporting. He also knows how to sell his offering to film and television producers. He has excellent sales skills — rare for someone marketing moral values.

If you're marketing moral values, there's this myth that you're supposed to be naïve, poverty-stricken, and weak. But of course if you actually *are* naïve, poverty -stricken, and weak, you can't market much of anything, can you?

Bingo! What a marvelous double bind. Greatest invention of evil Mammon since slavery.

**8. Thou shalt take risks.**

Moore takes risks big time. He regularly brings his cameras into places where people try to throw him out. In some cases, you can tell they'd probably bash his skull in if only the camera weren't rolling.

**9. Thou shalt learn how to fail and never thou to giveth up.**

Moore never gives up. He relentlessly pursues the victims of his embarrassing exposes. He follows them around into their offices, into elevators. He's gentle — but relentless.

**10. Thou shalt be not a phony rebel.**

Moore is not a phony rebel. He doesn't do destructive things. He doesn't shoot innocent people in abortion clinics. He doesn't complain about the world with his ass perched on a barstool. He doesn't send explosives through the mail. He doesn't eviscerate the credibility of a good cause by posing as an extremist proponent of it. He doesn't even try to trick senior citizens into buying dozens of magazines so they can win TEN MILLION DOLLARS. He communicates with humor and grace. And real power.

**11. Thou shalt know thy prospect well.**

Moore is essentially a journalist. He does background investigations of the corporations and individuals he exposes. He cites statistics, and even conducts polls. Stupid polls, but polls nevertheless.

**12. Remember thou the power of the simple truth.**

Moore's camera is an unblinking eye that records the simple truth. He never attacks people viciously. He just allows them to reveal who they really are. On film. In front of millions of people.

**13. If thou perpetratest a hoax, thou shalt reveal it as such thyself.**

When Moore perpetratestetheths a hoax, he doth revealeth it as such hisself.

**14. Thou shalt not write fourteen commandments**

Stop it.

*Can it! Just cut that out!*

— Edward Albee. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.  
Martha to George, Act I

**In summary:**

For a clear illustration of how the mischief marketing commandments work, check out Michael Moore. True, his mischievous campaigns are not what you'd call particularly subtle, but they are often brilliant and entertaining. In your own business, you may want to do something less wacky than the kinds of things Moore does, but the blueprint is there for you in his work. Take the best and discard the rest.

One last thing before we leave this chapter. These are afterthoughts, however, so you can skip them if you like. They're not essential to Mischief Marketing, but they do help to clear up some misconceptions a few readers may have at this point.

**To readers who lean toward the Right or toward Libertarianism:**

The preceding discussion singing the praises of Michael Moore could easily mislead some folks into thinking that mischief marketing is a leftist, commie, Big Government, do-gooder enterprise. It is not.

Mischief marketing is a business tool. Like any other business tool, it can be used for good or evil. That the author happens to share Moore's distaste for corporate abuse has nothing to do with how effective the techniques in this book are.

But the key point I want to make here is this. Even if you're a *laissez-faire* super-libertarian capitalist nut, I'm sure you can agree that what mischief marketers like Moore are doing is far preferable to letting the government enact and enforce ridiculous and misguided legislation that unnecessarily chokes the market.

After all, humor is a knife that cuts both ways. So even if you yourself happen to be a corporate fat-cat abuser of the working class, why, you can use mischief marketing to sell your ideas, too. You can try to convince people that selfishness and greed are the highest values. Go right ahead. Be my guest.

In fact, selfishness and greed are precisely what Ayn Rand's followers do in fact market in those huge, boring books they publish. Unfortunately, they do so without much humor at all. Satan himself had a more mischievous sense of humor than Ayn Rand.

You don't believe me? Here's a typical joke from an Ayn Rand follower:

"Fella walks into a bar and says ...

*America's abundance was not created by public sacrifices to "the common good," but by the productive genius of free men who pursued their own personal interests and the making of their own private fortunes.*

— Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (1966)

... and the bartender looks at him and says:

*The proof of an achieved self-esteem is your soul's shudder of contempt and rebellion against the role of a sacrificial animal, against the vile impertinence of any creed that proposes to immolate the irreplaceable value which is your consciousness and the incomparable glory which is your existence.*

— Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957)

This hilarious story elicited roars of laughter and tears of embalming fluid from the members of the audience at a recent Ayn Rand convention. No, no.

But if you *do* decide to mischievously market the ideals of greed and selfishness the way Ayn Rand did, please just be sure you stick to the commandments.

#### **To readers who lean toward the Left:**

We are in a new millenium. Welcome. Capitalism has triumphed over communism, and so the time for moral integrity to enter the marketplace has come at last — not via government intervention, but via the agency of natural market forces themselves.

This is not a call to action, it is a statement. This will happen. It is already happening.

The Internet has opened up vast possibilities for reaching and informing consumers, and for inspiring consumers, mischievously and otherwise, to take action — all kinds of action, too, incidentally, not just buying and selling. The marketplace of commerce is merging with the marketplace of ideas and information.

When shoppers are well enough (and mischievously enough) informed about the difference, say, between (1) a salad dressing made by a Family-Friendly company that supports charitable causes, or that provides day care for its employees' children; and

(2) another salad dressing made by a company that underpays and abuses its employees ... why, the consumers in this new, informed era will do the right thing, the good thing, and therefore, between the products of these two companies, the new, informed consumer will no doubt choose — the cheapest one.

The one they always chose.

What did you think I was going to say? What do I look like, an idiot?

Know anybody struggling to get started on a shoestring budget?

Why not help them get started?

Tell them about *Mischief Marketing!*