

A templative tale from
Mischief Marketing

Mischievous Mathematician Sophie's Choice Ruse

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

... to confront and deal with the Sabotage Syndrome, which is closely related to the Gethsemane Effect.

There are at least four kinds of sabotage that are relevant in this context: that which comes (1) from people close to you; (2) from acquaintances; (3) from your prospect's "guard dogs;" and (4) from within yourself.

Needless to say, the most insidious one is the last. But let's take them in order.

Sabotage from people close to you

Here is yet another subject that most business books unfortunately never discuss. It is the Gethsemane Effect taken one step further.

Whenever you try to do something — anything — that goes beyond the goals and dreams to which most people limit themselves, **you need to know that people around you may unconsciously sabotage your efforts in subtle ways.** As with the Gethsemane Effect, this may include a few of the people closest to you.

Now, sabotage is an awfully strong word, so let's discuss this for a moment.

When we say that people will unwittingly sabotage you, we do NOT mean something paranoid and crazy. We do NOT mean, for example, that your friends will suddenly transmogrify into Mafia hit men named Vinnie, and start rigging explosives to your car's ignition system. That is patently absurd because, obviously, your friends will be called

Vito. No, we're not talking about anything as dramatic as all that. What we're talking about is subtle sabotage. Subtle sabotage means things like this:

- You relate some exciting news about your business to your husband, and he says, "Yeah, honey. That's great. Can ya bring me a beer?"
- You tell a good friend that you just got a big break: one of your most important prospects responded personally to your mischief marketing campaign, and even made an appointment to see you. Your friend says, "Is that what you were wearing?" Or "You showed that crazy fucking thing of yours to HIM?"
- You're in the midst of struggling to meet an important deadline. Suddenly everybody wants you to help them move furniture, mow lawns, babysit kids, go to parties, "stop working so hard," "have a little fun," and so on. Your answering machine goes bananas and starts dialing out by itself.

Mischief Marketing in Science: Sophie's Choice Ruse

In the 1700s, if you were interested in math — but you happened to be a woman — many people quite seriously thought you were mentally ill. That's why, when Sophie Germain (born in 1776) started staying up all night to study number theory and calculus, her father confiscated her candles, hid her clothes, and made sure she didn't get any heat. The poor guy thought his daughter was going nuts.

None of this stopped Sophie — who kept a secret cache of candles, and wrapped herself in bedclothes in order to continue her work.

But when at last the time came for her to go beyond books and study at a real, live university, Sophie was stuck. The prestigious school that would have been perfect for her accepted only men.

So Germain mischief marketed her way into the *Ecole Polytechnique* by assuming the identity of a former student, Antoine-August Le Blanc. What the school didn't know was that Le Blanc had left Paris, and that the person now getting his lecture notes (and solving his problems) was really Sophie.

All went well until the course supervisor, famed mathematician Joseph Lagrange, noticed one day that Le Blanc, not the brightest bulb on the tree, had suddenly turned into an extraordinary mathematician.

Lagrange soon learned Germain's true identity, and took her under his wing. She no longer had to pretend to be Le Blanc with him. But she did use this mischief marketing device at least one other time — when communicating with Carl Friedrich Gauss.

Germain's work on Fermat's Last Theorem was to be her greatest contribution to mathematics, but initially she was not credited for her breakthrough. When Germain wrote to Gauss she was still in her 20s, and, although she had gained a reputation in Paris, she feared that the great man would not take her seriously because of her gender. In order to protect herself Germain resorted once again to her pseudonym, signing her letters as Monsieur Le Blanc.

— Simon Singh
Fermat's Enigma
Anchor Books, 1998

Similarly, whenever you embark on a mischief marketing campaign, **expect resistance** from the people closest to you.. But the sooner you learn about (and accept!) this very common phenomenon, the better off you'll be.

Friends love misery, in fact. Sometimes, especially if we are too lucky or too successful or too pretty, our misery is the only thing that endears us to our friends.

— Erica Jong

And remember: *Judge Not*. These folks are not ignoring your achievements in order to hurt you. It's just that your marketing efforts don't fit their pictures of you, their preconceived notions about you. It confuses them about who you are. They've arranged the furniture of their minds so that you're a coffee table, and here you are suddenly turning into an ottoman. It mixes them up.

Sabotage from acquaintances

Most of us human beings are naturally jealous and envious. In fact, if you want to know what most of us are really like underneath our carefully crafted, civilized exterior, visit a kindergarten. To paraphrase the title of a lovely book, everything you need to know about human nature you can learn from kindergarten.

This patently obvious fact is even reflected in language, specifically the language that religious leaders have used for centuries. You often read accounts of spiritual leaders who preface their remarks by addressing their parishioners or congregants collectively as “my children,” or individually as “my child.”

Why do they talk like this? Why do they refer to people as children? Because it expresses the simple truth that most of us *are* like children.

Yet here is the problem that causes so much grief in the world: *we forgive children for being selfish, jealous, and envious — but we don't forgive adults.*

If we recognized, however, that most adults actually *are* children — something that genuinely spiritual people recognize — then we would not be so mad at the adults who offend us or who obstruct our projects. We'd just accept them for what they truly are — young children in old bodies.

Mrs. Silliman

About a year ago, a woman *literally* named Mrs. Silliman fought hard to stop one of her neighbors from running a home-based business. Silliman argued vehemently before her homeowner's association and county zoning board that the neighbor's weekly total of two hours of piano instruction (what Silliman called her neighbor's "business") violated the rules of the housing subdivision in which they lived.

If you have a home-based business, how do you deal with neighbors like this? Do you ask their permission first before you set up shop? What can you expect them to say if you do?

"The most encouraging thing your neighbors will usually say is, 'Oh, OK,'" says Rudy Lewis, president of the National Association of Home Based Businesses, a trade group in Owings Mills, Md. "But what they're really thinking is, 'Oh no, there goes the neighborhood!' I advise our members to be like the military policy on sexual preference: 'Don't ask; don't tell.' You let the neighbors know, and someone is always going to oppose you."

And such opposition can doom a home business. Neighborhood associations, growing more powerful, are enacting tighter rules to keep the lid on everything from dog droppings and repainting with the wrong color to home businesses that are perceived as interfering with communal tranquillity.

— Johnson, Robert.
"Battle on the Home Front."
Wall Street Journal, 4/19/1999

Doing anything out the ordinary — and that includes running a business of any kind (whether out of, or outside of, your home) — **will usually get a Silliman on your ass**. You can't upset a child's routine. But remember: people like this are essentially just spoiled kids who have nothing better to do than sabotage others.

If you get mad at them — and this applies equally to the Sillimen in corporate boardrooms on Wall Street or in Silly/Con Valley, of course — you hand them a victory. Your anger will allow them to distract you from pursuing your goal. You will become like a parent who can't go shopping because he or she doesn't know how to ignore a tantrum- throwing, spoiled child. No, the best thing to do with such 'children' is to pay them no attention at all.

Another kind of sabotage comes from members of your prospect's staff members, their professional watchdogs.

Sabotage from your prospect's watchdogs

Yes, your prospect has professional watchdogs. Not always, but often. Watchdogs are staff members who have the job of protecting the boss from unwanted interruptions, unnecessary distractions — and crazy people like you.

When one day you yourself have finally “arrived” — when you've finally achieved success at shepherding your own business into being the next America Online, or when you've finally started fulfilling your social or scientific mission — you will quickly see that you, too, will need

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

Know anybody struggling to get started on a shoestring budget?

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