

Op Ed — Pelikan's Antidisambiguation

"Giving the People what they Want"



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For a few minutes, I'm going to pretend I know something about Marketing and Design. This is most likely pure hubris, although, as they say, "Even a stuffed-up truffle hog occasionally finds a truffle."

The working title for this month's episode, "Giving the People what they Want" is a citation of a central tenant of the Science (or Art) of Marketing. If people don't want citron-colored backpacks, why on Earth would a company manufacture citron-colored backpacks? To propose something that runs against Market sentiment in the target demographic group is risky — risky enough often to be a non-starter. What the target demographic group imposes upon manufacturing is a kind of impedance to innovation — at the very same time that such target groups may likely express a wish for innovation.

In this expression of imaginary knowledge of such things, I'm going to pretend that it's the role of Design to push against the impedance imposed by Market expectations. Then, the unveiling of innovation (or perceived innovation) becomes a tool or technique of Marketing, especially in the pursuit of Branding definition. Company X wants the market to recognize its laptops, its phones, its headphones, as exemplars of innovation — if the target demographic group values innovation (or perceived innovation) in the products it seeks.

Hence the convergence of Fashion and Technology Design! This is why the phone my parents bought in 1953 was available in black, while the phone we got our fourteen-year-old recently was available in at least six colors. You could also dress it up further with the addition of coordinated accessories (kind of like a little Barbie). The smart folks at the companies know that when people buy something they really value, be it a car, or a phone, or a set of golf clubs, they'll usually buy gifts for whatever it is as well.

But let's get back to the target group's expectations, or more importantly, the company's discernment of those expectations and how they shape the product to be introduced. This brings us to the realm of Market Research. Market Research aims to discover what people hope for in the products they buy. The currency of the realm is Market Opinion, for example, as discerned through Focus Groups. The idea is to discover what's hoped for, and then to provide it. The antithesis is also true: the company

wishes to find out what the target group absolutely hates in a product category, in other words, what will ensure that the target group will never be back. What's so despised that even if the group merely hears about it, or remembers it from past encounters, it'll kill the sale, if not the brand.

It's for the sake of this that the company will place before the target group a trusted person the target group member would like to emulate, and have that trusted person pose a question to an uncomfortably close surrogate for the target group's inner fears, "Are you still using that greasy kid stuff?"

Actually there are despised elements that are capable of killing not just a brand, but an entire product category. Words that can be associated with product-category-killing elements would include "Clunky," "Obsolete," "No Longer Relevant."

So no one, be they from Design or Marketing, would dream of attempting to foist upon a target demographic group a product bearing an attribute revealed through a focus group to be despised. It's simply not done. That's how you kill a brand, if not a product category.

One side effect of this process is a gravitational pull toward the center of mass of a bell curve. See what works, and make your product like that. This breeds a tendency for products to become more like each other over time, even as they attempt to establish differentiation within the target group's perceptions.

It is frankly for this reason that most phones are more like each other than different. Same for cameras, automobiles, major appliances, shoe fashions, backpacks, you name it.

Same for Pop music.

Same for major studio motion pictures.

Same for books designed to be read for pleasure.

Would Marketing ever, ever willingly permit the driver to swerve to hit the turtle, or for that matter, compel the frog to swallow the quail shot? Could a book to be read by children ever employ a dead rat as an item of barter, with or without a string to swing it? Would Marketing willingly permit the story to be released with the boy having to shoot the dog? Maybe breathe a hint of the threat, maybe let the boy have a nightmare in which such a thing is anticipated — but really to do it? Unlikely.

So literature, as we know it, were taught it, remember it, may well include story elements that run counter to every instinct of the modern product design and marketing algorithm. We may be living with the cultural result of a massive, relentless pull of all characters and plots toward some market research-guided center of gravity. The driver almost hit but just missed the turtle, the item of barter was actually a Halloween prop and quite fake, a veterinarian showed up with a new Rabies vaccine at the last moment to save the dog.

Marketing might congratulate itself for protecting those authors from the consequences of their own depravity, as well as for shielding a sensitive public from such cruelty.

Ah but this narrative (I must resist here the pull toward launching a full-throated disparagement of the modern use of the word "narrative") overlooks several inescapable aspects of the world in which the narrators live.

First, the news is pretty bleak. Some horrifically terrible things happen: things *designed* to shock and offend — and not just in nightmares, but in reality. Second, the identification and singling out of that which is feared or reviled is an instrument of efficacy, not just for perpetrators, but for the media who report it and deliver it to our home. There are no sweeter words to some of these professionals than, "We must caution you that these scenes are graphic." Third, the instrumentality of this content, very, very often, is the "phone" — not the device for transmitting and receiving spoken content that **Alexander Bell** invented, but the Internet-connected mobile television production tool in the hands of, well, practically everyone. And Fourth, every one of these devices is able to produce content that will be seen within moments by every other such device on Earth.

The convergence (or at least coincidence) of these forces has created a cultural lurch from which we've yet to experience the full impact. How do we go back to the status quo ante? How do we un-see what we've seen? How can we even absorb it, process it, cope with it?

For some the answer lies in pure escapism. The focus-group-driven plot designers of Hollywood know what we dread. If a story line, a narrative, can tap into that dread and employ it, it becomes what some analysts might call a "force

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multiplier” for the marketing effort. Then, if the story comes out alright, if the imminent victims escape, if a hero rescues them, maybe even dishes out some well-deserved punishment to those sub-humans who perpetrated the outrage, then we’ve got the outline for a winner.

There’s another branch of the media I’ve not mentioned yet — a growth sub-category, a bright spot in the marketers’ media portfolio.

Gaming.

As the appetites for action have spiked in the audience, so have the capabilities to deliver it. Why sit passively and watch some actor, or obvious stunt stand-in, charge into the fire fight

and deliver some well-deserved punishment when they can deliver the means, the method, the opportunity, to experience doing it yourself? Each member of the audience can supply his or her own motive. All the experience designers have to do is place the instrument in the audience member’s hands, and point them in the direction of the bad guys.

The experience the gaming industry is delivering these days is, frankly, no longer vicarious. It’s immersive. It’s anything but second-hand. There’s a reason an entire category of “entertainment software” is called “first-person shooters.” The publishers of these “interactive experiences” are not simply small start-up studios. Some of the biggest names in media have their hands in the market. Major motion picture studios are producing entire mo-

tion picture franchises derived from characters and scenarios first explored in video games.

I guess they’re just “giving the people what they want.” At issue here is not the medium: not film, nor print, nor music, nor comics, nor even interactive fiction per se. Instead, I question the nature of the decisions being made by those in a position to select content for all these various forms of publication, the calculus they apply. They may defend their actions, saying they’re just giving people what they want, but they have nurtured that marketplace, cultivated the appetite, and invested huge capital in birthing and nourishing the means to explore “virtually” the experiences that our news reflects back to us in reality. 🍁