

Truth: stranger than fiction

I have just seen a movie called 'The Invention of Lying'. It stars and was co-written by Ricky Gervais. We are seeing a lot of him here in the US on TV, at awards ceremonies, in movies and so on.

He has an English accent of sorts, a French name, is overweight like an American and seems somewhat innocuous like a Canadian. A one-man ethnic melting pot.

The movie's premise is that in a world where no-one is physically capable of lying, everything is taken at face value, trust is implicit, there can be no deception and honesty can be brutal - anyone who can subvert this genetic predisposition toward truthfulness has a decided advantage and formula for immediate success.

Movie-making in this parallel world is active but decidedly boring and more a recitation of historic events. Marketing and advertising are equally boring as all must tell the truth.

Government is based on public trust, or at least apathy, but many governments don't just lie to their citizens, they actively prevent the truth being told.

Buy Coke because it's famous. Buy Pepsi . . . when you can't find a Coke.

It got me thinking that much in our global modern society revolves around what I will call a subtle circumvention of the truth. So how would it all function if only the truth were permitted?

Negative campaigning

Politics: Campaigning here in the US would cease to exist as we know it. Politicos are listening to their strategists and focusing not upon their own personal strengths and convictions, but their opponent's weaknesses, whether these be real or completely fabricated.

A blatant lie in a 30-second sound bite is very effective in swaying voters away from a candidate. Negative campaigning is reaching new lows. People hate it but it seems to work so it continues and grows. Plus, without lying, the candidates would have to admit how much they are either owned by corporate lobbyists, hope to be owned someday by these well-paying entities, are incompetent or driven solely by ego and greed.

Imagine them admitting that their reason for seeking election and endless re-election, is solely to increase their own financial fortunes and feed their massive egos and thirst for power: they have little interest in serving the public good.

There, now wasn't that refreshing? I'd vote for any candidate who had the guts to admit any of this.

Marketing/advertising: How to distinguish one product as better than another? No lies or stretching of the truth as to the risks/rewards of certain

products? Advertising would have to become much more creative and use humour. I do see many companies trying this now, especially automobile manufacturers.

Pharmaceutical advertising would disappear completely. I mean, the side effects from some advertised drugs can be worse than the illness they are designed to alleviate!

Tobacco advertising would be simple and scary: it's enjoyable but it will kill you. So . . . you decide. But before you die a horrible death you will become a social pariah if you smoke in public. Liquor ads wouldn't need to change.

Automobiles. As mentioned above except for when something goes wrong: the Toyota gas accelerator fiasco would have surfaced earlier resulting in fewer accidents. Toyota's competitors would have had to admit that their own cars may be just as unsafe.

Cosmetics ads? They would be all gone in their present form. Can't fib, remember! Do these products really make you look younger, become more attractive, grow hair, remove hair, smell better, etc? They would just have to say that they make you feel better and more confident and when you feel better, you do look better. Sort of a systemic approach to beauty.

Diet products?
Going, going, gone!
Celebrity endorsements?
What for?

Who is naïve enough (*caveat stupidus*) even in our world to think the celebrity spokesperson is doing this for anything except money, with the exception of speaking on behalf of a charity. And where truth is mandatory,

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DOUG SACKS explores a world where no-one tells lies.

they'd have to admit they need the money to pay for their excessive lifestyles, or make blackmail payments for scandalous and illegal behaviour. Or just that their agent told them they must do anything to keep in front of the public.

Mixed results

Studies do show that people don't believe the claims advertisers make about their products. That's why the friend-tell-a-friend recommendation mechanism of social media holds such promise.

While this issue is worthy of its own column and then some, suffice to say results as to the effectiveness of social media marketing to this point have been mixed.

- In 2009, the number of small businesses (up to 100 employees) that adopted social media increased from 12 to 24 per cent
- A survey of 500 businesses showed that just 22 per cent made a profit from promoting their firms on social media: 53 per cent broke even. 19 per cent lost money
- 50 per cent of business owners said social media marketing requires more time/effort than expected as regular interaction with customers at these sites is required to gain positive results

However, just the other day, an article showed how amazingly effective and damaging a negative campaign could be using social media. Greenpeace did this to educate the world about how Nestlé is buying palm oil for its Kit Kat bars and other goodies, from suppliers allegedly destroying the rain forests. Some experts have recommended that Nestlé shut down its Facebook page as

so much damage has been done to the brand.

History: History is not quite all 'bunk' as that great American bigot and innovator Henry Ford once said. But it is close. Old Henry wasn't too far off-track here. History is recorded by the victors, not the vanquished. And it is done so to justify the often heinous means the victors used to overcome the vanquished.

So all the romantic or whitewashed notions we have been taught would have to be discarded.

Government: Pretty much gone except to provide domestic and global security and provide basic infrastructure services and maintenance. More of a benign anarchy would exist. Government is based upon public trust, or at least apathy, which is often achieved by a dissemination of propaganda, most of which is at least a stretch of the truth. Many governments don't just lie to their citizens, they actively prevent the truth from being told. Censorship exists everywhere but the best and most recent case now is the China vs. Google heavyweight wrestling match.

Google was contemplating pulling out of China completely but at the time of writing may just make a strategic retreat to Hong Kong. The losers here, once again, are the people who deserve to hear the truth, the truth their government wants to offer in controlled doses, like a prescription medication. But the Chinese government needs to realise soon that it can't hide the rest of the world's actions and its own from the 1.2 billion souls it tries to control.

If Google Inc closes its Chinese language search engine,

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this would remove one of the last major foreign players from the world's most populous and fastest-growing Internet market, with 400 million users - growing by 250,000 every day!

Google has about 36 per cent of China's search revenue, according to Analysys International, a Beijing-based research firm, compared to 58 per cent for local rival Baidu Inc. Google is one of the few foreign participants with solid market share. A combination of strict government regulation, intense competition from Chinese companies and strategic mistakes has meant that foreign Internet companies have either struggled to make inroads in China or never entered the market to begin with, so the market is almost entirely dominated by local companies.

Google's closure would signify a move toward a Chinanet, China's answer to the unfiltered information highway of the global Internet. By the way, Microsoft's Bing is waiting in the wings to move in and fill the vacuum if Google leaves.

Corporations: These will continue and increase in importance as those that survive and thrive will be ones that offer necessary products and services that are safe and also a good value. Sounds like a simple formula for success.

Marketers: See 'Corporations' above. Sell the product with a good (truthful) story, eye-catching creative and if applicable, humour.

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