

# Postcard from the edge

Attention marketers, businesses, employers, neighbours and strangers who pass in the street. The current cocktail of stressful issues which show no sign of abating is manifesting itself in dangerous ways in the US.

One gets the feeling that many people are on edge or 'on the edge' and just barely keeping emotions contained. Stress and worry are also changing consumer buying habits into non-buying habits.

Examples:

- The Jet Blue Flight attendant who 'lost it' in a confrontation with a rude, obscene and insulting passenger, got on the public address system and issued a profane tirade, then enabled the emergency chute, grabbed a few beers and slid down and off the plane and went home. He is facing criminal charges.

Of greater interest is the

**Can you imagine marketing that was based not on selling the benefits of your own product or service but on how much worse a competitor's products are?**

public reaction to this with many saying he is a hero as he stood up and said "I'm not going to take this anymore." What exactly the 'this' refers to, is a blank that can be filled in by each individual in solidarity with the flight attendant - depending on what they are tired of 'taking' themselves.

Overnight he had a fan page on Facebook with 81,000 fans and growing. Did he do what many working Americans would like to do but don't because of the obvious consequences?

America loves a maverick who defies convention and risks everything for personal conviction - not the judicial kind. Just look at about every other movie that is released by Hollywood and the Indie film makers these days. If a movie isn't about a comic book superhero or Disney kiddie flick, then it's an anti-hero saga.

- The woman who attacked a McDonalds drive-in window because she was too early in the day to order Chicken McNuggets. I wasn't aware it was ever too early to order anything on a fast food menu, but I stand corrected. Anyway, she 'lost it' as well and will face criminal charges, too. I don't know if she has a fan page on Facebook.

- Yet another workplace massacre, this one only ten miles from where I am writing this column. Eight innocent people killed because they showed up for work. The killer had been asked to resign that day for stealing from the company.

**People are on edge here**

They are angry, upset, worried, stressed, scared. We have two wars with continuing casualties,

ill-effects and no clear indication that they are having the desired affect; an economy that remains flat and continues to shed jobs; domestic and workplace violence; and an anger at our politicians over tax and spend policies that is palpable.

Last month's political primary elections were telling. In my State, whoever dominated the television ad spots commanded big leads in the polls, at least until their opponents started their own barrage of ads. The tenor and content of these ads was upsetting: all negative; little except for very vague allusions to what the candidate will do to make things better; all about how bad the other guy is; dredge up anything and everything - arrests for misdemeanors 30 years ago? Use it. Domestic disputes? Air that dirty laundry, too. Personal or business failures? Even better.

Question: Why were 90 per cent of the ads in this negative vein? Answer: They work, unfortunately.

In these hard economic times, every candidate who qualified took on the 'Abe Lincoln persona' of honest and humble origins. So many candidates are multi-millionaires and driven purely by ego or boredom that the few who are not were emphasising these origins and demonising their wealthy opponents to great affect with the electorate. One candidate pledged \$50 million of her own money to finance her campaign. She won without needing to spend nearly that much. But remember, this was just a primary. The general election is in November. Another candidate spent \$10 million. He lost. Another pleads

**DOUG SACKS** reports on feelings of negativity which are rife Stateside.

poverty and qualifies for public campaign financing but it turns out he too is a multi-millionaire and drives a Ferrari. Another candidate's wife maintains a checking account balance of one million dollars - to avoid overdraft charges, no doubt!

Voter turnout was 20 per cent of eligible voters. Not only is there anger but disillusionment. The robo-call became a daily nuisance. Often as many as four phone calls a day from a single candidate. Do Not Call listings don't apply to political messages. Many people are saying they will vote for the candidate that did NOT call them. Not a bad rationale! One candidate's daughter was even getting robo-calls asking her to vote for her father. Calls were made from cell phones and unidentifiable sources to get past people's caller ID devices. Pretty clever, these political strategists.

**Need for change**

Nationally, there are feelings of a need for change: a 'throw the bums out' type of thinking, but that is hardly original.

Many new candidates are emphasising that they are successful business people, not Washington insiders, and they will run Washington like a business. Negative ads by opponents stress their business failures, employee layoffs and huge CEO salaries. But government is not a business.

So what does that mean really? That remains to be seen in November. Will most incumbents prevail as they have for decades or will there be a big sea-change?

Either way, the people will have no clear idea what the candidate plans to do to initiate

change until well after Election Day. But we will become intimately familiar with the weaknesses, failures, personal lives and bad habits of their opponents. So, has our choice in the voting booth become simply choosing the least offensive candidate? The one with fewer arrests, angry ex-spouses, or distortions of the truth?

Political campaigning is not business, either. Can you imagine advertising and marketing that was based upon this: not selling the benefits of your own product or services - being as vague about this as possible - but using every available media channel to emphasise how much worse your competitor's products are? Brand X only made a few people sick but Brand Y made hundreds ill. Well, I guess I would opt for Brand X!

Let's rejoice that business and marketing do not follow the same model as political campaigning but compete by at least trying to offer a better product or one that is more convenient or less costly.


People do need more opportunities to vent their frustrations. Not everyone can curse out someone at work, grab a few beers and jump down a slide. Facing jail time, loss of his present job and the future in his chosen profession destroyed, that air steward's future still remains very bright. Stellar, actually. National overnight celebrity. Probably a slot on some TV reality show. Talk show guest. Highly sought-after motivational speaker. Best-selling 'how-to' author. He'll do just fine. Actually, it was a brilliant career move.

He could even run for political office some day.

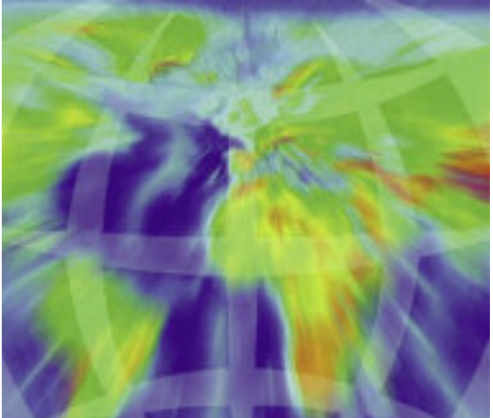
**Stress and worry are changing people's buying habits into non-buying habits.**

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