

Prince . . . or pauper?

DOUG SACKS is on a personal crusade to clean up the face of direct marketing. He knows it will enrich his life, but not his bank account.

This is the time of year for resolutions, although by the time this is printed it will be closer to Valentine's Day. Can love and direct marketing make for a seamless segue?

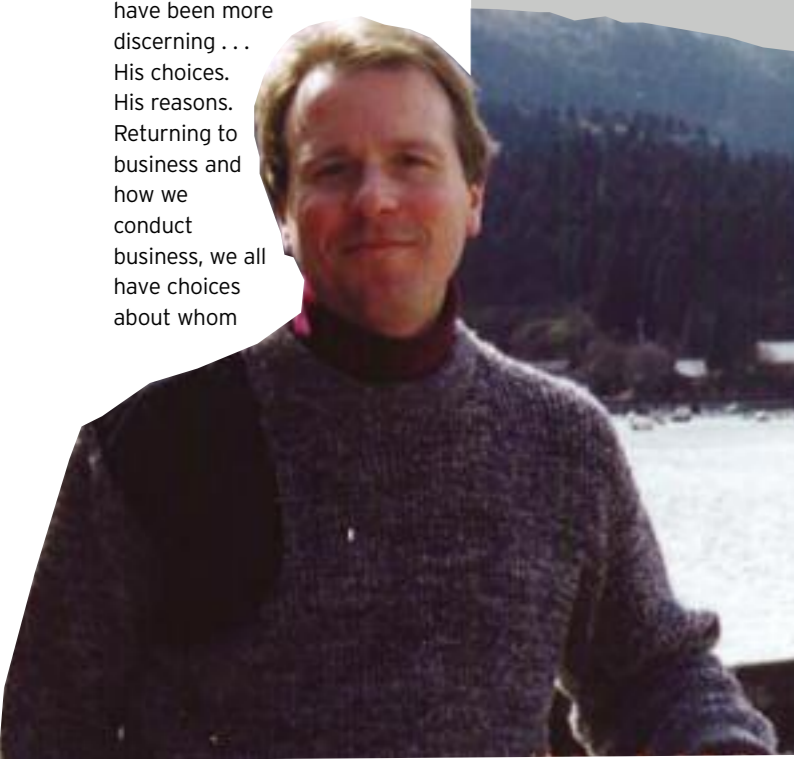
Here goes . . .

My personal resolution for 2010 was to have as many paying clients as Tiger Woods had mistresses. But then, as the number kept increasing and I realised this was most likely an infinite number, I lowered my expectations and am only seeking half as many clients as Tiger Woods has mistresses. I am nothing if not realistic. That should make for a good 2010.

Unlike Tiger, I am seeking quality over quantity. And Tiger's romantic choices bring up more important topics for 2010. It appears he wasn't too discerning about his choice of 'companions'. I would expect a young, famous, athletic, jet-setting billionaire could have been more discerning . . .

His choices. His reasons. Returning to business and how we conduct business, we all have choices about whom

I resolve to work with clients whose goods and services I am not ashamed of. Perhaps it's a mid-life crisis, but I don't want to assist questionable companies.



we choose to do business with.

I saw 2009 as a year of desperation for many in business in the US. On New Year's Eve and beyond, many were not celebrating a beginning to 2010 as much as an end to the agonies of 2009. This crossed all sectors and verticals (except investment banking, which motors along just fine with only an occasional bump in the road of eight-figure bonuses). Any client, customer, lead, prospect was welcome.

Restaurants changed menus to lower prices and reverted to extensive happy hours to draw in diners. Hotels lowered their prices. Airlines pretended to lower theirs but made up for it by creating ridiculous à la carte menus for even basic services.

The backlash here has been severe. Southwest Airlines has developed a highly effective ad campaign based not around safety or service but that your bags fly for free and people are choosing Southwest for this reason, feeling insulted by and resentful of their regular carriers. Companies are lowering standards along with expectations.

Have direct marketers been tempted to lower their standards of whom we do business with? I would hope - with 2010 already appearing to be a more active and financially rewarding year than 2009 - that we choose to be more discerning, not less. I for one, resolve to work with clients whose goods and services I can be, if not totally proud of, at least not ashamed of. Perhaps it is a sign of advancing age or a much delayed mid-life crisis, but I don't want to assist questionable companies offering even more questionable goods

and services just because a potential payday may result. Or assist the expansion of questionable goods and services into new and unsuspecting international markets.

I'm not suggesting or demanding that others follow this lead - this is my personal crusade. But, let's face it, direct marketing has always attracted a healthy contingent of questionable commerce. Not illegal by any means, but certainly not making the world a better place. Mostly an unadulterated pursuit of a buck at any costs.

Of course, the scams persist

The latest scams have been unconscionable Internet and telemarketing scams exploiting people's natural goodwill and generosity. This involves making contributions to the earthquake victims in Haiti. While there are many, many heralded and unheralded organisations working on behalf of Haiti and impoverished people everywhere, scammers see a chance to make a quick buck here and of course, by their actions, make good people willing to make a donation think twice about it.

Please, don't think twice. Just do some homework and seek out a reputable agency. The same 'twice-thinking' should go for all of our clients. Do a little research to ensure their marketing efforts do no harm. Are their contact methods intrusive or exploitative? Is it a good product at a fair price? Is the service legitimate? If it's a non-profit, do a realistic percentage of the donations reach the intended recipients?

Is anyone, in these economic times, willing to say no to

business because of personal standards? It certainly makes it difficult. But perhaps this recession offers us all an opportunity to re-evaluate our own goals and motivations. 'Just say No (thank-you)' works for more than drugs. It can work to clean up direct marketing and give it a long-overdue re-branding.

This has been discussed by every direct marketing group and association as long as I can remember. Especially when some particularly bad publicity airs about privacy invasions, identity theft, mail, phone and email scams.

Most organisations ask that its members self-regulate. But

really the only way to do this is by taking some financial hits and turning clients away. This is very hard to do in these times when many are competing ever more fiercely for a piece of the DM marketing pie.

Lessons in failure

Will there ever be sessions on this at future direct marketing events? Not likely. What would the titles of the session be? 'Say No to Your Customers'? 'Lose Money but Sleep Better'? 'How to be a Case Study for Failure at Next Year's Conference in One Easy Lesson'?

I can think of a million catchy session titles as well as an impressive check-list of

guaranteed take-ways all attendees will leave with. But I can't imagine getting a session like that approved or getting anyone to attend now that Mother Theresa is no longer with us.

But it needs to be done. The days of relying on others to do what is necessary are over. So it needs to be a personal crusade.

If there are any other quixotic characters out there willing to tilt at windmills, I'd appreciate the company.

Douglas Sacks is VP - strategic planning and partner at Focus Worldwide LLC, specialising in global data, analytical and marketing solutions. Email: doug@focus-worldwide.com

On New Year's Eve, many were not celebrating a beginning to 2010 as much as an end to the agonies of 2009.