

Jerks and spammers, swines and scammers

DOUG SACKS sums up the headlines that have been rigorously discussed across various media, Stateside.

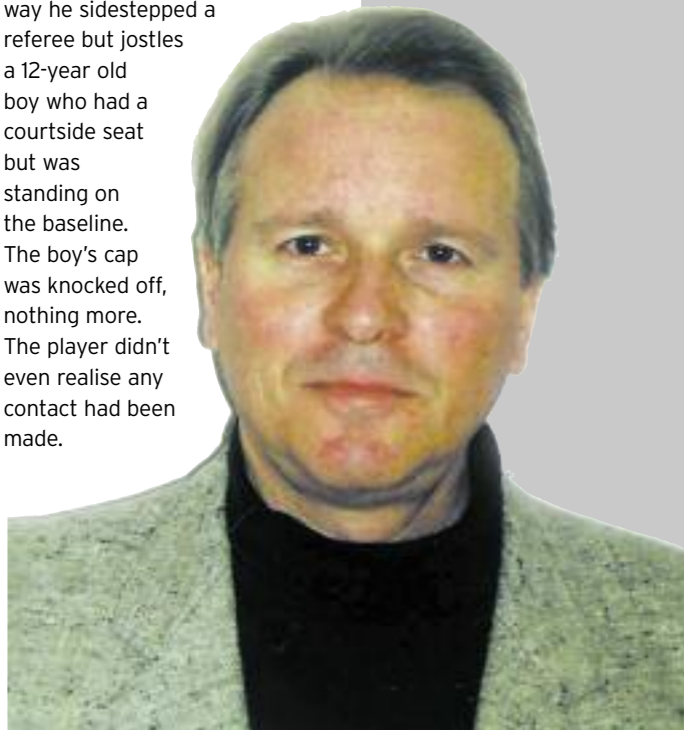
Where to begin? So much good stuff lately to comment upon.

I'm going to throw it all together and hope by the end it melds into a really good stew. If not, then don't eat it.

Privacy redux: As a follow-up to last month's column, written to stimulate debate, here are two examples which will either convince the privacy advocates that even more privacy legislation is needed or will convince the social media aficionados that indeed a new age is upon us so just get used to it. You decide.

Dad from hell

Much has been written in the US sports pages about a maniac at a recent basketball game and what his intentions were. After a rookie player from the visiting team sank a last-second shot at the buzzer to win a play-off game, he ran to mid-court to celebrate with his teammates. On the way he sidestepped a referee but jostled a 12-year old boy who had a courtside seat but was standing on the baseline. The boy's cap was knocked off, nothing more. The player didn't even realise any contact had been made.



Here, everything on the news is scary. Don't eat that. Don't go there. Don't buy this. Don't do that. Don't fly. Don't drive. Don't breathe.

The boy's father went ballistic (his team lost, remember). He demanded an apology and made what many felt was a racist remark. Most condemned his overreaction and figured he was wrangling for a monetary settlement. That's the American way, you know! The player apologised the next day, even though there was nothing to apologise for. Reaction was almost 100 per cent against the irate dad, who acted like a jerk. In one sports online chat room, someone posted the dad's two email addresses and 'suggested' everyone email to tell him what they thought of him. I'm sure he got a few . . . thousand!

They're baaack!

Oh, those pesky outbound telemarketers. Won't they just go away? One or several rogue companies here offering extended automobile warranties have run afoul of the law, the US Senate and empowered consumers. Guess which group exacts the most retribution? Over a billion robo-calls have been placed by a company or companies offering the warranties. Many of these have been placed to people on DNC lists and even to people who don't own cars.

Talk about targeted marketing! Clearly this is illegal.

My own state's Attorney's General has been 'investigating' this practice for a year. A year? And still the calls persist. An irate US senator is pushing to enact legislation and a federal investigation.

Big deal. That's nothing for rogue marketers to fear.

However, irate consumers pestered by the calls banded together on a social networking site called 'reddit'. A company

was identified (we'll call it Company A) and all were told to inundate them with nuisance calls, tie-up their phone lines with long renditions of rock and heavy metal music, etc. This overloaded their voicemail system. The company's CEO was also identified. People were driving by his house honking their horns, etc.

On the surface, this sounds like justifiable retribution. But what if this company was not responsible for the calls, as their CEO claims? And, in fact, just as I was preparing to send in this column, it was announced that a 'cease and desist' order had been issued to two telemarketing companies engaged in selling extended warranties over the phone. Neither of these was Company A.

Extended auto warranties are a good idea in many instances and reputable companies which obey the laws offer them. But the entire industry segment is being tainted by several disreputable practitioners. Perhaps if there was any kind of regulation in place or if law enforcement had moved faster on this, the grass-roots vigilantism wouldn't have been necessary. But, the reality is, the world has changed and how people react has as well. Email addresses, telephone numbers, personal info can be found and disseminated over the Internet at lighting speed.

Good thing or bad? Doesn't really matter. It's here and that's the way it is. Certainly in the most grievous cases, the persons who disseminate the information can be prosecuted. But how long will that take? And it is not something that can be put back into the bottle. It's out there now and people see

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nothing wrong with it.

Please note, I have not suggested the marketing industry regulate itself to prevent this type of abuse. That's a failed experiment if there ever was one.

Swine flu scare

Such an easy segue jumping from swinish marketers to a swinish virus. I am very happy this didn't become a global pandemic, but I didn't really think it would - just so much hype. Another case of the media 'crying wolf'. And losing a bit more of its rapidly disintegrating credibility. What happens if/when there is a global pandemic or something? Will anyone believe it before it is too late? Here in the US we saw a barrage of news reports, daily, almost hourly, at the local, state and national level.

Were these designed to inform or just scare? If the latter, it guaranteed a steady stream of viewers at least until the crisis had passed.

Here, everything on the news is scary. Don't eat that. Don't go there. Don't buy this. Don't do that. Don't fly. Don't drive. Don't breathe. But don't die either.

Weatherpersons whip the public into a frenzy every week or two in the winter over a potential killer snowstorm sending the frightened sheep bleating to the stores to stock up on things like water. (I learned long ago that if you melt snow you get water.) Oh well. Then the storm turns into a joke of a non-event. A mere dusting that would only shut down London, nowhere else in the world.

American humorist of old, Will Rogers, once said, "All I know is what I read in the

papers." Oh, for those days again. A modern-day Will Rogers would say that he believes everything EXCEPT what he reads in the newspapers.

Maybe that's why no-one is reading any more? That brings us to the next topic.

Trust in the media

Yes . . . but. According to TNS Global, people now trust the information they get from online news roughly to the same degree as news from television and information from friends.

Globally (and marketers are taking note), the most trusted information source is friends, with 42 per cent of those surveyed saying they trusted word-of-mouth recommendations. About an equal number trusted TV news (41%), online news (40%) and newspapers (39%). But none of these sources of information even approach 50 per cent. So the majority surveyed just don't believe anything they hear, see or read anymore. And we can thank the media for that. At least you can all believe everything you read in this column. 100%!

Pandemic = money-maker

So how do we combine roguish marketers with trust in the media and swine flu?

Easy. Global pandemic = money-making opportunities. The entrepreneurial spirit continues to thrive here in America. Not only vaccine producers saw a goldmine in the recent swine flu hysteria. It didn't take scammers long to latch on to the latest hot-button topic to try to make a quick buck. Scams built on fears of swine flu spread like, well, a highly contagious virus, across

the Internet. The US Computer Emergency Readiness Team issued an alert warning of a number of email scams related to the swine flu. The attacks arrive via an unsolicited email message typically containing a subject line related to the swine flu. Online security firm F-Secure reports that dozens of new swine flu domain names were registered in the days following the media scare. The Federal Trade Commission and Food & Drug Administration sent out alerts about bogus products related to this 'killer flu'. <http://ftc.gov/opa/2009/05/swineflu.shtml>

But wait, there's more!

Ad spending in the US totalled \$141.7 billion in 2008, down 4.1 per cent from 2007, according to TNS Media Intelligence.

In the fourth quarter, ad spending was down 9.2 per cent from the year earlier period. Internet display advertising grew 4.6 per cent in 2008, the slowest rate since 2002. Other media types that showed growth last year were syndicated TV (6.5%); Spanish-language magazines (4.9%); cable TV (2.1%); free-standing inserts (1.8%); and Spanish-language TV (0.1%). Newspapers were hardest hit, with ad spending down 11.8% for the year.

I guess advertisers don't believe what they read in the newspapers any more than the rest of us.

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