

# Book Reviews

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## [Harvard Business Review on Corporate Ethics and The Good, The Bad, and Your Business](#)

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According to *Advertising Age*, the top 200 brands in the United States spent a combined \$46.56 billion in 2004 on measured media advertising (Schumann 2005). According to both Greg Stielstra and Mark Hughes, the authors of two new books on customer-to-customer marketing, almost all of it was a waste of money. Stielstra is the author of *Pyromarketing: The Four-Step Strategy to Ignite Customer Evangelists and Keep Them for Life*, and Hughes is the author of *Buzzmarketing: Get People to Talk About Your Stuff*. Both books contend that a variety of factors, including the proliferation of advertising messages and product choices, the increasing importance of interactive media, and the advertising industry's current lack of credibility among consumers, have made traditional marketing techniques obsolete. To reach consumers in today's crowded marketplace, it is necessary to get customers to do the advertising. Getting customers to talk about and/or to recommend a brand is the best way to break through the clutter.

Both *Pyromarketing* and *Buzzmarketing* begin with the premise that there is a need to shift away

from the dominance of mass-media advertising toward a paradigm in which the customer is an active part of the marketing equation, a trend to which many practitioners and academics subscribe (e.g., Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn 1993). However, both Stielstra and Hughes recommend distinctly different approaches to harnessing the power of word of mouth. *Pyromarketing* focuses on reaching the "right" people (i.e., those most likely to buy) and leveraging their influence to reach others. In contrast, *Buzzmarketing* focuses on reaching as many people as possible. Indeed, Hughes explicitly turns his back on the need to target the "right" customers, arguing that "the buzzmarketing model is based on a philosophy that targeting isn't fully necessary, because buzz will spread further and wider" (p. 56). The following review highlights the two books' distinctive features and then discusses their commonalities.

## **PYROMARKETING**

*Pyromarketing* is built on a direct marketing framework, with the added element of evangelism (the evangelism comes naturally to Stielstra, who, by profession, is a marketer of religious books). The book, which centers on the metaphor of building a fire, maintains that the way to fan the flames of word of mouth is to use a careful, analytic approach to finding, exciting, and maintaining customers. Marketers are like the central character in Jack London's *To Build a Fire*; their whole world must be focused on "nursing tiny embers of interest into a strong, warming blaze if they are to survive in a harsh, cold world" (pp. 45–48).

Stielstra offers four steps to survival, developed around the fire-making metaphor. The first step is to find the small subset of customers that is most likely to buy ("gather the driest tinder"). It is best if these customers are opinion leaders (e.g., pastors if the product is religious), and it is best to find them when they gather with like-minded people (e.g., at a conference related to the behavior or through an interactive mailing list). Stielstra advises the reader to think smaller and smaller until he or she finds a group organized around a common interest that is likely to "notice, remember, act upon, and repeat your marketing message" (p. 107).

The second step is to give the "tinder" an experience with the product ("touch it with a match"), ideally in a natural setting and in a way that will exceed expectations. The third step is to encourage word of mouth ("fan the flames") using elements such as interactive tools and prepaid mailers and/or by building a sense of community. The final step is to maintain long-term relationships ("save the coals") by maintaining customers' trust and keeping a well-maintained database. Stielstra argues that this is how to keep a customer for life.

## **BUZZ MARKETING**

In contrast to *Pyromarketing*'s injunction to "dig deeper" (p. 107) until the narrowest subset of "dry tinder" customers is found, *Buzzmarketing* is about the big and the broad. Hughes's mantra is "out think, don't outspend" (p. 7). Hughes implies that the main problem with most advertising is that its creators think too small. With a great deal of creativity and a willingness to take risks, attention-generating public relations and promotional tactics can be used synergistically to complement, enhance, or replace high-dollar advertising.

Hughes describes six steps to creating winning buzz. First, the campaign must be built on something that will push people's buttons. People like to be "in the know" and to entertain others, so giving them something interesting to talk about can cut through the clutter. Hughes recommends using the taboo, the unusual, the outrageous, the hilarious, the remarkable, and the secret.

The second step is to use the media to help spread the word. To capture the media's attention, Hughes suggests building a brand's story around a topic that the media likes to write about (e.g., the David-and-Goliath story, the outrageous story, the controversy, the celebrity, what's already hot). The third step is to use advertising, but use it to get attention. To get attention, there needs to be fewer competitors vying for it. This is where Hughes falls back on more traditional

positioning ideas of choosing/creating a space that is underserved (similar to Kim and Mauborgne's [2005] "blue ocean strategy" or even Ries and Trout's [1981] strategy). The fourth step is to think big (climb "buzz Everest"), the fifth step is to be creative, and the sixth step is to ensure that a quality product backs up the buzz.

### **COMMON FEATURES**

Despite the fundamental philosophical difference between mass and targeted word of mouth, the two books are quite similar in their recommendations of how to encourage customer-to-customer interaction.

#### **Get People Talking**

The first commonality between the books is the idea that to get customers to do the marketing, it is necessary to spark their interest. This is the heart of the customer-to-customer paradigm. To fan the flames of the fire or to create a water-cooler stir, the marketer must get people to talk about the brand. In *Pyromarketing's* framework (and consistent with academic work on word of mouth), people talk about a brand because they are committed to it (Brown et al. 2005). For example, Christian religious leaders encouraged their congregations to see Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* or to read Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* because they believed in the message.

In the world of *Buzzmarketing*, personal commitment is just one way to get customers involved enough to spread the message. They may be motivated to talk up a brand because it changed their life, but they may also be willing to talk it up because they find that the message itself is interesting (e.g., urinal advertisements for the Web site half.com that read, "Don't piss away half your money").

#### **Create Relationships**

Consistent with its direct marketing approach, *Pyromarketing* stresses the idea that the most likely person to buy is someone who has bought before. *Buzzmarketing* also focuses on the idea of relationships. For example, when the author promoted a company's Web site by convincing a town in Oregon to change its name to "Half.com," the building of strong relationships with town leaders was instrumental to success.

In addition, both Stielstra and Hughes agree that long-term success depends on a quality product. Although customer-to-customer marketing can work to build initial interest, it can carry a brand only so far. To be successful over time, customers must be passionate about (Stielstra) or at least be satisfied with (Hughes) the brand itself. Consequently, starting with a brand that people believe in and "policing" brand quality are vital to capitalizing on evangelism/buzz.

#### **Be Honest**

Finally, both authors understand the need for honesty and ethics in a customer-to-customer context. Consumer advocacy groups sometimes equate buzz marketing and other word-of-mouth campaigns with the somewhat shady practice of stealth marketing, in which a marketer may talk up a product without making his or her brand affiliation known (Vranica 2005). It is important to note that neither book advocates a stealth campaign. To both authors, openness and honesty are integral in convincing customers to help market a brand.

Overall, although *Pyromarketing* is not a scholarly book, Stielstra relies on a broad treasure chest of source material to illustrate his points, drawing from literature, history (e.g. Boorstein 1974), social psychology (e.g., Cialdini 1984), and even forestry. There is not much new here from a how-to perspective (much of the same ideas and techniques can be found in traditional direct- and database-marketing books, such as that of Arthur Hughes [2000]), but the fire metaphor is interesting, and there is much that is useful in the book. Notably, the chapter on the final "save-

the-coals” step includes an excellent description of the importance of lifetime value.

*Buzzmarketing* is a lighter, more interesting read than *Pyromarketing* and has a more diverse set of stories—everything from Rit Dye, to the Pepsi Challenge, to the story of Brittany Spears. The lists of ways to get consumer and press attention are useful, and the exhortations to think creatively, never give up, and remain vigilant about product quality are doubtlessly good advice. Still, the book is more entertaining than educational; it would be rather difficult to recreate the successes Hughes recounts. More than once, a vital step in the buzz-generating process for a brand is something akin to “then, they caught a huge break” (e.g., p. 147), and in the end, the whole thing boils down to the easier-said-than-done recommendation; ultimately, to get people talking, there must be a really great product and a really great promotional idea.

—Judy Harris, University of Central Florida

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Both of these books on business ethics are long on application, aphorisms, and heuristics and short on conceptual guidelines for decision making. This makes for interesting and thought-provoking reading. However, readers may benefit further from a framework that facilitates systematic thinking about ethical issues; one example of such a framework is in *Ethical Marketing* (Murphy et al. 2005).

*Harvard Business Review on Corporate Ethics* contains six articles that appeared in *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) between 1981 and 2001. Given that HBR readers are likely to be managers, the articles have a strong pragmatic focus, with some theory supporting the advice. A benefit of reading the articles is that the current Enron, WorldCom, and Adelphia scandals seem like more of the “same old, same old.” Some of the ethical topics and illegal behaviors mentioned in these articles are Johns Manville failing to warn about the cancer dangers presented by asbestos; Continental Illinois Bank giving ill-advised loans in the U.S. oil patch; Sears, Roebuck and Co. performing unneeded automobile repairs; and Beech-Nut marketing adulterated apple

juice. However, these readings are more than history lessons. The authors make several suggestions for how to promote ethical behaviors and ensure that they are undertaken. If these suggestions had been implemented before some of them became a part of the law in the twenty-first century, the most recent scandals may have been avoided. The following is an overview of each of the book's six articles:

In "We Don't Need Another Hero," Joseph L. Badaracco Jr.'s premise is that the most effective moral leadership is pragmatic and quiet. These leaders are successful, not because they lead a moral crusade but rather because they are "hard-boiled" realists who understand that they may have mixed motives for what are ultimately morally correct results. Badaracco lists four basic rules: (1) Look for ways to buy time, (2) pick your battles to avoid wasting political capital, (3) bend the rules, and (4) search for compromises. His view is that middle managers may not receive awards for righting wrongs but rather by winning small moral victories, which cumulatively can accomplish a great deal.

In "Ethics Without the Sermon," Laura L. Nash more directly argues that "consultants" in philosophy and businesspeople approach problems differently and speak different languages. To illustrate this point, she uses the terms "categorical imperatives" and "deontological viewpoints" to illustrate the divide. To close the gap, she suggests 12 questions that businesspeople need to ask when making decisions. The questions are derived from theoretical ethical constructs but are grounded in executives' realities and decision-making processes.

Saul Gellerman's "Why 'Good' Managers Make Bad Ethical Choices" first appeared in 1986. It suggests that corporations need to establish internal controls, many of which are now required by the Sarbanes-Oxley law. Top management must also exert a moral force in the company, and the philosophy needs to be supported by the board of directors' requiring independent internal audits and controls. Gellerman's view is that "[t]he most effective deterrent is not to increase the severity of punishment for those caught but to heighten the perceived probability of being caught" (p. 63). This is necessary because "declaring codes of ethics and teaching them is not enough to deter unethical conduct" (p. 65).

In "Ethics in Practice," Kenneth R. Andrews suggests that corporations need to move beyond neoclassical economic theory, which is based on the individual's or the organization's pursuit of self-interest and profits. Rather, the company needs to view itself as a socioeconomic institution with multiple stakeholders. To achieve this broader orientation, written policies and internal controls to enforce these policies are needed; overall, a "chief executive [who] exercises moral judgment ... is more influential than written policy" (p. 76). In summary, Andrews' belief is that a chief executive officer must have good character and believe that complete loyalty and pursuit of the maximization of profits is the primary obstacle to obtaining high standards of ethical practices.

As do the other authors in this series, in "Managing for Organizational Integrity," Lynn Sharp Paine posits that companies need to move beyond legal compliance and suggests that they need an integrity strategy. In 1994, when Paine wrote this article, companies were developing legal compliance systems to meet the requirements of the 1991 Federal Sentencing Guidelines. Paine argues that companies need to assume both a moral and a legal responsibility. Thus, her suggested integrity strategy is driven by the need to encourage responsible and legal conduct.

In "Values in Tension: Ethics Away from Home," Thomas Donaldson discusses the ethical concepts of cultural relativism and ethical imperialism and suggests that these concepts are not the best guides for ethical decision making outside of a manager's home country. His view is that ethical behavior uses elements of both philosophies, and he enumerates three principles: (1) respect for core human values, (2) respect for local traditions, and (3) the belief that context matters when deciding what is ethical behavior. Furthermore, Donaldson appreciates that when working with these principles, managers must deal with conflicts that reflect different stages of

economic development and local traditions. Therefore, to help guide decision making, he advises people to answer three questions. First, would this decision be acceptable in my home country if it were at the same stage of economic development? Second, is it possible to be successful in this country without doing the contemplated action? Third, is the action a violation of a basic human value?

In "The Discipline of Building Character," Joseph L. Badaracco Jr. asks, what should a manager do when faced with two rights choices instead of a right and wrong choice? Badaracco considers the first situation a "defining moment" in contrast to the latter, which is an ethical decision. He relates that people have these defining-moment decisions at the personal, work group, and company level. He suggests three questions that decision makers must answer to guide them to a possible solution. The uniqueness of this treatise is that it examines situations in which the balance is between two ethically correct decisions, but one decision may better advance the future of the person, the team, or the organization.

The last entry in the book, "The Parable of the Sadhu," by Bowen H. McCoy, is a case study that presents an ethical dilemma. McCoy relates a situation in which a group of people needed to make decisions on what steps were needed to save the life of a pilgrim hiking in Nepal. McCoy discusses some of the participants' moral reasoning in the actual situation. In his afterword, he provides more background in the years since he wrote the case and suggests that the discussion leader may want the participants to comprehend the "correctness" of all the possible decisions.

For academics, the pragmatic suggestions in these readings could supplement more conceptual textbooks. For executives, the *HBR* readings bring together articles that may be thought provoking, help implement some of the requirements of Sarbanes-Oxley, and suggest how to be both ethical and legal.

Jeffery Seglin's book, *The Good, The Bad, and Your Business*, presents numerous real-world examples of businesspeople making decisions that have ethical consequences. Compared with the *HBR* readings, the advantage of Seglin's book is that it has a more integrated discussion of ethical issues. There is a logical progression as he moves through the three sections of the book, "Money," "People," and "The Common Good." In general, the chapters on money present financial decisions. Frequently, the issues are what to do when inadequate cash flows dictate tough allocation decisions, such as who gets paid first, employees or suppliers? The chapters on people cover human resource issues, such as how candid of a reference should be given for a former employee. This type of decision prompts Seglin to discuss in depth the issue of doing what is legal versus what is ethical. Finally, the chapters on the common good cover organizations' obligations to society. In one of these chapters in this section, Seglin distinguishes among truth, posturing, and lies. The intent is for the reader to understand the difference between embellishing the truth and making false statements.

All the chapters have a central theme, and Seglin relates several stories to illustrate the ethical dilemmas. Frequently, he does not arrive at a conclusion about whether a decision was ethically correct. Rather, he tries to provide enough information for readers to decide for themselves. At the end of nearly all the chapters, he provides some heuristics that help readers think through their decisions. Some examples of these guides are as follows: "Ask yourself how you would feel as a businessperson on the receiving end of the action you're about to take" (p. 32); "[p]lay hard, but play clean" (p. 152); and "[w]hat do you want the lasting impact to be?" (p. 176).

The book is an interesting read. It may lead some readers to think through some of their past actions. It may also stimulate lively debates about alternative courses of action. However, one problem with the book is that it does not provide a general conceptual framework to help resolve the debates.

In conclusion, the *HBR* book and Seglin's book would be good supplemental readings in an ethics course. Both books tend to be anecdotal, which makes for interesting reading and provides a pragmatic view of the business world. However, both lack a strong conceptual basis to aid decision making. For an introduction and grounding in ethical reasoning and decision making, practitioners, academics, and students would be better informed and guided by first reading and thinking through the concepts presented and the questions raised in a book such as *Ethical Marketing* (Murphy et al. 2005) and then using the two books reviewed here as supplements to provide more examples of ethical issues and some good heuristics.

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