



Accentuate the Positive!

The negativity pervading most political commercials doesn't promote change; politicians and executives must eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive.

By William B. Locander and David L. Luechauer

THIS YEAR, our articles are focused on the leadership lessons sales and marketing executives might glean from commercials. You may be wondering what could be learned from the political commercials that aired during the national, state, and local elections of 2008. Our answer is: nothing. At least we didn't learn much about the candidates, their positions, their plans and implementation strategies—that almost every commercial we saw focused on what was wrong, flawed or broken in the incumbent, the challenger or the system. Elections are won by running commercials that focus on what is broken, who is to blame and why the populous should be afraid of anyone who dares to differ with their values, opinions and beliefs. Focusing on the negative is no way to run an election. It is an even worse way to run a company. Sadly, however, focusing on problems, is a common approach to leadership we are taking the position that the lesson to be learned from political commercials is this: Don't emulate them.

The Problem with Problem-Solving

Many sales and marketing executives gained their prominence by being skilled at identifying and solving marketing-related problems. However, problem-solving approaches decrease in applicability as people rise through the hierarchy. Take a moment and reflect on the question: How many "people" problems have you solved using a problem-solving methodology? How many times do you find yourself entrapped doing the same things that were supposed to be "solved" six months, one year, or five years ago when the problem was first identified? Leaders who adopt a problem-solving orientation don't generate many creative or lasting solutions. Why hasn't the problem-solving approach worked?

First, this approach causes people to spend more time looking in the mirror assessing what went wrong than planning where to go next. To see the futility of this approach, try driving home by looking only in your rearview mirror. Second, it doesn't take long

before people become resigned to the notion that their place of work is filled with problems. Third, it reduces the possibility of generating new theories and new images of social reality that might help them transcend the current situation. Fourth, this approach usually consists of finding and often displaying failings, shortcomings and inadequacies. The most likely response will be blame, denial, defensiveness, anger or depression. Generally, neither people nor systems like to discuss their problems. And even when they do, they usually resist acknowledging their contribution to the problem.

A while ago, we were part of a team leading an intervention for a utility company. We had clear data that suggested the company near the bottom of the industry in terms of customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and perceptions of quality service. Rather than seeing our study as a chance to improve, the key executives—most of whom had no training in survey design, research methodology or statistical analysis—spent more than three hours criticizing our instrument, our method and the statistical analysis that was conducted. They concluded that our study was flawed, and that they did not have a problem with customer satisfaction.

Addressing problems, setting targets and working to accomplish them usually perpetuates a culture of problem-centered improvement. This mentality frequently leads to a culture of "if it ain't broke don't fix it." Hence, people wait to take action until problems are identified. As a result, marketing executives often attempt to address complex issues asking how to fix what is broken, instead of: "How can we accomplish that which we desire to achieve?" Therefore, the problem-solving approach brings us down rather than propelling us forward.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a term coined by Case Western Reserve University professors David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva. AI is a method of inter-

vention that attempts to help individuals, groups, organizations, and communities create exciting and new generative images for themselves based on an affirmative understanding of their past and present operation. In short, AI fosters a dialogue that allows marketing executives to identify, magnify, replicate and build upon the structures, systems, processes or dynamics that are already working or valuable for them. AI theorists posit that we are constructing the world we see and think about whenever we talk. Therefore, as we change the way we talk, we are changing that world.

AI has three main components. First, an appreciative intervention that seeks to discover “the best of,” by asking organizational members to recall or recount past and present organizational successes. The success stories may be generic or focused on specific areas of interest. Second, the appreciative inquiry asks members to “generate insights” or to develop explanations regarding why those successes occurred. Finally, through the process of inquiry itself, the elements that contribute to exemplary performance are “reinforced and amplified.” The hallmark of successful appreciative inquiries is that the system generates at least one new insight into the elements that contribute to their peak performance. AI interventions reflect Bing

Crosby’s advice to Mr. In-Between when he crooned:

You’ve got to accentuate the positive
 Eliminate the negative
 Latch on to the affirmative
 Don’t mess with Mister In-Between
 You’ve got to spread joy up to the maximum
 Bring gloom down to the minimum ...

AI allows marketing executives to focus on current positive activities, rather than negative events in which they are embedded. This optimistic focus creates a new reality that says greatness is within us, and we can use it to accomplish even greater things. As a result, organizational events are approached from a more exciting, more energizing and more positive base. People want to work on issues together, because they know they have been successful in the past. ■

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