

The Art of Controversy

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Here's a little topic that I really like to talk about, and I use it. A lot of people don't see how I use it because I use it very subtly, but once I explain it to you, you'll see it and you'll also see its power. And it's something to consider adding to your toolkit of internet marketing tactics. And that's the art of controversy.

It Sells

Controversy, done properly, sells. I laugh because two ago I got an e-mail from kind of a big marketer. In fact in 2008 he had a list of 857,000 people on his list. And he threatened to sue me.

Why did he threaten to sue me? He said I libelled him because on one of my sales pages I said "Look, I bought this guy's product. It was super overpriced, and basically it sucked. I didn't do what I thought it would. I was just appalled by it, and that inspired me to give you this product. Not only, in my opinion, do I think my product is better than his, but my product is only \$37 when his product is almost \$200. Mine isn't going to build you a million list overnight, but then again it's not supposed to. It's supposed to help you get started with..." and then I sold the product some more.

Well, he somehow got on that page, and he got mad at me. He threatened to sue me, like I said, because of what I said about him. And then he tactfully gave me this advice, and I say that sarcastically. He said, "If you want to get ahead in this industry, you shouldn't say bad things about your marketing peers."

I thought, "What a crock of shit." I honestly thought his product was crap. It was deceptive advertising. I'm surprised somebody hasn't sued him. So what am I supposed to be? Some kind of pussy who doesn't say what's on my mind? Am I going to be one of those guys who hides because I'm afraid to offend somebody? No.

Speaking Your Mind

And so actually a lot of people -- because I shared this with some people privately -- and they're like, "I read that sales page." And they very specifically remembered that paragraph. It was a damn good selling point. I even included it in my pre-launch about how that inspired me to decide to launch that product because I had bought his product and it sucked, and I told them not to buy his product. That's very controversial because I went out there, and I took a direct stand. I wasn't going to be a wuss about it. I honestly wanted to do a greater

service to my customers than worry about one of my “marketing peers”. And so it really created a good topic, and in fact I'm going to continue to use it in a blog post where I talk about it more.

When I studied my e-mail marketing to see what ones got the most response, either to me personally in my e-mail or on my blog, always the most controversial issues had the most heated debates. People are checking back to see what other people have said.

I was talking about another so-called marketing peer who had this huge launch, and I was talking about how they bungled it and how it sucked and all this and all that. And that got a lot of great conversation. And a lot of people respect me because they feel when they see me coming through that I tell it like it is, whether it's something that's going to offend a certain group of people or not, and that's controversy in my opinion.

A lot of people -- they just instantly take me at my word because I've demonstrated to them that I'm not afraid to speak what's on my mind. And I usually don't have any ulterior motive other than that -- to show them that I'm going to be the guy that stands up for them. I'm not going to be like all these other marketers who turn a cheek and just hush hush about it or worse, jump on the bandwagon just because it works and makes them money even though it sucks. So controversy done properly sells. And this is why you want to consider using controversy.

The Polarity Theory

First, there is the polarity theory. Polarity theory: You resonate most with those who share your views. Howard Stern is a great example of this -- shock jock extraordinaire. A lot of people want to be like Howard Stern. They're like, "Yeah, I believe in the same things that Howard says. Howard says this about women, and Howard acts like this around people and he's such a dick. Yeah, I'm a dick, too. I believe and hold those views." So he resonates with them because hardly anybody else in the media up until that point came out and was like him. So all these people were looking for somebody to hold as their idol, and he fulfilled that role.

Now does 95 percent of the people like that stuff? Probably not. He appeals to a very specific market segment, but that's the polarity response. Usually the following you can create is equal to the number of people that you can drive off that absolutely hate you. There's republicans and then there's democrats, but there's few "republicrats" and there's few "democrans." It's either you're one or the other. Really, if you try to combine half of the republicans and half of the democrats together it's not going to work because nobody stands for anything.

So how are you going to find all those people out there that share your values if you're not afraid to say some things that you take a stand on? Some clear issues

where you say it in black and white -- I choose black or I choose white. If you stay in that gray area, nobody knows whether to side with you or not. They don't know if you share the same views as they do.

So that's a very big part of controversy is where you take that stand knowing full well that you're going to piss off some people or some people aren't going to agree with you or criticize you. That means, though, everybody else who believes what you believe respects you more.

The Vicarious Thrill

Here's another thing: The vicarious thrill.

Most people want to say it. They want to do what you do. They want to say what you say because it appears -- controversy is like bypassing a lot of social conditioning that people have. Many people are afraid. It's sad. They're afraid to ask for things because they're afraid they'll say no, and then they feel bad because of it. Or they want to go up to that woman and ask her out, but they're afraid of what's going to happen if she says no and if people laugh at them. And so on and so on and so on.

So most people are trapped by their social conditioning of what others think of them, but they always want to break free from that. That's a huge psychological thing. They always want to break free from that trapped feeling. And if they can't do it, here's what a lot of them think: They're like, "Boy, if I hang around Jason and Jason doesn't have a lot of those social imitations that I have, maybe just being around him -- some of that will rub off on my and I'll kind of catch his attitude and his behaviors. And then I'll be able to apply it to my life and escape that freedom."

But even if they can't do that, then they can at least get the vicarious thrill, meaning they live out their fantasies through their idol or their figure or their role model or the person that they look up to or the person that they follow. So a lot of people can't be Jackie Chan kicking people around and doing all these fancy tricks and stuff, but just by watching it they feel like they're part of it just because they're taking part of it by watching it and observing it even though they'll never do it. They live out their thrills by watching someone else do it, and that's what's so great about controversy.

Finally and most simply, controversy works because it grabs attention.

Grabbing Attention

Controversy typically means saying things that most nobody else is saying. Some of it involves shock, although in my opinion, controversy and shock don't go hand in hand necessarily. Shock is sometimes an element of controversy; sometimes it's not, but controversy grabs attention.

I write headlines with controversy in they will a lot of times. For example, I wrote one that says "The 80/20 rule sucks." And that is shocking. More importantly, it's very controversial because I'm sure a lot of people would not agree with me on that, but they want to see what the hell I have to say that makes me want to say that so it grabs their attention and hooks them in. I do this all the time in my copywriting. I say "Why you should not use a swipe file to create headlines." I'll say that when I'm selling a copywriting product. And that's challenging conventional wisdom on its head. That grabs attention because I have now said something that is totally different than everything that they've been taught so I'm the antiauthority figure. And that's controversial. It grabs attention. People want to see why I'm saying that. They might not necessarily believe me, and it's going to spark a lot of conversation with them. Internal dialogue -- is he right? Are those guys right? And also external dialogue with other people. "Well, check out what dude said about this. This totally is something contradictive. Who's right? " Well, guess what? Now people are looking at you to see what you were doing in comparison to what everyone else is doing.

However, with that said, controversy done wrong fails. Controversy done properly sells; controversy done wrong fails. And it falls flat on its face.

It's like anything. Using controversy is a little risky, but usually the bigger the risk, the bigger the reward. You can make the most money in the market, especially the Forex market in currency trading. That is where a lot of money's at stake, but the problem with that is you can also lose the shirt off your back quicker than anything. I mean, the way to invest that has the least likelihood of failing is to buy CD's, certificates of deposit, that have a 5 percent return. Or maybe bonds or blue chip stocks or whatever, but you're not going to get rich right away with that. And even then with the future of the market, who the hell knows? But short trading, trading on the margins, options, Forex trading, all that kind of stuff has the attempt to become a big money payday, but it also has an equal attempt of losing a lot of stuff.

And controversy's the same way. If done right, it's going to really help you drive your sales through the roof, like the rich jerk does. Or when done wrong it's just going to look stupid. Specifically, you look like an attention whore. You're using controversy for controversy's sake.

What the hell? Everybody's like, "Okay, I see through that ploy. What you're trying to do is trick me, and when people try to trick me, I want to get away from those people." Meaning they're not going to buy your product.

And so you don't want to do controversy for controversy's sake. You have to have a very specific plan of action behind it. And mine is two-fold. Mine is basically this: I want people to know me as the guy who speaks his mind and who isn't afraid to stand up and say something that might not be so popular, but is in their best interest to hear, in what I think is in their best interest to hear.

I know that I run myself the so-called risk of getting sued or pissing off some of my so-called peers that are going to burn some JV bridges down the line. But in my opinion, my clients come before any of that crap because they're the reason my business exists in the first place. I'll get more of them if I did do those JV's, but if I don't treat them right my business fails.

So I want them to know that I am out looking for their best interests. So if that means I have to take a stand and personally suffer some short-term loss just to demonstrate them to them and take a stand on a controversial issue and speak my mind when nobody else is saying a damn thing, then I'm going to do it.

So that's my specific thing, and the other thing is I know what's good for creating dialogue. I want people to talk about me, too. And so when I combine those two together, that's a very powerful form of controversy.

You know what? So many people were mailing those promotions, and not one of the people were coming out and saying "this sucks" on that day hardly at all. None of the guys in my position or higher. A lot of end consumers were saying that. It comes good from somebody who's kind of in the inner circle. So that's one thing. Don't use it for attention's sake. Have a specific strategy behind the controversy.

Don't Skimp on Steak

Second, the problem with controversy is too much sizzle and not enough steak. And what that means is sometimes you can do so good with controversy that you got the whole marketplace in excitement, but you've focused so much on controversy you left a lot to be desired for delivery. So you created this buzz and this stir and everything, you got everyone all excited and you got the marketplace in a frenzy, and then you delivered crap because you spent 95 percent of your time in your whole launch creating the controversy and only 5 percent working on the product.

So controversy should be the last thing that you're going to infuse in the campaign. Or if you got a really good hook to work it in. But make sure that you don't overdo it with controversy because you can oversell yourself.

I've had this happen before. Sometimes you market too well. You market so damn good that a bunch of people buy and then you get a high refund rate because people got so excited they didn't even analyze what they were buying. They just bought impulsively. And then when that emotional excitement wore off, they actually looked at themselves sober in the morning and said, "I made a mistake." So you had to give them their money back. So that's another problem with controversy is that you can oversell people this way and then get high refund rates or get unsatisfied customers.

And the other thing is you might offend too many people. It's good to alienate certain groups of people, but you don't want to alienate every group. You don't want to be the only person who believes these issues. There's some topics that are just taboo that you want to stay away from because you're going to piss off everybody. And so you've got to walk that fine line, too. You can't be over the top. You can't be too flamboyant, at least not very productively. I mean, Dennis Rodman made it work for him. Some people make it work for them, but you run that risk the harder you turn on controversy is you don't want to offend too many people because down the line you might not have a following anymore.

Like I said, my controversy the low-key and toned down so people don't even know I'm using it a lot of times. And I recommend a similar approach unless you have that personality that's naturally controversial. That can work really good.

Doing Controversy Right

How to do controversy right. Let's talk about that.

Like I said, No. 1 on my list is never be afraid to speak your mind, even if it's the unpopular opinion. Let's say there's 20 people in the room, and you know 15 of them believe one thing and you think that thing's absolutely wrong. What do you do? Do you just be a sheep or do you actually speak up your mind? Well, I tell you what. If the other four people believe what you believe but they didn't have the balls to say it, guess what? All of those four people are going to like you because you said what they wanted to say, and all those other 15 people are going to be pissed off at you, but guess what? Maybe those other four people are going to like you so much that they'll buy your product when before they wouldn't have bought your product. Nobody would have bought your product. So it's great to speak your mind because you're going to resonate with other people who believe the same things as you do but aren't saying it consciously.

The other thing with controversy -- and I've talked about this before -- challenge conventional wisdom constantly. This is good for yourself. Always challenge your own thoughts even. Think about it. What worked a year ago doesn't necessarily work today, and the marketplace is changing all the time. So if you openly come out, if you have a hunch on something that you think is absolutely wrong that's being commonly taught to people that are especially beginning in that field, you want to come right out and say it.

Because, A, it's great because some people are going to really give you attention, and, B, if you're right and everyone else is wrong, you're going to get a die-hard following as being that watchdog, being that guy who can predict the future and has that insight. People are really going to love that.

The thing to do with controversy, though, is you can't half-ass it. You got to take a definite stand on an issue. So if you're going to be that person who says when something comes up that's crappy, even if it's going to sacrifice your short-term

profits, you've got to be the guy that says it. Otherwise the next time something comes up and you don't say it or you change your mind and try to profit from it, well now you're incongruent, and that's no good for your business.

So take definite stands on issues, and then stand on it. But it's okay once in a while to change your position if you come up with new information as long as you justify it. Say, "Hey, I was absolutely wrong on that thing, but you know what? I'm not going to be afraid to speak my mind because I'm right a lot, too. You're going to want to hear what I have to say." You can't pander to both sides. You can't play both sides, so why try? Why not just use controversy instead and take that definite stand and then use that to harness your marketing by grabbing more attention and resonating with those people who share your beliefs.

Here's another really cool strategy for how to do controversy right. It's always good to come up with your "I want to offend them list."

Choosing Those To Offend

You should have a very specific group of people that you set out to offend. How's that for challenging conventional wisdom? And I say this as an instructive exercise because that will then allow you to free up to really write to the market that you want to write to. So let me give you an example.

I absolutely have no problem offending people who think they can just buy PLR and then turn around and sell it and make a million dollars. I think it's absolutely stupid, and I say that. You're dumb if you think that because it's just not true. Maybe you're not dumb; maybe you're naïve because you don't know any better yet. Regardless, you're just having a stupid strategy. Don't use that strategy anymore.

So I start off my sales letter -- I say, "If you think PLR's some magic push-button solution that you can instantly buy, turn around, and just have loads of money come to you, then leave this page immediately. This message is not for you." And so I ran off a lot of people, but guess what? I don't want them as my customers, and they probably weren't going to be my customers anyway. So when you can take those stands, the people that are left reading, they're like, "Oh wow." They feel a lot more compelled to keep reading, and they're going to be more inclined to take you up on your offer.

So set out to offend a certain group of people knowing full well that if it's the people you don't want in your customer funnel or the people you don't want to deal with or the people that you just absolutely think are silly or wrong and probably wouldn't buy from you anyway, well then if you go out and really put it to them, everybody else is going to feel good just because it's not them that you're sticking it to. So you're going to get likeability. The enemy of my enemy is my friend is true in a lot of cases, especially in marketing.

Finally here, this is another really good trick: Come up with industry norms and find out how to break every single one of them.

For example, I always tell people "Write your headline in 5 minutes or less like I do. Don't write a hundred headlines. Just write three or five. And if it fails, go back and test it again." Where most people will say, "If you have ten hours to write an ad, you should spend eight hours on the headline." I mean, even big pros have said that, and maybe that's true for them or whatever. But it's not true for me. I challenge the industry norm. I do that all the time. I do that all the time, especially with my e-mail marketing.

Sometimes my e-mails are six pages long. Sometimes they're two paragraphs long. They're whatever I feel like writing, and that's again incongruent to the industry norm. I never hardly ever do affiliate promotions unless they're really, really, really good. So again, that's against the industry norm because people are doing JV's all the time.

Do Things Differently

The other thing that I don't do is for every ten JV's that come my way, nine of them get a cut of my profits. I don't turn around and mail for them. That is just how I've set up my business. If they don't like that, we don't do JV's. Most of them are cool with that -- the people that I want to work with. But again, that's against the industry norms.

And so it's really good in your business to find creative ways to do things differently than what everybody else is doing in the industry. Not only is that good for your business because that forces you to act outside of the box, which can help you get these huge breakthroughs that nobody else is getting, but it's really good for controversy because you can take those stands. You can make those statements in your communication, and people are going -- it's really going to grab their attention. It's going to really resonate with those other people like, "You know what? I always thought those gurus were wrong anyway because I tried their stuff, and it didn't work for me." So that's how you do controversy right.

Now where do I apply controversy -- in your copywriting, like I'm talking about, even in your product positioning.

Find a product that absolutely would create a lot of talk in the marketplace, but also would deliver value, a lot of stir where there's two definite, opposite sides on that issue. And then you can position your product to say, "F everybody over on that side. Everybody over on this side's right. And that's really good for positioning a product to get a lot of attention. Like I said, do an e-mail. Like I do it all the time.

On the forums it's good. Now don't be, again, a troll. Don't try to piss people off just to piss them off. But don't be afraid to speak your mind and say something that's against the norm or against the popular opinion of the forum if it's what you truly believe. Pretty much anywhere where communication takes place and there's a way for you to make that communication commercial, you're going to want to consider applying controversy.

Now with that said, you shouldn't apply controversy if you have to force it. If it doesn't come naturally to you and if you have to really concoct obscure, weird ways and convoluted ways to use it, then forget it. Not every strategy works for everybody. You don't have to use controversy. This is just something to consider, something that I absolutely stand behind. But if you really have to force it -- if you're like my grandma, who's the nicest woman in the world -- you probably shouldn't use controversy then.

And if you can't handle criticism, that's another reason you shouldn't handle controversy because you will be criticized. Now what I have found is if you do a lot, if you take action a lot, you're going to be criticized anyway. So big deal. I say learn to handle criticism anyway and actually turn it into your advantage. But if you can't, you're probably not going to make it in this business, and you're absolutely not going to make it using controversy.

And finally, if you don't have a good reason to be controversial, don't do it. Otherwise you're going to be controversial for controversy's sake.



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