

# marketing creativity

13 essays for creative humans



STACEY CORNELIUS

**Marketing Creativity** is a short collection of essays published between 2009 and 2011. They're some of my favourites.

It's a combination of practical marketing advice and thoughts on respecting the creative process, written by someone who's been down that road.

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## Lessons Learned in Art School

It's Thanksgiving day here in Canada. What am I grateful for? That I put myself heavily into student loans to go to art school. It was the best decision I ever made.

I had some remarkable instructors when I attended NSCAD University (still sometimes referred to as "the Art College"). I vividly remember three things that were said to me during my time at NSCAD; the first two were offhand comments; the third was carefully worded and meant to stick. None of them were said in a business context, but as so often happens, simple, sincere words are more valuable than you realize.

Those words have served me well as an artist and designer. They're important marketing lessons, too.

***Play, but play well.*** Keep your goals in mind, but let your imagination run.

***Don't get precious with it.*** Allow yourself to make mistakes as you explore possibilities.

***You're responsible for what you put into the world.*** This isn't about political correctness; it's about not being a jerk.

And here's a bonus lesson I figured out later: have respect for yourself, respect for your collaborators, and respect for your work. That applies not only to your creative process, but also how you promote it.

# The Power of Commitment

The following quote is a Sticker on my desktop:

*“Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans—the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.”*

—W.H. Murray, Scottish Himalayan Expedition

There are people who would have you believe that positive thinking will make all your dreams come true. There are enough self-help books pushing that message to sink a container ship.

The theory is great, but translating theory into practice rarely shows you where the potholes are. And just thinking it doesn't make things happen. You have to choose. You have to act. You have to work at it.

What gets you through is the commitment. Not hanging on out of pride, but the knowledge that not everything will go according to plan, that there will be setbacks and mistakes, and that is precisely the way things are supposed to unfold.

You stumble, you learn, you move forward. Or sideways. Or say, “Damn, this isn't what I want to do at all,” and have the courage to admit it and dig into what really makes your engine run.

Providence, however you choose to define it, moves when we decide.

## The Wisdom of Failure

What happens when you fail?

If you do it right, you learn, sometimes a lot. You learn to suck it up and move on. You learn to trust your gut. You learn what everybody else is doing might not be right for you.

Mostly you learn your roof won't cave in, the wheels won't fall off your car, and embarrassment is not a fatal condition.

I'm talking about marketing a microbusiness here, not brain surgery or building bridges, and I'm not talking about putting your entire life savings into a single venture. The former has lives at stake and the latter is nuts.

When I'm about to do something stupid (read: against my nature), I start to panic just a little. I rush. I make a lame comment on a popular blog without reading it carefully because I think it might get me traffic. I lower a price out of fear. There is a physical sensation associated with the choice—something faint, easy to ignore. But when the deed is done, it multiplies by tens and I feel it—stomach around my knees, and an urge to run. I affectionately call this condition Consummate Idiot.

Except nobody really cares but me. Most people won't even notice, unless I've made a colossal blunder. Mostly I've been either too smart or too cautious to do something that extreme.

I'm embarrassed, and I do not expire.

When you fail, there are signs in the settling dust, if you pay attention. Drag your eyes away from your navel and consider: what informed the choice? Did you do your homework first? Did you act out of fear? What did you tell yourself before, during and after? How did you feel physically?

How do you feel when you try something that goes well, when you're acting according to what you believe in?

The cues are consistent. Commit them to memory.

Failure gives you the chance to have your very own time out to think about what you've done. Take your box of crayons if you like, and scribble some notes so you can avoid those mistakes in the future. Consider what worked. It's worth noting things that mostly worked, too. Or even kind of worked. Examine it all. Consult your gut.

This might come as a surprise, but things are supposed to go wrong. You can't get it right every time. No one can. Do everything possible to succeed, but with the realization that there will be setbacks. Do your research, trust your instincts, then get on with it.

If you're not afraid to stumble, you won't be afraid to try.

## The Truth About Self-doubt

Sunday, 7:00 p.m. A post needs to be written for Monday morning. It's not happening.

"Forget it," I say, "I'm going to welding school."

"Okay," the fella replies, in that unmistakable tone. He's humouring me.

Truth be told, I didn't use the word "forget." I used another word, one I don't throw around in polite company.

I couldn't do it. The well was dry. I was convinced if I tried to utter one more syllable about marketing, or creativity, I would implode.

Here's the thing—I have perfectionist tendencies and a long-standing hangover from a sadly misguided Protestant work ethic. My art school roommate used to joke with me about it. I could never relax—an affliction unknown to him—so I'd pretend to razz him about being lazy, and he'd reply, "That's right," with a big, cheese-eating grin.

Things haven't changed much. He still knows how to relax, and I still don't. The work ethic has evolved into something more sensible, but it still hangs me up.

You'd be amazed at how fast that kind of self-inflicted pressure can throw you into a seething pit of self-doubt.

Then again, maybe you wouldn't.

I'll bet my last dime you've been there at least once. You ask yourself, "Is this good enough?" and a voice rises up like a recurring nightmare, laughs at what you've just created, and snorts, "No!"

When that happens, all you want to do is raise the white flag, gather your wounded, and get the hell off the battlefield as fast as you can.

But before you declare your surrender, there's something you need to know. The voice isn't yours. And it's lying to you.

"Is this good enough?" is a worthwhile question. It means you care about what you send into the world. It means you're not so deluded that you think everything you create is perfect and wonderful. It keeps you from becoming complacent.

If something needs a little more polish, or even a major rework, fair enough. A sense of responsibility to your audience, a sense of integrity, pushes you to be better. A chronic, knee-jerk, all-encompassing negative response will make you crazy. That goes beyond self-doubt and into full-blown self-sabotage. You can't make anything good when you're being crushed under that weight.

You need to know where your self-doubt comes from, and you need to shut it down.

You don't require a PhD in psychology to figure it out. Somewhere along the line, maybe when you were a kid, you got it into your head you couldn't. That's not an accidental grammatical error, that's how it feels when you fall into serious self-doubt. You can't. Period.

Something happened to make you internalize someone's criticism. When you were little, you didn't have the experience, or the vocabulary, to understand how the world works. When someone criticized you in adult terms instead of talking to you at your level of understanding, you weren't able to reason it out. Adults were powerful. Adults knew everything. So you decided *you* were wrong.

Maybe it happened later in life. Someone you admired stomped all over you. And you absorbed it.

You might not even be aware of how it seeped into your consciousness. But now you carry it around, a toxic load of criticism and negativity, waiting like a virus to jump on you when your defences are down.

It might happen when you're about to send work to a jury, or bidding on a

job. It might rear its ugly head when you're developing new work, or crafting promotional copy.

One negative comment from one person could trigger it.

Or it might just show up when you're overtired, or when you've been working too hard, and all you're trying to do is something you've been doing consistently for months, or even years.

Pull back the curtain and see self-doubt for what it is—an imposter. A boogeyman who should have been retired long ago.

If you learned the skills and executed something that was good, you have proof you can do it. If you're starting out, you're not supposed to be a master. Mastery takes time and practice. The “no good” message is a habit so deeply ingrained in your thought patterns it's automatic.

Self-doubt is a short circuit. When you stop the automatic response and change the habit, you fix the wiring.

Skills improve. Techniques evolve. We mature as artists and as people. We all make mistakes. That doesn't mean you're no good—it means you have more to learn. We all have more to learn. There will always be room for something better.

The next time self-doubt comes calling, force it to state its case. Demand proof. Require it to justify its position. When you turn it back on itself—when you look it in the eye and hold your ground—it crumbles.

# What Happens When You Try Too Hard (Marketing 101 revisited)

Three people I know have said nearly the same thing over the past few days:

Why can't I get this right?

One person was frustrated at not being able to master a new skill quickly. One was trying to wrestle designs into lower price points. One was overthinking her marketing message.

Their intentions were honourable, but they weren't getting the results they wanted, and for good reason. Trying too hard interrupts your flow. It hangs up your thinking and twists you into a ball of anxiety.

Learning takes time It's beyond frustrating when you try to master something that looks like it should be easy.

When your initial efforts are met with unabashed defiance, you wonder what could possibly be wrong with you, particularly when other people seem to be doing the very same thing with little or no effort.

But they had to learn it, too. If you want to get good at something, you have to work at it. You have to practice. And you are required to make mistakes.

(You could say mistakes are a natural part of the process, but if mistakes are a prerequisite, your pride will take less of a beating and you'll be less likely to quit.)

## **Give quality work the respect it deserves**

Trying to dumb down good design is as bad as trying to copy it. You end up with a pale imitation of the original. The balance is off, the shapes are wrong, and there's an unmistakable sense that something's missing. It's like the cheap knock-off gowns that appear every year after the Academy

Awards.

Yes, you can have the fabulous dress that Penelope Cruz wore! Except the cheap version usually ends up looking like an okay-ish prom gown.

You'd be better off going to the local vintage clothing store. At least you get a dress that still has its original character.

You could drop the price on an original piece, but that sends its own unfortunate message. Quality buyers get suspicious when they see a price that's too low. What's wrong with it? Substandard materials? Poor production?

The price has to be in proper alignment with the quality of the piece and the person who makes it.

That advice is hard to take. You need to earn a living. But pricing creative work is like dating—the scent of desperation is only attractive to vampires.

Selling creative work is also like dating—if you don't see good prospects, you're in the wrong place. Move on.

Use your head, but trust your instincts When you know who your ideal customer is, you have a strong sense of how they think—what delights them, what bugs them, and what they really, really want. All the marketing books in the world can't replace that kind of understanding.

What they really, really want is a function of emotion. They feel good when they buy directly from you. It's cool—you're cool. Your work makes them feel sophisticated. It makes them feel special.

There are theories to explain the emotion and techniques to help you enhance that feeling, but sometimes the complicated logistics get in the way. Sometimes it's best to just be human—to exercise empathy and meet your customer where they are, instead of trying to pull them to you.

So let's take those three experiences and combine them to craft a basic marketing plan.

### **Marketing 101 revisited—the creative version**

- Make excellent work. (Practice. Learn new things. Practice some more.)
- Don't sell yourself short—price your work properly.
- Sell in the right places.
- Sell to the right people.
- Don't overthink it. People are emotional creatures. Let your creativity and empathy help guide you.

Wanting to get it right drives you to do better, but it doesn't matter whether you're trying to learn something or get your message out—pushing too hard drives you crazy.

You might think marketing is just another skill, like learning to roller skate, but that's not true. Marketing is a multi-faceted activity. So much of you is wrapped up in your work, you can't separate yourself from your marketing. And you shouldn't, because you is what helps sell your work.

Marketing isn't just a matter of following a recipe. It's an organic process. If you approach it that way, it feels more natural, and more like a part of your creative process.

Just remember: don't try too hard.

# Lessons Learned from a Job Interview Gone Wrong

Once upon a time, a long time ago, I had a job interview. It was a technical writing gig. I can't recall the name of the company.

My throat tightened the minute I saw the sea of cubicles. I got downright jumpy when I met with the interviewers. There were two of them and me, in a small room. I suspected they were recent university graduates, and it quickly became clear they were both big fans of pre-programmed conversations.

They asked a few perfunctory questions, then started on the hypothetical quiz section. How did I feel about office politics? Could I give examples? How did I feel about the situation I encountered?

It was like I'd been sucked into *The Matrix*. I found myself fighting a nearly irresistible urge to bolt for the door.

*"I'm not comfortable gossiping about a past job to get a new one. If I were the type, I'd give you my unvarnished opinion of the self-important jerk who took credit for someone else's work, and exactly how that poisons a workplace. And if you're asking me that question, I have to wonder what kind of culture you have here."*

But I didn't say that out loud.

I gave them a sanitized version of the story, reluctantly jumping through their hoops, the desire for a cleansing hot shower growing stronger with every word.

## **Then things got interesting**

When they finally got to the big question—why I wanted to work for the company—I did the unthinkable. I deliberately blew the interview.

"I don't want a career. I want to do work I'm passionate about."

I can't remember if they asked me about writing.

I do recall two very clear realizations: first, I could never work in Cube Land again. Second, and this was striking: way too many job interviews are stellar examples of how to not get your message out.

**Put the textbook down, and back away quickly**

Far too often, marketing, like a bad job interview, becomes a meaningless ritual. You go through what you think are the correct motions. You sanitize your words to mimic corporate-speak, because corporations are successful, so you figure that's the way it should be done. Formal. By the book. Non-threatening.

You tell people what you think they want to hear. You don't dare talk about what you can't – or won't – deliver, because you might not get the business.

You water down who you are and what you really want to do.

You settle, too fast and too easily.

And you end up miserable.

**A big opportunity and a big decision**

A couple of years later, I had another interview. This one was for a vice president's position at a small company that did cool creative work. I must have made a good impression, because shortly after the meeting they called and asked if I could come in for a few days, to see if it was a good fit before everything was finalized.

I thought hard, but not long. I didn't want to admit it and lose out on the opportunity, but I knew even before the offer was made I'd rather be in the shop making stuff than in the office talking about it.

I turned it down.

The salary and the title were very tempting. But I knew I couldn't give them what they wanted, or what they deserved. They couldn't give me

what I wanted, either.

I remained self-employed, for a lot less money.

On rare occasions, I still wonder if I was out of my mind.

This much I'm sure of: the source of those choices wasn't madness. What I said was the simple truth, and both times the words just fell out of my mouth. I don't have to fake excitement when I talk about making things, or telling stories, or pushing past stale, stiff, inflicted limitations to do your best work. Because those things matter.

**Where good marketing comes from**

When you talk about the work you're truly passionate about, you don't have to force your words or ideas. That's the place the best marketing comes from, because it's the place the best stories are made. It's good because you mean it. It's good because it's true.

The people who love what you create hear that message, loud and clear. They're listening for it.

# How to Turn a Free Meal into an Extraordinary Brand

Let's go to dinner. My treat. You'll love the restaurant and get something unexpected to take home with you.

Our maître 'd is gracious and welcoming. We immediately feel like honoured guests as he seats us at a softly lit table with a pristine white tablecloth and sparkling silverware.

The room is filled with quiet conversation and easy laughter that weaves its way through the mellow sound of the gleaming baby grand piano in the corner. We settle in and ready ourselves for what's to come.

The chef has prepared our menu.

## **Salad**

The meal begins with pear and walnut salad, chilled to perfection. Artisan-made dishes complement the salad perfectly, and the server delivers it with such subtlety it seems as if the food has materialized out of thin air. We're hungry, but eat slowly, savouring each bite and soaking in the delicious atmosphere of the place.

There's just enough of a pause between courses.

## **Soup**

Next is roasted red pepper soup garnished with fresh oregano and parsley. The aroma and texture are heavenly. The soup is accompanied by a small platter with fresh rosemary bread, roasted garlic, and olive oil lightly flavoured with basil pesto for dipping. We're each presented with side plates and small, beautifully crafted knives to spread the garlic.

Once we've caused the soup and contents of platter to disappear, we wait for the next course, contemplating our Sauvignon Blanc as it catches the light through hand blown glasses. The server hasn't changed the wine, so we anticipate something fresh and flavourful.

We are not disappointed.

### **Main course**

Our now-beloved server delivers unto us lemon risotto with fiddleheads and asparagus, and grilled halibut garnished with lemon and a spring of rosemary.

The vegetables taste fresh-picked, and the fish likely came from the wharf just a few hours ago. We're rendered nearly speechless, except to ruminate on the nature of Nirvana and how sad it is the food probably isn't as good as it is here.

We take a break before moving on to dessert, enjoying each other's company and the sense of ease the proprietors have created for their guests. There's original art on the walls, the lighting is modern but subtle, the chairs are comfortable, and the round table is the perfect size for intimate conversation as well as leisurely dining.

### **And dessert**

We decline ice wine in favour of black tea. Almond cake, topped with delicate slivers of dark chocolate, arrives soon after. We stretch out the final course as long as we can, delaying the inevitable end of our evening.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still with me? Give your head a shake—we're about to make a small change to our feast.

Let's serve our magnificent meal in a cafeteria.

### **Change the context, change the story**

We're greeted by the harsh blue zombie-like tinge and incessant hum of fluorescent tube lighting. That sound is mercifully dampened by the dull roar of the ventilation system.

The walls are concrete, painted some headache-inducing combination of beige and faded red. There's canned music piped in from the ceiling—tinny instrumental covers of hits from the 1980's and '90's.

We pick up our food from a serving line. No courses—get it all at once or get lost. The dishes, cutlery and soup bowls are plastic, and the wine comes in a styrofoam cup.

The ambience doesn't exactly jive with the food, does it.

Let's try another variation: a Country & Western bar, complete with live band.

It's the same meal. Does it still feel like lovingly prepared gourmet fare? You might decide it's exactly the same and try to argue the setting doesn't matter. But how does it feel? And what kind of price tag would you assign to each experience?

Granted, the above shift is a pretty extreme, but you get the point. And it leads to an important question: what "story" do you tell when you show your work to the world?

### **Context tells your story**

Putting your work in the right context has a powerful impact on the way your audience perceives it.

Your story is crafted from more than just what you create. It's how you introduce yourself and your work to your customers—your words, the design of your website, pricing, the venues you choose, even your business card.

### **No detail is a throwaway.**

Your customer may only be able to afford a salad, or she may only want dessert, but if you do it right, she'll remember you and the care you took to create an experience that made her feel like an important guest rather than just another sale.

She may come back wanting another salad—or she might decide she wants a four-course dinner.

### **Create an unforgettable experience**

It's not about how much money you spend—although at some point most of us have to invest real money in our businesses—it's about the thought you put into every aspect of your brand and your marketing message. It's about the story you tell.

Telling a good story isn't about picking a theme and jamming it down the throats of your audience. There's a big difference between funky and tacky, or between elegant and done to death. A good story creates context.

Context creates atmosphere. Atmosphere seeps into the consciousness of your audience. Just like the ambience in an elegant restaurant, the context you create stays with your customers. They associate that feeling with you.

You don't have to turn yourself inside out or agonize over every tiny detail. Just ask yourself: does this complement my work and reputation or detract from it?

***Your brand is every experience your customer has with you and your business.*** When you align your marketing message with the quality and spirit of your work, you create an extraordinary brand.

# The Best Piece of Advice Nobody Ever Wants to Hear

Once upon a time, during one of my unfortunate stints in the world of business administration, I worked in a shared set of offices. One day a woman stormed in, red-faced and angry. She was holding a black velvet board with earrings pinned to it.

“Would you buy these?”

She phrased it like a question, but it was a demand. A furious demand. I discovered she’d applied to a high-end show and the jury rejected her work. She decided to prove how wrong these misguided, awful people were by immediately selling her samples to anyone within earshot. My office was her first stop.

I stammered something about it not being my style, and she left without pressing me further. I was hugely relieved.

Because I lied.

The style wasn’t the problem. The designs weren’t thrilling, but they weren’t bad. There was definitely a market for her work.

The problem was in the execution.

Bits that should have been straight were crooked, pieces meant to match, didn’t. The work was not a good fit for the quality of the show, and the jury decided accordingly.

She didn’t want to hear that.

Nobody ever wants to hear that.

**Criticism stings—even when it’s necessary** We’re protective of our work, and sometimes insecure about our skills. We can be completely neurotic

about our talent—the thing we believe we have to be born with and can never learn. When someone even hints we might need to improve our technique, it can feel like the world is about to cave in.

Sometimes an honest comment can kick us out of a carefully cultivated sense of denial.

Sometimes that hard landing is exactly what we need.

One caveat: criticism has to be constructive, it has to be honest, and it has to be informed. There are plenty of people out there who don't know what they're talking about, but still spew all manner of negativity. If criticism comes from resentment or ignorance, it's just noise.

On the other hand, if someone tells you your work isn't a good fit for her or her venue, she might think it needs improvement, or she might simply mean what she says (maybe because you didn't do your homework before approaching her).

### **The courage to be truly creative**

One of my favourite art school instructors had a brilliant bit of guidance for her intro level students: don't get precious with it.

You can't get better if you get precious. Creativity isn't about playing it safe, and it's not about sticking your head in the sand and pretending the big, bad, critical world doesn't exist. The world can seem cruel at times, but there are people who can see potential and don't want it to be wasted.

They'll tell you the hard truth because they want you to achieve the great things they know you're capable of.

When you commit to a life as an artist, boundaries have to be broken, even if you make one tiny crack at a time. As Leonard Cohen said in "Anthem," "There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."

We all need those creative fissures.

### **Don't take it personally—kick your critical thinking into gear**

No matter where you are in your career, it's important to understand where your buyers are. Your real buyers. The people who will give you money for your work right now. You may aspire to greater things, but if your work isn't ready, neither are the clients.

Readiness comes in stages. Creativity is a continuous process. There is always something to learn. There's no shame in that, and no failure. It's true for every artist, regardless of medium.

**Take the advice and run with it**

The angry artisan found a mentor, who showed her fabrication techniques that completely transformed her work. From what I heard, that connection was made through the organization that rejected her application.

I don't know if that's true, or if she sought him out herself, but she was able to get past her wounded pride and do what mattered most to her. She went on to create a successful business and was able to reach the clients and the shows she wanted.

# Six Marketing Lessons from an Underground Virtuoso

There's an email in circulation. One of those slightly shrill messages that proclaim, "This is a true story!"

Usually they're not true, and usually they contain a punch line with any combination of multiple exclamation marks, all caps, or a massive increase in point size, as if the emphasis makes up for the poor writing (not that I have an opinion or anything).

Often those emails are nothing but urban legends. This time, though, the story is true. The original version won a Pulitzer prize for Feature Writing, written by Gene Weingarten and published in the Washington Post. It was published almost four years ago, but since it's making the rounds—and since the email got my hackles up—it's worth a look from a marketing perspective.

The story—virtuoso incognito Internationally renowned violinist Joshua Bell agreed to play his 18th Century Stradivarius violin (valued at \$3.5 million) in a Washington, DC, subway station. He wore jeans, a t-shirt, and ball cap. Approximately 1,100 people passed him during the morning rush hour. Bell played classical masterpieces for the passing crowd, most of them civil servants.

The impromptu performance was arranged by the Washington Post as "an experiment in context, perception and priorities—as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste: In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend?"

You can imagine what happened.

## **Philosophy in marketing—set the stage**

Weingarten draws to our attention the words of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who said to appreciate beauty, optimal conditions are required.

This is where the marketing monster that sits on my shoulder started jumping up and down, and where I depart from the Washington Post feature to focus on how Bell's subway performance applies to how you showcase your work.

Kant was right on the money. I don't pretend for a minute to measure up to his genius, but here's my take on the experiment.

### **Lesson #1. Market like you mean it**

People are busy. Lives are complicated. Marketing must be grounded in how things are, not how you want them to be.

The world would be a wonderful place if everyone stopped in their tracks at the sound of beautiful music, no matter where it was played. But the reality is we have crowded lives. We're overloaded with information, and it seems there are more people and businesses vying for our attention every day.

We have to filter some of that information out just to stay sane.

A little anecdote: I once walked within a few feet of an attractive, well-dressed blond man, twice within a few minutes. I only saw him in profile, but something tugged at the back of my mind. I dismissed the half-formed thought.

The following day while I was at work, a radio announcer reported that Sting and his partner Trudie Styler had to make an emergency stop in the city while they were travelling, because she had fallen ill.

Fortunately, no customers were in the store when I had my outburst in the middle of folding the Levi's.

I didn't recognize him when I saw him at the hospital. At the time of the encounter, I was in the death throes of a terrible relationship and I had been visiting a friend of my mother's, who just had a hysterectomy. Rock stars weren't exactly drifting through my consciousness.

### **Lesson #2. Strong visual associations make it easy for your customers to**

**remember you**

Use them consistently and use them well. How likely would it be for Joshua Bell's fans to recognize him in a t-shirt and ball cap? In my opinion, not very. People often look different in person than they do in photographs. One person did recognize him, a woman who had seen him live in concert three weeks before his appearance in the subway.

Here's another real-life example that further illustrates the point: I wear a cap, with my hair up, when I walk my dogs. I meet a few people on our trail fairly regularly. Occasionally, I'll bump into one of them in the city. My hair is down, I don't have the dogs, and these people do not recognize me, not even when I begin speaking.

I'm not a celebrity they only see at a distance, I've looked these people in the eye and had conversations with them. Would they know me if my appearance was the same? Maybe. If I had one or both of the dogs? That's far more likely.

In this context, the dogs are my brand. If you'd like to extend the metaphor, they're the company logo. When I change my appearance, the ability for people to recognize me drops drastically.

Associations are important—be true to your brand.

**Lesson #3. Understand customer expectations**

Take a walk in your customer's shoes. Try to see yourself and your business the way they see you.

Who expects to see a virtuoso violinist performing in a subway? What would you think if you saw a musician in that context? I'd think it was a busker, possibly a music student making some extra cash.

I might be dead wrong, but there are plenty of buskers where I live, so it's a logical conclusion.

**Lesson #4. Your customers aren't always experts**

Hands up: how many of you would recognize the sound of a Stradivarius violin in a crowded subway? How many of you could do that in a concert

hall?

Don't expect every customer to be an expert in your medium. Many of them won't be. Take advantage of the opportunity to let them know what you're about. Tell them interesting things. People love to share stories. Give them something to talk about.

#### **Lesson #5. Context matters**

The lesson here is simple: if you present yourself like a busker, people will believe you are one.

I've walked past booths at high-end craft shows because of a poor display. Bad lighting, low tables, or a sulky exhibitor. I've clicked away from poorly-designed websites without even looking at the content.

I once said to a friend, "Don't expect me to care about your work if you don't." (I was referring to the people I just mentioned, not criticizing her). That statement is harsh and ungracious, but it's the dead honest truth. Show your work the respect it deserves.

#### **Lesson #6. Don't expect your customers to just find you—marketing is *your* responsibility**

Imagine the crowd that would gather to see a free concert—not in a concert hall, but in a public space—by Joshua Bell if it was promoted.

People who weren't classical music fans would likely go just out of curiosity, or to get a glimpse of that spectacular violin.

The result of Bell's busking in the subway? \$32.17, including the \$20 left by the woman who recognized him.

#### **Bonus lesson: good writing matters**

Multiple exclamation marks, all caps, or large print in website copy or a newsletter has a certain desperation about it. Save your large print for headlines and leave big exclamations to the comic book writers. (If you read the Washington Post feature, they use all caps—but I suspect it's due to a straight copy and paste from their nicely formatted print version of the story.)

# Why You Should Stop Working on the Cheap

“Makers, when you underprice your work you send a message: handmade=cheap. It’s a bad business plan that undermines your medium.”

The perception of “cheap” I posted the above tweet on March 1st. I followed it up with, “There’s a reason I don’t buy “bargain” art or craft. Cheap = poor quality. Pricing is part of your marketing and part of your brand.”

A thoughtful question followed: at what point does my perception of handmade being cheap change?

The simple answer is this: handmade does not equal cheap. Not by itself. At least, not in my world.

I have a degree in craft. Textiles, to be precise. I have a great appreciation for fine craft as both a designer and maker as well as a buyer, and not just in craft, but also in visual art, music and design.

The perception of value is created by both parties.

## **The key elements of making and marketing**

The critical step is alignment: design, execution, presentation, price, and customer. All of these things combine to create a complete picture. It shapes the perception of value of your work. It becomes your brand, whether you like it or not.

A \$100 price point is undermined by a \$10 presentation.

A \$10 dollar customer doesn’t understand—or care about—top quality work.

Top quality customers expect to pay full price. The best customers want to

pay you.

### **Panic is not a viable business strategy**

When you underprice your work, you leave money on the table, catering to a so-so audience instead of turning your energy and attention to your best customers.

Panic pricing sends a message about your medium. It affects you as well your colleagues. Not much of a creative legacy, and not a great way to strengthen your creative community.

If you need a certain price point, that bread & butter sure seller, plan for it. Instead of underpricing, make work that aligns with that price point, and with the audience prepared to pay it.

### **What “cheap” really is**

“Cheap” is a trap. It distorts your thinking and poisons your creativity. It hamstring your marketing and stunts your professional growth.

“Cheap” creates false expectations. Try breaking out of that mold when you have a customer base that expects the moon for a buck and a quarter.

The worst thing about cheap? Low prices for quality work is a lie. One you tell yourself as well as your customers.

# Marketing is just Marketing—Until it Isn't

“It’s just a product. Get over it.”

I can’t recall where I read those words, but they were intended as advice to artists. I shook my head, snorted, and left the website.

I can’t even remember what got me there, what link I might have clicked, who may have pointed me in that direction, or what search term I could have possibly used to land in the midst of that particular flavour of cynicism.

Not exactly a great way to describe the work that matters most to you, is it.

Sure, you can call an object, or even a service, a product, but the term is most often used to describe things that are mass produced.

A squishy definition isn’t the real problem with the above statement. The problem is its inaccuracy.

## **Great marketing is in the details**

The core concepts of marketing are sound. They can be applied across industries and media, from the largest multinational corporation to the most modest solo artist.

The difference is in how you apply them. The difference is in the details. It’s always about the details.

## **The big companies get it**

Mercedes doesn’t market the same way as Hyundai. They’re both car companies, they use the same media for advertising, but their core customer is different. The price point is different. The sales pitch is different.

Each company tailors their message to connect with those customers. If

either saw their vehicles as “just products,” the focused attention required to develop a marketing campaign in a highly competitive industry would be lost.

The irony is delicious—even mass-produced products can’t be treated as just products. Not if you’re doing it right.

### **Great marketing needs the right approach**

There are plenty of people who will advise you to sell your work the same way as something that rolled off an assembly line. That you should use pushy sales pitches like a late-night infomercial talking head, or tools and techniques that would make the most, um, “enthusiastic” Internet marketer squirm with delight.

Did I just hear your lip curl? Excellent. Glad it’s not just me.

### **What you *do* need to get over**

Taking the business side of your creative practice too personally is never a good idea. Not everyone will like your work. That’s a given. You can’t internalize someone else’s personal taste.

Taking things too personally can stop you cold when it comes to selling, too. That might be slightly not good for business, if you’ll pardon the grammar.

Freaking out about marketing? I could tell you not to, but you’ll freak out anyway. So let your eyes bug out and your pulse race, but don’t let it stop you. That paralytic marketing reluctance is the thing you do need to get over.

### **Business meets personal in a good way**

I’ll hazard a guess that no one can shame you into marketing. Snapping at you to “get over it” might wake you up, but insulting your work in the same breath makes me wonder if the speaker really understands how intimate the creative process can be.

The act of buying is personal.

Think of how you feel when you find that perfect gift (even if the recipient of the gift is also you). It feels personal. And I'll bet you a really good dinner it doesn't feel like you're just buying a product, especially if it comes from the hands of an artist.

So by all means, stand up and proclaim, "My work is not just a product!" It means you respect your work.

Take that respect to your marketing.

**Now get busy**

If your work isn't just a product, then show the world what it is.

Present it beautifully.

Don't underprice it.

Pay attention to the details.

Hang out with the people who get what you do.

Talk about your work. In your own words, in your own voice.

That's marketing.

# The Social Media Cocktail Party: Conversation or Cartoon?

## **Fear and fascination in social media**

Social media is a funny thing. Some people still talk about it like it was invented last week. Despite the vast number of how-to's out there, I still see frustrated comments about people using it badly.

Observed: someone was struggling with people posting their stuff on her fan page without asking. She didn't object to the content, just wished they checked with her first.

I don't know if they were using said fan page to market themselves, or just blundering in without showing a simple courtesy to their host.

"Courtesy" and "host" are good guide words to use when navigating social media.

You can think of it as a far-flung cocktail party, with the expected cast of characters in attendance.

Some of these people you don't want to talk to, but they have a few traits you'll recognize—and might be afraid you'll inadvertently imitate.

## **That guy**

He marches up to you, half-flattened mini-Mohawk, eyes slightly glazed, and jams a brochure into your hand.

"See what I do? Do you? Look at this! You wanna buy this? You do! You really wanna buy this!"

You lean back, afraid to make any sudden movements, a brittle half-smile on your face. When he finally has to come up for air, you make your escape.

"Right. Well. Enjoy your evening."

You flee for the hors d'oeuvres table before he has a chance to unleash a second barrage.

### **The public speaking correspondence course graduate**

You recognize the signs: a little too stiff, like his skin doesn't fit, not quite focused on you because he's busy reciting course lessons in his head. Step 1, step 2, step 3, choreographed without the slightest bit of rhythm.

He says something meant to be an ice-breaker, punctuated by a slightly shrill laugh. He switches topics, talking about something he saw on the news, then pauses unexpectedly, waiting for you to pick up his meandering train of thought.

Look up "awkward" in the dictionary and there's a snapshot of you trying to manage a conversation. He seems like a nice guy—but it's way too uncomfortable.

You politely move on after suggesting he try the dip at the other end of the room.

### **The fangirl**

She's clutching a martini glass, flitting from group to group, bouncing a little as she speaks. You try to keep your face expressionless as you wonder if she might just spontaneously combust.

She lands in front of you and immediately begins gushing about her sales agent. He has a huge international reputation. She can't stop talking about him. Somewhere in there she mentions what she does, but it's hard to pick out the details because every other word is his name.

You take a quick glance at the rubber plant beside you, in case he's hiding behind it, holding a tiny teleprompter. She races off, and you exhale, wondering if you'll survive whoever you might encounter next.

### **The ambassador**

She smiles and extends a hand, introducing herself. Asks what you do, listens attentively to your answer.

She talks about her own work with quiet pride. Wonders if you're familiar with what she does. A little? She fills in the gaps, and tells you a couple of interesting stories.

You suddenly feel like you just ran into an old friend. You're more than pleased to get her gorgeous business card.

How does she do it?

Simple.

### **The magic is in plain sight**

She listens.

She gives the conversation breathing room. The party will still be there tomorrow. And the next day.

She's not afraid to talk about her work, not afraid to let you take your turn at center stage, and not afraid to tell you she's interested in doing business.

She's not trying to win points with anyone, not desperate for attention, not hell-bent to gather hordes of people around her. It's not about knowing the most people, it's about knowing enough of the right people.

She knows word will spread because she makes good work.

She knows people enjoy spending time with her because she treats them with respect.

### **A little character redemption**

The remedy for That Guy? If it shouldn't happen in person, it shouldn't happen online.

Public Speaking Dude needs to take a deep breath and remember people are just people. Like his close friends, the ones he relaxes and laughs with. A script won't work if only one person has a copy.

Spontaneity is better. Not knowing what will happen next just means there's more to discover.

Fangirl? The point of marketing is to allow people to make a connection with her and fall in love with her work, not who's selling it for her. It's great that she loves her online marketplace or bricks and mortar shop, or her online community or favourite A-list blogger, but that name shouldn't overshadow her or her work.

There's getting noticed, and getting noticed.

**A conversation is a living thing**

We can't all be ambassadors or brilliant salespeople right out of the gate.

Speaking as a card-carrying introvert, I can tell you I've made my share of gaffes and to be honest, I'm far more comfortable behind my keyboard than in any strictly social situation. Put me in a party with people I don't know, and I'll be the one wanting to hide behind the rubber plant.

Online marketing and social media are a work in progress for all of us, something that happens to take place with words and images and madly clicking mice instead of face to face.

Practice is required. Relax. One way or another, we're all at the same party.

# Ditch Your Creative Baggage

## **A day in a creative life**

She stares at the half-finished piece on the table in front of her. The twisted bulb, too close to her head, hums and crackles, bathing her tiny studio in a flood of alien light.

The knot between her shoulder blades is hot. She imagines herself bursting into flames, nothing left for the coroner to find but a small, unrecognizable pile of ash.

And that bloody damned thing would still be sitting there, a final, glaring testament to an utterly failed artistic career.

She winces as she straightens up on her stool, rubbing her neck. A headache lurks at the base of her skull.

And right on cue, there's that hollow, spinning place in the pit of her stomach, the familiar, growing panic she feels every time she tries to do something ambitious.

She wants to run, change her name, go to dental school and pretend she never aspired to anything other than the endless joy of being utterly average.

Beats the hell out of being second rate.

She paces the length of her small table, eyeing the piece with disgust. *No one will ever want this. Why can't I get this right? Why can't I get anything right?*

She tries not to think about what she's really thinking.

*Oh, well, mediocre and meta all at once. Aren't we clever?*

About what she really wants.

*Why can't I be as good as—*

She stops, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands.

*I don't want to do this again. I don't want to ever do this again.*

She could quit. Just chuck it all.

No relief there. Not really. She's done it before. That kind of comfort is false.

*Wherever you go, there you are.*

She stands over her work.

*It's better, isn't it? From when I started. Isn't it?*

The answer comes creeping quietly, from somewhere still and deep, slowing her churning stomach as it rises.

Yes.

She frowns. She's done any number of off-the-self-help-shelf pep talks, and none worked. Could it be as simple as just deciding to stop beating herself up?

*The drama queen has abdicated. Huzzah, the peasants are revolting.*

She snorts.

It doesn't matter.

What matters is how this moment feels, right here, right now. The panic has faded.

It's better.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Where you are is the perfect place to start**

There are a myriad of things that can stop you in your tracks. Comparing yourself to someone you see as wildly successful, telling yourself you can't "do marketing," that you aren't smart enough to master the simplest technology.

You can tell yourself other things. Better things.

Truer things.

Things that don't make you feel ill.

Business skills are learned, not bestowed Most of this business we call creativity is about learning, whether it's artistic technique, a new medium, or marketing.

We all start somewhere, learn in different ways and in our own time. There's no shame in that.

"I want this to be better" isn't a reason to stop. It's a reason to push forward.

That desire won't derail you, it's the baggage you bring along for the ride. Ditch the baggage. Do your work.

## A Final Word

I hope you enjoyed this ebook. You can find me at [perceptionsfiltered.com](http://perceptionsfiltered.com) where I write about creativity and critical thinking, and how both of those things impact on marketing.