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A View From the Bay: It's All About Commitment

By Tom Marx and Tom Herndon

Q: What makes an effective marketing partnership?

A: When the commitment to the relationship is senior to the circumstances.

We all know that in order to have a real partnership in your relationships, you have to have partners who are committed to the partnership. Sounds obvious, but this fundamental commitment is too often missing. A commitment to the partnership is necessary, whether we're talking about a marriage, an employee/employer relationship, or the relationship between you and your agency.

(I am using a broad definition of agency here. This could be a traditional advertising agency, a PR agency, an integrated agency or the consultant/specialist. For the sake of simplicity, I'll just use the word "agency.")

Commitment is my life blood. The following statement is taped to the front of my computer monitor so that I can see it every day:

*Until one is committed
there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back,
always ineffectiveness.
Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation),
there is one elemental truth,
the ignorance of which kills countless ideas
and splendid plans:
that the moment one definitely commits oneself,
then Providence moves too.
All sorts of things occur to help one
that would never have otherwise occurred.
A whole stream of events issue from the decision,
raising in ones favor all manner
of unforeseen incidents and meetings
and material assistance,
which no man could have dreamt*

would have come his way.

I have also learned a deep respect for one of Goethe's couplets: "Whatever you can do or dream, you can begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."

—(Attributed to W. H. Murray in The Scottish Himalaya Expedition, 1951.)

For the past 12 years, this powerful reminder has helped guide my life choices. Indeed I've made some bold moves in my life. In my personal life, I ended a relationship in which I was NOT committed, which in turn, opened the door for a new one — one in which a mutual commitment to partnership has been the bedrock of our marriage.

I also declared my commitment to having my business be about providing breakthrough marketing strategies and powerful creative solutions. This commitment has fueled a great passion in me — about the kind of work I do, the people I surround myself with, and the industries in which I am involved.

In fact, I would be so bold as to say that the "genius, power and magic" of my passion (my commitment) has helped The Marx Group become a marketing leader in the automotive aftermarket. It even inspired a new commitment — to become an author! Last fall I completed what I hope to be the first of many books: *Marketing Sucks! (And Sales, Too!)*. (<http://www.marketingsucks.biz>)

WHEN IT WORKS

When commitment is present and the partnership is working, there is a comfort level that allows everyone to relax and focus more on the business at hand. All that surface stuff is eliminated and a stronger relationship is fostered. When the commitment to the relationship takes precedence over the day-to-day concerns about life, communication flows easily.

This means that when a disappointment or breakdown occurs, 100% responsibility is taken by all involved. Assumptions are communicated rather than not. No one tells stories about the other behind their back because each person feels respected and empowered — there is a strong sense of loyalty. Knowing they're not going to be judged, or even worse fired, because of some risky idea gives each person the room for out-of-the box creativity. Laughter and dare I say, fun, happen even under intense pressure and everyday problems and breakdowns find a way of getting resolved.

When a commitment to partnership is present, things seem to flow. However, as you know, relationships require attention to be paid.

WHEN IT DOESN'T WORK

Sometimes, when commitment is NOT so present, changes in the dynamic can be very subtle — communications become fuzzy, bills go unpaid, work gets delegated elsewhere, where there was an open door there is suddenly limited or no access at all, and so on. Things seemed to have changed, it feels a bit more uncomfortable, something's off, but you're not sure why.

One sure sign commitment is at risk is when emotionally, you already have one foot out the door. When things don't go well, your first reaction is to leave the relationship. Those unexpressed upsets or assumptions manifest into ignored phone calls or postponed emails. And listening — to both sides — before jumping to conclusions, goes out the door! Sadly, the need to be right has become a priority and the blame game begins: us vs. them, rather than us vs. the problem.

My Experience

When it comes to the relationships I have had with my clients, I've experienced the gamut of commitment. One client has had an AMAZING, almost devotional, regard for us as their marketing partners; another client was a lot colder, more arm's-length. One (thankfully) former client had zero

commitment to our relationship. And, there have been plenty of variations in between.

You know and I know that sometimes it can feel as if you're spending more time with your agency/client than you do with your spouse. I firmly believe that being around each other is much more fulfilling when a commitment to the relationship come first.

You don't throw your partner in life out of the house and out of your life whenever you have a disagreement (well, at least most of us don't!), so it also makes no sense to throw your agency — your partner in marketing — out of your business because you don't see eye-to-eye on every issue.

Commitment Takes Practice

Commitment is less about faith and more about practice. Here are some every day practices I have found to be very useful:

1. Make sure any assessments you make about your partnership and your commitment are grounded before taking any action — err on the side of commitment.
2. Have your commitment to your relationship stay senior to the breakdowns; to the day-to-day challenges that tend to erode commitment. Think twice about severing a relationship.
3. Stay committed and see how powerful the relationship becomes. Notice how you both benefit by staying with it for the long haul.
4. Above all, keep the doors of communication — and your mind — open.