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Meet the MasterMinds: Jay Conrad Levinson, Guerrilla Marketing Guru



Jay Conrad Levinson is the author of the best selling marketing series in history, ***Guerrilla Marketing***, and 28 other business books. His books appear in 37 languages and are required reading for MBA courses worldwide.

Levinson is a former vice president and creative director at J. Walter Thompson Advertising and Leo Burnett Advertising. He is now the Chairman of Guerrilla Marketing International, a consulting firm serving large and small businesses around the globe, and a marketing partner with Adobe and Apple Computer.

He has written a monthly column for ***Entrepreneur*** Magazine, articles for ***Inc. Magazine***, and on-line columns for Microsoft, Netscape and AOL.

In his most recent book, ***Guerrilla Creativity***, Levinson shows you how to apply creativity to marketing—the guerrilla way. MCNews talked with Levinson about how management consultants can accelerate their marketing results using the creative strategies in the book, including a leading-edge concept called a "meme."

MCNews: What is guerrilla creativity?

Levinson: Guerrilla creativity combines art, the science of human behavior and business sense to create **good** marketing—strategies that will generate enough confidence and trust that people will have good reason to buy your product or service. It drives marketing strategies to their goal.

Too much of marketing today is created to win awards or to dazzle the beholder with cleverness. Guerrilla creativity works to inform rather than entertain. **Creative marketing instills a positive image of you and your services** in the minds of your prospective customers or clients, and motivates them to buy from you.

MCNews: One of your ten insights for marketing creativity is about demonstrating your benefit in a memorable way. What's the best way to do that?

Levinson: Well, it goes without saying that you want your prospects to remember your name, but you also want them to remember what makes you special. What do all your prospects have in common? Imagination. So, the best way to help people recall who you are and why they want what you've got is to create something that appeals to that imagination. A meme is the perfect way to accomplish that.

MCNews: You've described the meme as a powerful marketing advance, a new weapon. What exactly is a meme, and why do you think this concept is so important?

Levinson: A meme is a self-explanatory symbol, word or combination that immediately communicates an **entire idea**. A meme is capable of breaking through today's sensory overload. **Used in marketing, a meme can propel profits to new heights.**

The concept of a meme—it rhymes with cream, by the way—was first developed by Oxford University Biologist, Richard Dawkins, in his 1976 book, ***The Selfish Gene***. He coined the noun meme to describe a unit of cultural information that is transmitted from one mind to another. The dictionary defines a meme as a self-replicating element of culture, passed on by imitation.

MCNews: Can you give us an example of a meme?

Levinson: Sure. What do you think of when you see someone waving a white flag on a battlefield? Everyone knows that a white flag means surrender. It is an instantly recognizable, unambiguous and complete idea. That's a meme. You can probably think of many more memes yourself, like a hitchhiker's thumb, a Red Cross and the mushroom cloud forming from an atomic blast. There are many others. A meme can be either just visual, or a combination of verbal and visual elements.

The important features of a meme are that it takes a reader or viewer just a split second to get the point, like the white flag on the battlefield, it is simple to communicate and it crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries.

MCNews: How does the concept of a meme change the way we think about marketing our services to clients?

Levinson: The amount of marketing that is bombarding people keeps increasing every year, so it's harder and harder to get through to people, and it's harder for them to devote the time to read what you want them to read. A meme can be used as a shortcut to communicating your value in an increasingly overcrowded marketing environment. **Your meme can immediately communicate to prospective clients who you are and why they should do business with you.**

If you do it right, an effective meme communicates your idea instantly, and you have a way of breaking through the clutter. So, you can do less marketing, enabling you to cut your marketing budget.

MCNews: What are some examples of memes used in marketing?

Levinson: One of the best is the Sprint pin dropping, which they've stayed with now for over a decade. Their team did market research that showed what people were most concerned about with a long distance carrier was clarity and communication.

And, somebody pointed out that often people characterize a quiet environment as being so quiet you can hear a pin drop. Using that single thought, they created a graphic representation of a pin dropping for their marketing. When people see this meme, the pin drop, they know it means clear communication.

One of the most successful memes in marketing history is the Marlboro cowboy, who became a symbol for rugged individualism and freedom. I was in England when we introduced the Marlboro Man in Europe, and it was amazing how many Europeans immediately understood its meaning because it represented so many things that they had seen only in movies before.

Notice that the ads don't say much, they usually just show the cowboy and a pack. Other memes that come to mind include the Energizer Bunny, which personifies constant energy, and the Pillsbury Doughboy. I was there when that meme was developed with Leo Burnett. I didn't like his voice much, but he's done a good job of communicating fun and ease. I'd also add the Michelin Man, who does a good job of representing comfort and softness.

MCNews: Is there a difference between a meme and a logo?

Levinson: Yes, a big difference. A logo represents a company, like the swoosh stands for Nike. If an alien landed on earth and saw the Nike swoosh, it wouldn't understand what that swoosh was intended to mean, other than representing a company. But, if an alien saw the skull and crossbones symbol on a jar, it would probably get the idea that something in the jar might be dangerous. So, a logo merely represents a company, but a meme communicates an entire idea.

MCNews: If you wanted to create a meme for a consulting practice, where would you start?

Levinson: I tell my clients that to create a meme, they have to get down to the essence of their idea, to focus more clearly on what it is they want people to do. So a meme is really the lowest common denominator of an idea. This forces people to isolate the core notion of what they are about, rather than relying on special effects or fancy production.

The first step is to list the specific benefits you offer to clients, especially those benefits you provide that are truly differentiated, or that provide you or your firm a distinct advantage in the market. You should search for the benefit or benefits that few others, if any, offer. Base the list on your understanding of the benefits of your services and your research on the needs of your clients.

Then, try to think how your benefits can be expressed visually, or in just a few words. For example, when marketers were looking for a way to communicate the benefit of a new, low calorie, frozen dinner, they came up with Lean Cuisine.

If you are using words to describe your benefits, **don't confuse your emerging meme with a glib, elevator speech.** Your meme must transmit specific information.

So, a consultant could come up with just a brief set of words and visual images that communicate their main competitive advantage. This is the starting point. If you try hard enough, you'll find that every benefit you offer has some visual representation. By creating a long list of possible visual images for your meme, you'll have a wide selection from which to choose.

At this point, you should also create a list of your target client's characteristics. The list could include the need to grow the business, reduce costs, or improve productivity, to name a few. Using the visual and verbal elements of the client's needs and the benefits you provide, you have a great starting point for creating your meme.

The concept of a meme is so new to marketing that some may shrug it off for now, like some did when on-line marketing burst onto the scene. I think that if a management consulting firm comes up with a meme, they will find it's a real boost for them.

I'd add a quick word of advice to those consultants launching new practices. **If you are in the process of naming your practice, try to come up with a name that is also a meme.** You'll find this approach simplifies and can vastly improve your marketing effectiveness.

MCNews: Based on your experience in evaluating marketing plans, what is, generally, the most common area for improvement?

Levinson: Many marketers suffer from a similar ailment, and that's a lack of patience. **Create a sensible marketing plan and then stick with it.** Be patient while the plan takes hold. Over time, the plan may need to be revised, even re-revised. But with patience, you'll see the plan evolve, take shape and have a powerful and profitable impact on your business.

MCNews: How long should a business wait for the plan to take hold?

Levinson: If they're really lucky, three to six months. It isn't unusual, though, for a plan to take a year or so to really pay off. These are broad ranges, of course.

MCNews: What advice would you give management consultants about marketing in these turbulent times?

Levinson: There's a common myth in marketing that suggests that if clients like your marketing, they will buy your product or service. Consultants must remember that this is, indeed, a myth. A consultant may have the best web site, white papers and references, but fail to capture the imagination and trust of prospective clients.

A consultant's marketing program is a door opener, a platform for demonstrating to prospective clients how the consultant can solve a particular problem. But consulting is a high contact business, and what must come next is a personal consultation to demonstrate specifically how your service will bring substantial benefit.

I can't stress enough the importance of the personal consultation in marketing consulting services in these times. What this means is spending some of your precious marketing resources and energy demonstrating and potentially helping clients address some of their issues **before** they hire you.

MCNews: One final question: what's on your personal reading list right now?

Levinson: I read and review a range of business books I get from my agent and others. So, my personal reading list is filled with fiction, your basic beach books. They give me a refreshing break from all the non-fiction.

MCNews: Thanks for your time today and for the great ideas.

More information on Jay Conrad Levinson is available at www.jayconradlevinson.com and www.gmarketingcoach.com.

If you'd like to read more about Jay Levinson's marketing strategies, you should sample these four books: ***Mastering Guerrilla Marketing***, ***Guerrilla Marketing***, ***The Way of the Guerrilla*** and ***Guerrilla Creativity***.