

Short Communication

Marketing case study: How to beat the litterbug

Hugh G. Clarke

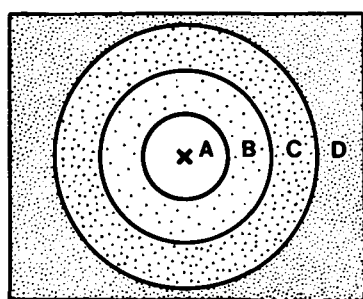
Personnel Manager, Lewis Stores,
Cape Town
68 Dean Street, Newlands 7700, RSA
Accepted 25 July 1979

Litter proliferates in our parks and cities, and even defaces the premises of business concerns. Numerous attempts are made to 'clean up' the environment. Those solutions that succeed, contain some significant 'truths' which are often ignored by the marketing man — although these principles could also be applied to good effect in the field of marketing.

Four principles in action

Placement of the litter bin

Take any park on a wind-still day and examine the pattern of litter proliferation. Within each 'hotspot' or 'traffic-dense' area, you will find a mass of litter . . . Let us assume that in the park, officials place a bin to contain the litter. Figure 1 shows the likely litter 'fall-out' (exaggerated to dramatize what happens):



- X = Litterbin
Area A = Just about all
litter shoved in
bin
B = Much less put
in
C = Just about all
the litter left
lying around
D = None put in

Is there any behavioural 'law' which explains this fall-out pattern? Seemingly, yes!

Principle 1: *'The further from the source, the less likelihood of the message getting through' (whether it is to a litter bin or to the consumer)*

Zipf¹ stated this principle as a law: 'The likelihood of messages passing from one person to another is inversely proportional to the distance between them. The greater the distance, the lower the traffic density'. Gould and White² have commented: 'Communication decays with distance so that the average number of messages and information per person declines with the distance from the source'.

This behavioural principle is often overlooked by the marketer in formulating a marketing strategy. It implies that immediacy in time or space is all-important. In practical terms it suggests: the major market for any retail outlet is *in the vicinity* of the store; investment in point-of-sale display material is worth more than press advertising because the customer is *on hand*; advertising competitions or salesman's incentive schemes must be designed so that the 'participants' can see *an immediate gain* (and not some long-term one), and so on.

Design of the litter bin

One of the reasons for the fall-out pattern shown in Fig. 1 is that it requires *more* effort to walk a long distance to the litter bin than a shorter distance. Indeed, it is quite likely that the individual would not walk right up to that litter bin, but will throw in the rubbish from a short distance much as you would throw paper into a wastepaper basket.

Principle 2: *'The principle of least effort' (Zipf³)*

This behavioural 'law' states that man will tend to expend the least energy possible in performing a task. On this point, Henry Ford is reported to have said: 'If you want to find a better way to do the job — watch the lazy man!' So, in designing a litterbin that will receive maximum intake of litter, do not put on a loose or hinged lid. Reason: it requires effort to lift the lid and that will work against you.

Incidentally, it's amazing how universal this law is. One of the clearest proofs of this principle lies in the language we use. Notice how long words are shortened: omnibus — bus; autocar — car; aeroplane — plane. Short words require less effort. Virtually all words that are used frequently *are* short or shortened — no matter what the language, for example, 'I' (English); 'ek' (Afrikaans); 'ich' (German); 'Je' (French); 'Io' (Italian), and so on.

Many marketers fail to appreciate that this principle is at work all the time. Its significance?

- Product brand names: 'Coca-Cola' becomes 'Coke'
- Customer service: Do not make the customer 'hunt' for that product; she will not
- Shop parking: Your customer hates the effort of looking for parking
- Direct mail: Always include reply-paid coupons with mailing shots to improve the response.

In short, make it easy for the customer to act with the least possible effort.

Our litter bin is now perfect. Except for the birds. With no lid on the bin, the crows, seagulls and other birds fly directly in and steal all the titbits. They make a mess. That is what we are trying to avoid. A swing lid, as used in most kitchen refuse bins, is the answer. Except for the cats and rodents. They jump in after food and cannot get out. So it is back to hinged lids and rubbish bins raised off ground level so they cannot be knocked over by dogs.

Propaganda

What about preventative measures? Like information signs saying: 'It is an offence to leave rubbish lying around in this forestry reserve. Offenders are warned that

strict measures will be taken against anyone who . . .'. Messages which are not read.

Principle 3: *'Limitation of the amount of information that we are able to receive, process and remember'*

Miller⁴ has shown that this is extremely limited. On average, we can remember up to seven items of information, plus or minus two. Off-hand you can probably recall the makes of seven or so cars, soap powders, soup flavours, cool drinks. You may get a few more, probably a few less. The point is your brain is limited: by what it can remember, by the amount of information it can receive and process.

Back to the litter bin: Our long-winded message fails. It is totally ineffective and should be replaced by a shorter one, more acceptable to man's meagre information processing capacity — like 'Please do not litter'.

The significance of this third principle is often ignored by the marketer. It implies that simplicity is the key to success: that a straight-forward marketing campaign, without elaboration, has more chance of success than an elaborate one; that a simple advertising slogan — such as 'Coke adds life' — is better than a complex one; that salesmen should be taught to put across the major product benefits and not everything (which only confuses anyway). This principle can be applied to virtually all aspects of marketing, from market research and surveys to product labels and instructions to users.

Target marketing

Of course, the above measures will not wipe out littering entirely. Some individuals do not seem to care. The few:

that flaming 20% of the population who leave 80% of the rubbish lying around. We have to do something about them — like education, or those terrific television commercials.

Principle 4: was put forward by the economist Wilfredo Pareto⁵. He said: *'A small fraction in terms of numbers will always account for a large fraction in terms of effect.'* This is also known as the '80/20' principle or 'Pareto's Law'.

This 'law' is being used increasingly by the marketer. It implies that about 20% of the firm's product range in number will account for 80% of total sales turn-over; that a few key salesmen will obtain a large proportion of the sales; that as far as his or her customers are concerned, a few 'big-uns' will make up a substantial part of the total business. It is a principle that should never be ignored, yet frequently is.

Like that litter lying around. Like the person who drops it. Like the design of a dust bin. Like 'litterbug' propaganda.

References

1. ZIPF, G.K. Some determinants of the circulation of information. 1946. *Am. J. Psychol.* 59: 401—421.
2. GOULD, P. & WHITE, Rodney. *Mental maps*. 1974. Hammonds-worth, Middlesex: Penguin.
3. ZIPF, G.K. *Human behaviour and the Principle of Least Effort*. 1949. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
4. MILLER, George A. *The psychology of communication*. 1967. Hammonds-worth, Middlesex: Penguin.
5. PARETO, W. *Cours d'Economic politique*. In: *Stock control: The profit booster*. (ed.) Van Wijk, L. 1979. *Foresight*, pp.18—25.