

## To Market, to Market...

*David Seppala-Holtzman*

Dan was desperate. His business didn't have a cash flow; it had a cash gush. And the gush was decidedly in the wrong direction. Dan was the owner, CEO, CIO and all of the other chief things of Daniel's Dentifrice, a toothpaste company in the mold of Tom's of Maine. The one and only piece of good news is that Dan had recently got the local drug store to carry his product. This good news was tempered by the fact that the local drug store was about to go out of business.

Dan was so desperate that he decided to enlist the help of his brother-in-law, Rex. Dan disliked nearly everything about Rex, starting with his name. Parents should never name their little boys Rex, he thought. Children so named grow up with delusions of grandeur. Worse, they tend to be destructive because they confuse their name with "wrecks." To top it all off, Rex was in marketing, a field that Dan considered shameful. The job of marketers, Dan thought, was to convince people to act against their own self-interest by means of deception. All of this notwithstanding, Dan needed Rex's help.

After listening to Dan's sad tale, Rex responded with a slap on the back. "Danny boy, of course I'll help you! After all, blood is thicker than water!" This was a trifecta of negatives. Dan disliked back slappers, hated being called "Danny boy" and couldn't believe that Rex was so dumb as to believe that in-laws were blood relatives. Nevertheless, these were desperate times so Dan stifled his reaction. "Thank you, Rex, I really appreciate it," Dan managed to say calmly.

One week later, Rex dropped by with a script for a radio advertisement. As Dan read it over, his spirit sank to a new low. "Oh my God, Rex, are

you trying to get me sent to prison?! You know that the FCC doesn't allow false advertising."

"Calm down, Danny boy. There is not a single false statement in that script."

Dan didn't know where to begin. "Let's start with: '*There's never been a better time to try Daniel's Dentifrice.*' How can I claim that when today is no better than yesterday or tomorrow to try my toothpaste?"

"Precisely." responded Rex, "I didn't claim otherwise. This is a very common trick. I've negated a comparative. 'Not better' does not mean 'worse.' If I say, 'not less than three,' people think that I've said 'greater than three.' In fact, that statement really means 'greater than *or equal* to three.' Here, saying 'there's never been a better time' is perfectly consistent with every day being equally auspicious."

"OK, but what about the claim that Daniel's Dentifrice is the fastest growing company in America?!"

"Well, didn't you go from having no outlet to having one? That's an infinite percent increase. Surely no other company can claim growth of that magnitude."

"And here you claim that I am offering coupons so that you could save up to 75%. You know I can't afford to do that. Moreover, you mention possibly adding an additional 25% off. You know that discounts aren't additive, they're multiplicative. If one were to offer 50% off and an *additional* 50% off, that doesn't make the product free. It makes it 75% off. "

"Two key phrases here, Danny boy. I said '*could save*' and '*up to 75%.*' That is perfectly consistent with a customer saving zero percent. Really, the only way that you could violate that statement is to give a customer a discount *greater than 75%*. By saying '*up to,*' I have placed

a *ceiling* on the amount that could be saved, not a *floor*. People fall for that all the time. And regarding the additional discount, can I help it if people misconstrue that?"

"And Rex, you go on to claim '*No toothpaste brand has more fluoride than Daniel's Dentifrice.*' You know that we all have the same amount of fluoride."

"There's that handy-dandy negated comparison again, Danny boy. Works every time!"

Dan didn't know what to do. On the one hand, he truly disliked the thoroughly sordid nature of this entire enterprise. He would be deceiving people without technically lying. He didn't feel that this small loop-hole really absolved him of guilt. Rex's parting argument that magic acts work by way of misdirection and we don't accuse magicians of evil-doing didn't salve his conscience. On the other hand, Dan truly was desperate. And so, after a spirited internal debate, Dan ran the commercial.

Within two weeks, his business turned around. Cash was finally flowing in the right direction and a large drug store chain picked up his product for distribution. Dan ran the ad several more times and things kept getting better. He was simultaneously happy and unhappy about all of this. Finally, once he had recouped his entire investment and made quite tidy sum on top of that, Dan sold his business to Rex, at a discount, of course, to compensate him for the commercial.

Now, with time on his hands and money in the bank, Dan wrote a book, "*Caveat Emptor: Don't Be a Mark for the Marketer*," in which he detailed all the dirty tricks he had learned from Rex.

The royalties from the book were sufficiently large that Dan could retire comfortably. He was now financially secure and his moral compass was reset to True North.

#### Epilogue:

Both Dan and Rex were both doing quite well financially, profiting handsomely from opposite sides of the same coin. The two men, each having taken the measure of the other, developed, if not a friendship, at least a mutual understanding. It was in this spirit that Dan invited Rex to lunch. Walking to the restaurant, Dan stopped and pointed to a 99 Cent store. The sign in the window read, "All Merchandise is 99 Cents and Up." "I dare say, that sign could legitimately hang in the window of our local Mercedes Benz dealer," Dan remarked. Rex smiled. "It could, indeed, Danny boy, it could indeed."