

At the dawn of a new year after a restful holiday, I can't help but reflect on all the great gifts I enjoyed over the holiday season and throughout the year. This despite it being the most challenging year ever, having lost my wonderful wife, Carolyn, to cancer in April 2019.

I refer to family, friends, my Page Zero colleagues, and the many opportunities for growth that lie ahead.

Carolyn and I - at one time staunchly in the "don't own a vacation home" camp - wound up, against all good sense, executing on the Impossible Dream (perhaps you might call it the Canadian Dream) - building a modern cottage on a wonderful lot overlooking the Bay of Fundy (pictured below, as a work in progress a year ago at low tide). Even in her final weeks, she was going over the furniture layout with me, around the same time as she helped her mother plan the layout of her new apartment in a comfortable retirement residence.



Figure 1: A place to do some serious thinking and napping.

My cottage neighbours are quite the characters. Along with the "welcome to the Point" hand towels, I received a wonderful gift on Dec. 21 at an annual Solstice Party. The gift? Insight.

I got to talking with a Santa-Clausy-looking man (a cottager round the other end of the Point) who, at first glance, seemed certain to introduce himself as a retired steelworker and steadfast member of

the United Steelworkers of America. Other theories I entertained were that he was a fashionably rumpled Hollywood director. Possibly George Lucas' half-brother! (Better beard than Lucas.)

None of the above, apparently. He'd run businesses in at least three verticals (lumber, travel, and farming) and was also very good with his hands and the trades, apparently. In retirement, he was a specialty homebuilder and general contractor. I marvel at people like this.

Best of all, every time I mentioned one of our clients, he seemed to be an avid customer of theirs!

Names will be changed in a feeble attempt at confidentiality.

I mentioned one of our flagship clients, Newark-based All Things Edible, and he went on and on about how much he loved ordering from them. That resonated with me - for many years, ATE had been making a special effort to offer good Canadian shipping options. The price and quality often outshone local retailers. Then he told me this: he was really upset with the remarketing ads quite a few years back. "In fact, I got the company's President on the phone! I was really impressed at how he listened to me!"

"Ha, ha, you talked to Jeremy? Wild!," I sputtered. "I think I remember the immediate response to that feedback, and feedback like it," I mused.

An enlightened advertiser, Jeremy held fast to his decision to "put remarketing on a tight leash" (impression caps! personally, I'm a big fan). We also worked with a consistent directive: "don't hammer them." "Don't hammer them (the user)" meant definitely don't show remarketing ads for two days after the website visit.

This common sense was later forgotten by some other agencies and technologies that replaced us (all told, we worked for this client for about ten years). There's a lot of incentive for "attribution sniping," burying high-bid Audiences in places where clients and bosses don't think to look. One third-party tool and/or the team that enabled it allowed those bid multipliers to go all the way up to the max - 900% - in some cases.

The man then heard about our client Little Mermaid, a cult bricks-to-clicks brand that sells all kinds of building materials, heavy equipment, and parts and accessories for same, to small contractors...and to individual building and heavy equipment enthusiasts who build and repair things as a "hobby." "LITTLE MERMAID!," he exclaimed. "They're"

"Good or bad?," I gulped.

"I love Little Mermaid!," he reassured me. "They're doing a great job with their advertising! And the website works great!"

"Well..." I replied nonchalantly. "Big improvements to the online experience are coming in 2020. Plus we'll be refining that advertising."

"But you know who I can't stand?," he countered. "Gargantuan Tire."

“Hmmm, but they are improving. Many people say that,” I ventured, charitably.

He grumbled.

“I’m part of a group that gives feedback on their ads. You can tell them things, but they ignore them.”

Interesting. A gaggle of marketers who “listen” to the consumer, have meetings, and then fight across their siloes to gain credit from top management, alienating the consumer. Sound familiar?

The Talking Cure

To find out about that consumer, all they really needed to do was to talk to one. One. Really converse with them about their online experience – especially how the ads feel to them, and what the consumer’s breaking point is. I mean really, so what if you don’t like an ad?

What *does* my neighbor plan to do about it? “Never buy online from Gargantuan Tire again. Ever.”

Perfectly sensible in this case. Gargantuan Tire is a hardware store. It has to compete with Behemoth Depot, Homa, and the like. What it has to offer is a commodity. What they’ve always offered in their offline incarnation, and the only way they keep going, is to be liked and likeable. It’s about the same for your local Red Hardware, those folks that help homeowners with expert advice.

Online, Gargantuan Tire has spent nearly 20 years not being likeable. That’s a major disconnect. So: bye-bye.

But now I’m wondering if the theme is that a consumer like this just doesn’t like remarketing ads, banner ads, Facebook, and the like. Nope!

“I was having a really hard time finding something. I’m building a home for a couple in town. Nice couple. They’re obsessed with all this mid-century modern stuff. Problem is, it’s nearly impossible to find the original hardware.”

Nearly.

“So this incredible specialty distributor out of Montreal, Clairvoyant Distributors, shows me a banner ad. The products they can source fill a huge void! I’ve been buying from them ever since.”

So the verdict is in. It might contradict the “data” you’ve been analyzing, but that’s only because you don’t have all the necessary data. You aren’t interpreting behavior properly. More isn’t better, despite what the old traditional TV “reach and frequency” orthodoxy might indicate (pssst...this isn’t the idiot box). Silo-people in an email or Facebook department on the marketing team shouldn’t be so eager to get credit for their work that they alienate the customer by “hammering” them.

It's a two-way street

Consumers don't like it when the ad you show them is repetitive. They don't like it if it isn't useful. But they're relying on advertisers to find them. It's just easier to shop if both sides put in a little effort.

You won't realize that, necessarily, if you pore over data on your own, or if, as a company, your orthodoxy is solely internal meetings about what "we" want consumers to do next. What about "them"? (This was even a principle in an ebook I wrote - The Google AdWords Handbook - back in the paleolithic age...yes, I'm paleo. The principle was about the tone and vernacular of ads, even in niche or B2B fields. "Avoid insider thinking.")

You can get this kind of insight, lurking unassumingly behind an ugly Christmas sweater, by talking to a single consumer. One.

Next week, I'll explore a report readily available in Google Analytics that does a similar thing - if you aren't feeling like meeting any new people this week.

I really enjoyed the IRL, interactive experience talking with my Focus Group of One. Bringing Nanaimo bars to the party, Nanaimo bars I would have rather kept to myself? My mistake.