

Limits of Transparency: Keeping Our Corporate Clothes On

Transparency is a word and concept in widespread use in business culture. For better, *and* for worse.

John Wooden once said, “The true test of a man’s character is what he does when no one is watching.” But it’s also what you do when everyone is watching. And everyone is watching, all the time, and our entire business culture has embraced it. We are pitching it. As companies, are we baring too much for all to see?

The Internet and smart phones have turned our world into a living candid camera that hit us like a tsunami, and the waters have yet to settle. Now is the time to ask ourselves “How deep do we want to settle?” In our day-to-day personal branding and business relationships, we need more than ever to create our boundaries of transparency.

Doing business is all about relationships, and the fast pace of change made it harder than ever. So we began using transparency as a tool to build these relationships. How great is transparency when companies are trying to build *new* relationships?

In my corporate sales and marketing days, we sold ads on Google, Yahoo and Bing with tracking numbers and call recording to show transparency with the facts. We feverishly pitched every potential client our transparency in order to grow our company and meet monthly quota. It was our sales technique, but some days I felt like I was a corporate prostitute. We were overly proud to say we were “transparent.”

It was the “flavor of the day.” And to add to it, we were “sexy” and “relevant” just by saying so.

I once remember a customer wanting \$40 in clicks credited to his account because not one of those clicks turned into a phone call. Tracking numbers and call recording are transparency at it’s worst. It was rarely a good thing. “The customer is always right.” We wanted their business so they didn’t go to the next guy. Has transparency destroyed the good ole’ ideals of trust and loyalty?

The facts don’t lie. But sometimes when the facts are undesirable facts to the consumers, and they are the same for any situation, with any company, the consumer goes to the next guy...and then the next.

Let’s ask ourselves these questions:

- Does excessive transparency impact consumer respect and loyalty?
- Have we unwisely trained clients and customers to expect transparency in everything we do?
- Do we participate in the misuse of transparency by not setting appropriate boundaries?
- Back when things weren’t so transparent, did we care more? Did we have more of a conscience?
- Could we trade some transparency for a new [old] world of trust and where salespeople can operate with dignity?
- Does excessive transparency set consumer expectations too high?

The lifespan of transparency is running its course, yet we continue to pitch this concept for the appearance of progress. How does this improve business processes, generate revenue, and be a part of the business trend? We adapted to transparency very quickly but we are all un-adapting too slowly.

A certain amount of transparency builds trust, but too much transparency can tear it down. Especially when we don't have control over the facts, transparency can ruin a perfectly good relationship.

Transparency. "Another good idea ruined by the facts."

*This commentary does not pertain to the companies that aren't transparent enough or not at all, or to companies transparent to their customers but not their employees. They should be asking themselves a whole different set of questions.