



MARSHALL LAGER,
JANUARY'S CHIEF REBEL ANGEL OFFICER

Pint of View

The Devilish Drift

Watch your step on the slippery slope

JUST WHAT are we willing to do for money? It's a question that gets asked fairly often, usually in a truth-or-dare setting, but it's relevant to the whole concept of business. The question speaks to what value we assign to objects and actions, and is really the basis of commerce. What we buy as well as what we sell tells a story about us.

I recently ran across an auction on eBay for a human soul (in the form of a certificate). To entice buyers, the following descriptive text appears:

"What you are purchasing is a certificate that states 'Human Soul Of [Seller] Is Now and Forever the Property of (Buyer).' You will also be purchasing my handwritten journal to be sent out 29 days after purchase. I will also listen to and consider all of your life advice and participate in the religion of your choice (free service with purchase)."

The current bid for this priceless gem? Twelve bucks, plus \$3 shipping and handling. (Classic!) Here we have an entrepreneur identifying a commodity and putting it on the market. Unfortunately, he didn't really think things through, as evidenced by the low bid. In fact, this image inspired the following conversation between my girlfriend and myself:

Meaghan: "Participate in the religion of your choice?"

Marshall: Well, he is selling his soul, ya know.

Meaghan: Yes. But changing religions for \$12? There are easier ways to get \$12.

Marshall: Agreed. He should have set his reserve higher.

Clearly, the opportunity isn't right. Souls are easy to find, and TV and movies show us that people will offer their souls for sale at the drop of a hat. It's a buyer's market. Offering to change religions isn't a premium or special promotion, it's standard. What this joker should be doing, I regret to say, is something a little

more dishonest. Souls may be in plentiful supply, but what does one look like? You don't know. Nobody knows. James Brown, the Godfather of Soul, doesn't even know. So what you do, see, is you sell the same soul over and over again! Giving out a certificate of ownership is folly: Leave no paper trail and you're free to operate. Hey, as long as you're selling your soul, there's no reason to be scrupulous about it.

Selling your soul doesn't have to be an actual transaction, of course. In fact, most of the time it isn't, and is really a metaphor for the premise I started with: What are we willing to do for money? Or fame? Or power? Or security?

Businesses exist to earn money, but they can't do it without customers. The difference between success and failure is often whether those customers are enthusiastic about the company's products and services, or merely grudgingly accustomed to using them. Good businesses lose the power of their reputations as soon as they begin to drift from delighting customers to

taking advantage of them—selling the corporate soul.

For example, there's a coffee company out there (call them Ishmaels) that used to be a delight, and now is a source of sub-standard, overpriced coffee cranked up with sugar and frills, not to mention snippy baristas with an inflated sense of their own importance. I was never a big fan, but I used to think they were at least a good business. Now I merely accept their presence, like death and taxes. I'll give them my money when necessary, but always with the feeling that I'm feeding a beast.

Unrestrained greed, believing your own hype, forgetting who it is that makes you a successful business, the Dark Side are they. Beware the Dark Side. ☠



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MARSHALL LAGER,
SEPTEMBER'S CHIEF FASHION OFFICER

Pint of View

The CEO's New Clothes

The polo shirt is great, but the company sucks

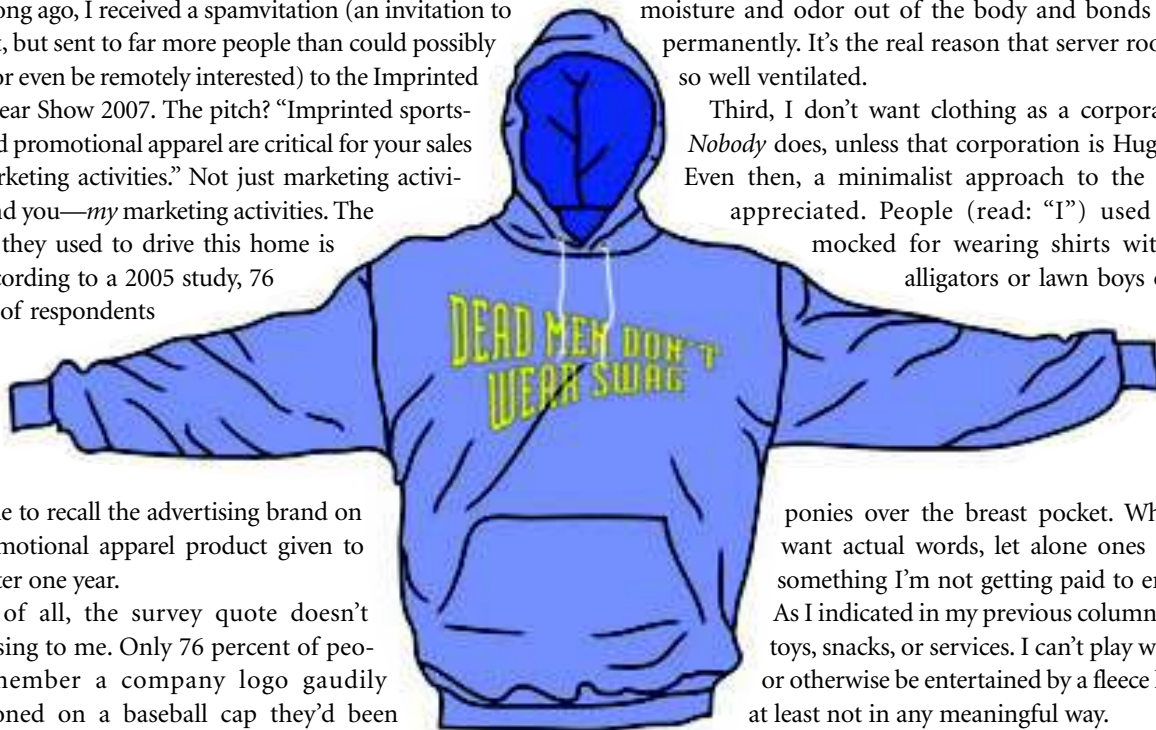
AFTER WRITING July's column on corporate bribery (the laugh riot "What Have You Done for Me Lately?") and August's on the nature of corporate name-branding ("Capital Ideas"), I realized I needed to make an important counterpoint: corporate clotheshorses.

Not long ago, I received a spamvitation (an invitation to an event, but sent to far more people than could possibly attend, or even be remotely interested) to the Imprinted Sportswear Show 2007. The pitch? "Imprinted sportswear and promotional apparel are critical for your sales and marketing activities." Not just marketing activities, mind you—*my* marketing activities. The statistic they used to drive this home is that, according to a 2005 study, 76 percent of respondents

the choir, marketing to people who have no ability to buy, or enabling the poor fashion choices of geeks. None of these are exactly contributing to the betterment of civilization.

Besides, even the relatively high-quality clothing of this kind seems to be made of a fabric that actually draws extra moisture and odor out of the body and bonds with it permanently. It's the real reason that server rooms are so well ventilated.

Third, I don't want clothing as a corporate gift. *Nobody* does, unless that corporation is Hugo Boss. Even then, a minimalist approach to the logo is appreciated. People (read: "I") used to get mocked for wearing shirts with little alligators or lawn boys or polo




were able to recall the advertising brand on the promotional apparel product given to them after one year.

First of all, the survey quote doesn't exactly sing to me. Only 76 percent of people remember a company logo gaudily emblazoned on a baseball cap they'd been given? That's pretty sad. If I get an article of clothing, I like to know what it looks like, both by itself and in relation to the rest of my wardrobe. It's bad enough to see somebody wearing a cap with the logo of Head, an athletic-apparel company—you get the feeling it's a parts label in case of accidental decapitation. Combining it with a Miller Lite "Great Taste. Less Filling" T-shirt is far worse.

Second, I don't accept the premise that logo-laden swag is strong marketing. Not counting Tiger Woods and his 14 Nike "swooshes" per ensemble, the only people I know who wear these things are technology personnel, fellow journalists, employees of the company itself, and people at trade shows. It's preaching to

ponies over the breast pocket. Why do I want actual words, let alone ones touting something I'm not getting paid to endorse? As I indicated in my previous column, I want toys, snacks, or services. I can't play with, eat, or otherwise be entertained by a fleece hoodie, at least not in any meaningful way.

I'm no stranger to this sort of marketing. I grew up as the son of a film industry executive: If a movie was being released in the U.S., I was probably getting a shirt, hat, or poster. At least it made sense in that context; promotional material from *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* might not fetch much on eBay today, but, at the time, the shirt for it started conversations about the movie, and might have influenced people to go see it. What are the odds that the guy next to you at the doctor's office is going to care about the newest database from CodeMonkey.com? 

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