

# The Big Lie

BY CHUCK MCKAY

The Big Lie. A simple concept. Make a statement. Repeat it. Repeat it until people accept it as true.

Only one thing wrong with The Big Lie. It doesn't work.

Its been tried by governments, and advertisers, and employers, and spouses. The Big Lie doesn't make people believers. The Big Lie is recognized as a lie when it contradicts their experiences.

You see, statements are only accepted as true when they align with other statements that people have already accepted as true. If there's an intellectual, or emotional conflict, people reject the new statement. They mentally catalog it as a lie.

So, if you, Mr. or Ms. Advertiser, make any statement in your ads, prospective customers are going to weigh that statement against that which they already know to be true. Does your claim resonate with truth, or does it cause dissonance within their minds?

If your ads do not reinforce what potential customers believe about your business, you're wasting your ad budget.

No one cares what you think about your business.

Let me offer an example.

When I was a much younger copywriter, working for a local radio station, one of our salespeople brought an assignment:

*"My client, a local pool hall, wants to build more family business. Make us some ads showing families having fun playing pool on Friday nights."*

I wrote a series of three ads, in which kids told stories about actually enjoying their parents company. We got some good child actors to play the parts,

recorded the ads, and made sure that the schedule offered enough frequency to make some impact for the advertiser.

The ads bombed.

Of course, it might have helped had the salesperson, or even the client, thought to mention that a local motorcycle gang used this establishment as their meeting place. There were so many chopped hogs, chains, and tattoos in the parking lot that any family who packed up the kids and drove to the pool hall would never let them out of the car.

The advertiser was well aware of his current clientele. He desperately hoped advertising would bring in people he wanted as his customers.

If his business had been brand new, that might have worked. Unfortunately, he had an existing clientele and an existing image. And, not only does no one care what you think of your business, they don't care what you want them to think about your business either.

Does it matter that you believe you're telling the truth, when your prospects don't? Sorry. Their perception is your reality. Did those families who found a parking lot full of motorcycles care that the owner didn't think of his place as a biker hangout? They didn't. They recognized The Big Lie. NO ONE CARES what YOU think about your business.

Now, if your ad sounds true, it has a chance. The more familiar that new statement sounds, the more comfortable people are accepting it. Jeffery and Brian Eisenberg put it this way in Call To Action – Secret Formulas To Improve Online Results:

*“Words and phrases that look or feel familiar will have more of an impact on people than the unfamiliar ... Too often, people talk or write the way that makes them feel comfortable and ignore what is necessary to make the audience ... be open to the message.”*

Step back and take an objective look at your ads. From your prospective customer's point of view, do your ads resonate with truth, or do they it cause

dissonance and discomfort? Make them uncomfortable enough, they'll assume you're lying. And when prospects believe you lie, they don't buy.

From time to time an advertiser will assume that if he tells The Big Lie, the "sheeple" will do what they're told and come buy from him. When they don't flock to his door, he blames the advertising. He's right. Those ads don't work. People are not stupid. They don't trust advertisers who lie to them.

Still, when there's enough money riding on new sales, it's relatively easy to start believing what you want to believe.

It's a simple thing, isn't it? You hire a new agency, buy a TV campaign, get your product featured in the popular magazines. If they can't do it, hire someone who can. No more excuses. Tell The Big Lie.

In the late sixties, GE, NCR, Xerox, and RCA all tried to challenge IBM for the computer mainframe business. They all thought of themselves as electronics manufacturers, and thought of computers as electronics devices.

Unfortunately purchasing agents didn't equate mass-produced television sets with digital computers.

When "*RCA, The Computer Company*" was used as a slogan, the market responded "*Don't lie to me. RCA is not a computer company. RCA is a radio and TV company.*" "*NCR Means Computers*" feels like The Big Lie. It must be a lie. We all know that NCR does not mean computers. NCR means cash registers. IBM means computers.

By the mid 70s GE, NCR, Xerox, and RCA were out of the computer business.

Their computer divisions weren't killed by a competitor's superior product. They were killed by bad advertising. The advertising was bad because it created an incompatibility with the truths already in the minds of the purchasers. "*NCR means computers?*" Sure. Sure, it does.

All through the 50s, the 60s, the 70s, Cadillac was the symbol of success.

We've all heard other things of quality being described as "*The Cadillac of...*"

Unfortunately, it was the symbol of success for old people. The average age of a Cadillac owner was 61. When Baby Boomers went looking for an entry-level luxury car, they bought Saab, or BMW.

GM's solution? Slap a Cadillac nameplate on a Chevy Cavalier, and call it the Cimarron. But, wait a minute. Cadillacs are big, they're quiet, they're luxurious. Ask any Cadillac owner. Ask any non-owner. The Cimarron? Not big. Not quiet. Not luxurious. Obviously, not a Cadillac. It's The Big Lie.

It was an expensive lesson. You'd think GM would remember 1982. Nope. Gotta get the sales curve headed up. Gotta expand the market beyond old people. And when there's enough money on the line, it's easier to believe what you want to believe.

In 1997 GM decided Cadillac should make another attempt to capture the younger market. They called this one the Catera, "*The Cadillac That Zigs.*" Humm. A non-luxury Cadillac, with a big price tag, marketed to a younger audience? Bad car, or bad advertising?

Seen any Cateras lately?

Advertising can't help your company by making claims that can't / don't / won't be accepted by the marketplace. Advertising can't fix a broken business... or a broken business plan.

How does Roxio intend to make Napster profitable as a paid download service, when the company's identity is so closely tied to free file sharing? Can they overcome this major intellectual and emotional discord?

Overstock Dot Com may see themselves as a high-end retailer. They can run ads forever claiming "*It's all about the O.*" Bad, out-of-date sexual reference aside, will consumers buy into a luxury image from a company named OVERSTOCK?

As my dear, sweet, saintly old Grandmother, Fanny McKay, used to say:  
*“Wishin’ don’t make it so, and neither do massive amounts of gross ratings points.”*

So here’s what you can do... must do: Make sure your ads build upon what the public believes about your business. Never contradict what they already know.

The only way to do that is to find your customers perceptions of you.

You’re not going to like what you find. THIS is what people really think of my company? I promise, your fist look through their eyes will be painful. Most of what disappoints you, though, will be small stuff. Grit your teeth. Dig deeper.

Find the nuggets... those reasons that your regular customers keep coming back. Find out what your existing customers believe they can’t find anywhere else. Ah. These are the truths you can use to build a long-term advertising campaign.

They’re the truths that a competitor can never take from you.