



(Doing) The Right Stuff

by Ursula Schoenberg

Just for the record: The editor sweet talked me into this. Asking someone working in ‘communications’ (a phrase that was coined when ‘public relations’ started getting a bad name) to contribute something on ‘being honest’ is, some might argue, like asking the Pope to write an article on Safer Sex. And I’m still not sure this is a good idea.

There is a certain irony in the timing here, as I am grappling with a dicey professional issue right now. As a public relations consultant working on implementing marketing strategies, heavy duty ethical questions only started to loom since I moved into the pharmaceutical area of communications, and I was pretty naïve in the beginning. Picture a guppy moving into a shark bay. I have by this time advanced to about moray eel status. To elucidate:

I am, by proxy, working for a pharmaceutical company that is launching a new product which it is marketing at a patient population with a bona fide medical problem—and I have not done too badly off of this client in the last months. However, due to the nature of this illness, in the not-too-distant future the company will be able to expand the existing indication into something that can be marketed as a lifestyle drug, with the promise of an even more captivating profit margin. The expression ‘disease mongering’ hovers over step two of the project (I’ve seen the data), and, viewed dispassionately, the work I do right now is paving the way for it.

So if I have an ethical backbone, I would start to prepare my exit strategy. In recent weeks I have been visited with the ghostly voices of grade school teachers saying “Ursula is not working up to her full potential...”, which I interpret as a sign that I should be re-thinking my priorities. Trouble is, I do like the money, i.e. what it can do for me. I have caught myself rationalizing wisps of ethical qualms that might be cropping up later, along the lines of “well, if people are stupid enough to let themselves be talked into using this stuff...”.

A slippery slope, as was brought home to me on a walk with my little daughter last week. We went out to pick some apples that had fallen off some trees in a nearby farmer’s orchard that is publicly accessible, and I blithely announced that we were going to “steal some apples”. Semantically correct, but pedagogically stupid, as I realized that being honest about not being honest was going to get me into hot water. I visualized myself years down the line trying to explain why it is not a good idea to lift the lipstick from the drug store, but it was OK to take those apples back then.

If being honest is, as one of my dictionaries defines, being ‘marked by firm adherence to a code of moral or artistic

values’, I’m not doing too well on the moral front right now. I fare marginally better on the second point. In Dorothy Sayers’ novel ‘Gaudy Night’, when the writer Harriet Vane is asked what she would not lie about in her professional life, she says “...saying that somebody’s beastly book is good when it isn’t”. That’s me, folks. When someone starts to slaughter language, I can be honest to the point of abrasiveness.

So with a little luck my client will get hold of this poignant exploration of my demons and put me out on my ear. Not before complimenting me on my eloquence, of course. And now you know why it can be hard for me to do ‘the right stuff’.

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Worth reading

‘Publishing Clinical Trial Results: The Future Beckons’ by Elizabeth Wager .

(<http://clinicaltrials.plosjournals.org/perlserv/?request=get-document&doi=10.1371/journal.pctr.0010031>)

The author would be interested in any comments which can be posted on

<http://clinicaltrials.plosjournals.org/perlserv/?request=read-response&doi=10.1371/journal.pctr.0010031>

or sent direct to her at liz@sideview.demon.co.uk

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