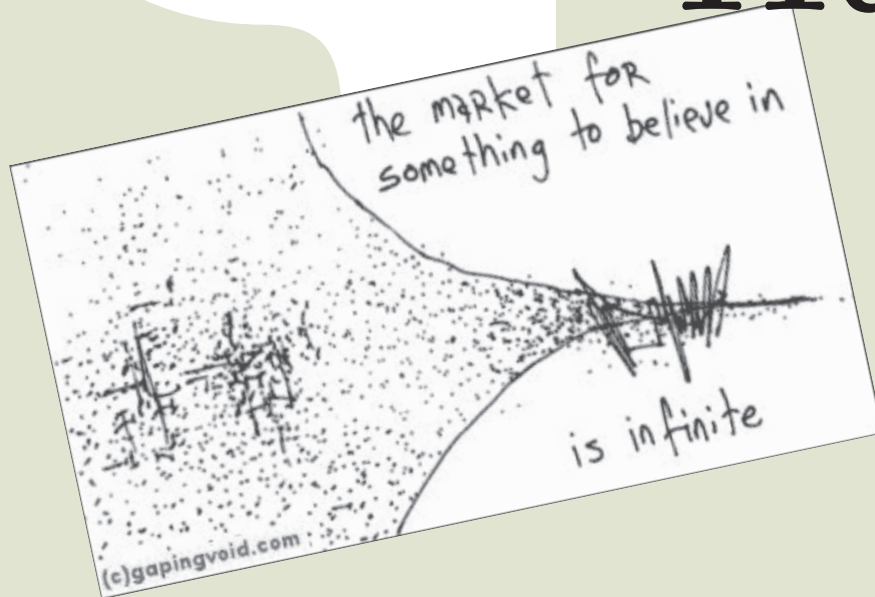


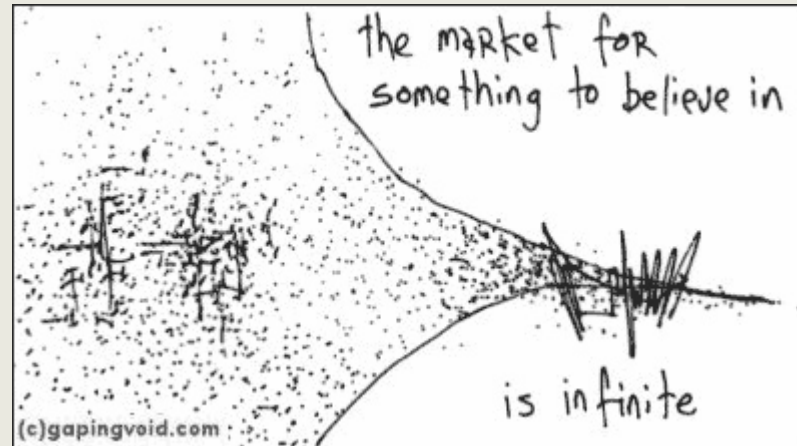
# The Hughtrain



by Hugh MacLeod

## THE HUGHTRAIN:

“The market for something to believe in is infinite.”



We are here to find meaning. We are here to help other people do the same. Everything else is secondary.

We humans want to believe in our own species. And we want people, companies and products in our lives that make it easier to do so. That is human nature.

Product benefit doesn't excite us. Belief in humanity and human potential excites us.

Think less about what your product does, and think more about human potential.

What statement about humanity does your product make?

The bigger the statement, the bigger the idea, the bigger your brand will become.

We have entered an age, the first in history, where self-realization is not just possible for an elite few, but for everyone.

I believe we are living in the beginning of a new global spiritual awakening.

It is not religion. It's everything and everyone around us. It affects Muslims, Christians, Atheists, Hindus, Jews, and Buddhists alike.

## It's **not about merit**. It's about **faith**. **Belief. Conviction. Courage.**

The spiritual implications are staggering.

It's no longer just enough for people to believe that your product does what it says on the label. They want to believe in you and what you do. And they'll go elsewhere if they don't.

It's not enough for the customer to love your product. They have to love your process as well.

People are not just getting more demanding as consumers, they are getting more demanding as spiritual entities. Branding is a spiritual exercise. These are The New Realities, this is Spiritual Republic.

The soul cannot be outsourced. Either get with the program or hire a consultant in Extinction Management. No vision, no business. Your life from now on pivots squarely on your vision of human potential.

## NOTES ON THE HUGHTRAIN: PART ONE

The primary job of an advertiser is not to communicate benefit, but to communicate conviction.



Benefit is secondary. Benefit is a product of conviction, not vice versa.

Whatever you manufacture, somebody can make it better, faster and cheaper than you.

You do not own the molecules. They are stardust. They belong to God. What you do own is your soul. Nobody can take that away from you. And it is your soul that informs the brand.

It is your soul, and the purpose and beliefs that it embodies, that people will buy into.

Ergo, great branding is a spiritual exercise.

Why is your brand great? Why does your brand matter? Seriously, if you don't know, then nobody else can—no advertiser, no buyer, and certainly no customer.

It's not about merit. It's about faith. Belief. Conviction. Courage.

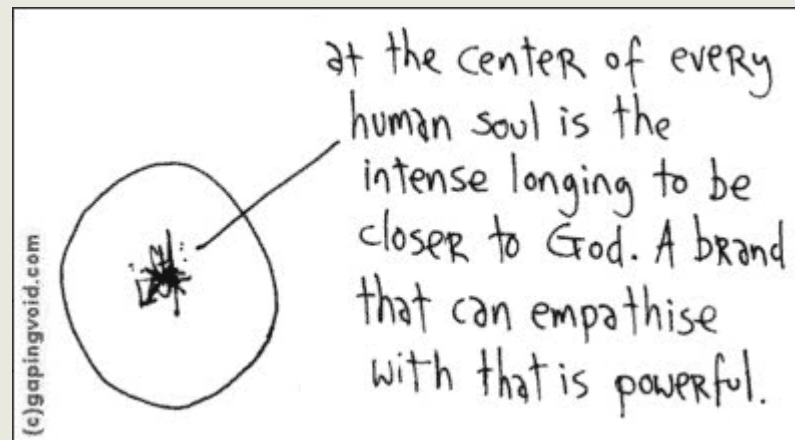
It's about why you're on this planet. To make a dent in the universe.

I don't want to know why your brand is good, or very good, or even great. I want to know why your brand is totally frickin' amazing.

Once you tell me, I can tell the world.

And then they will know.

### : EXPRESSIVE CAPITAL



From now on if anyone asks me why, say, Apple or Harley Davidson are such great brands, all I have to do is show them this “Longing” drawing above.

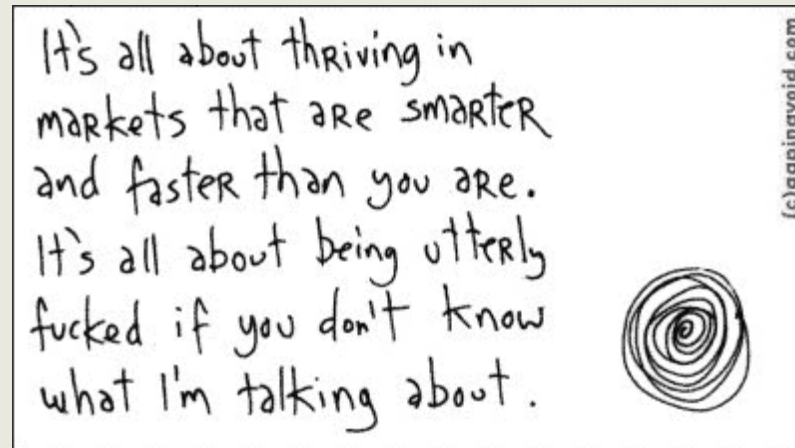
And of course, if anyone asks me why their brand isn’t so hot, again, all I have to do is show them the same drawing.

1. **FIRST WE HAD HUMAN CAPITAL.** You, there! Go to the next village and kill everybody because I’m the Chief of this village and I say so, etc.
2. **THEN CAME PHYSICAL CAPITAL.** Land, property, factories, etc.
3. **THEN CAME FINANCIAL CAPITAL.** Money, credit, dollars, etc.
4. **THEN CAME INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL.** Our widgets are better than your widgets because our engineers are smarter than your engineers, etc.
5. **THEN CAME EMOTIONAL CAPITAL.** People love our product more than they love our competitor’s product etc. This is the space “[Love Marks](#)” play around with so successfully: “A Love Mark is a brand that is loved by its user beyond reason,” etc.

So naturally, I’m thinking, “What next?” How do you out-Love-Mark the Love Mark? Perhaps:

6. **EXPRESSIVE CAPITAL.** Our products make it easier for the end user to find and/or express meaning, narrative, metaphor, purpose, explanation and relevance in his/her own life than our competitor’s products.

“Expressive Capital.” Has a nice ring to it. Heh.

**: THE KRYPTONITE FACTOR**

This “thriving in markets” cartoon above is one of my favorites. Sure, the line sounds good in a meeting. And yes, the client will invariably ask, “Can you give me a good example of what you mean, exactly?”

Luckily, we all now have such an example: I call it “**The Kryptonite Factor.**”

[Robert Scoble](#) mentioned it only a day or two ago [from time of writing]. I [first](#) came across it reading it [here](#).

Here’s how the drama unfolded:

**DAY ONE:**

**KRYPTONITE:** Our bike locks are the best.

**THE MARKET:** Yes, your bike locks are the best.

**DAY TWO:**

KRYPTONITE: Our bike locks are the best.

THE MARKET: Yes, your bike locks are still the best.

**DAY THREE:**

KRYPTONITE: Our bike locks are the best.

THE MARKET: Ummm... yeah I'm sure they are, but what's all this about some [recent video on the net](#) that's supposed to show how you can crack your locks in 10 seconds using a simple Bic ballpoint pen?

**DAY FOUR:**

KRYPTONITE: Our bike locks are the best.

THE MARKET: Hey, I just saw that video on a friend's website. And I'm kinda ticked off because I just paid \$60 for one of your new locks 3 weeks ago, and I'm wondering if a Bic pen can crack my lock or not ... does the pen crack all Kryptonite locks or just one or two models?

**DAY FIVE:**

KRYPTONITE: Our bike locks are the best.

THE MARKET: Hey, I just visited your website and saw no mention of the Bic pens. What the hell are you doing about it? Are you going to fix the locks? Are you going to give me a refund?

**DAY SIX:**

KRYPTONITE: Our bike locks are the best.

THE MARKET: No, they're not. You guys are assholes.



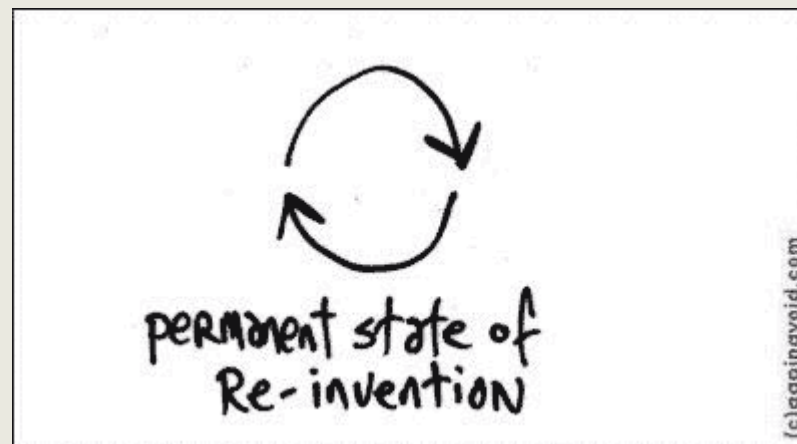
So what was the final outcome? How did Kryptonite address the problem? Did they fix the lock in the end? I have no idea. I'm just assuming their locks continue to suck. I suppose I could go visit the company website for more info, but... Eh. I can't be bothered. I'm just assuming it'll have the usual bullshit PR when I get there. Life is short.

One decent, smart, young, credible part-time blogger on \$500 a month, writing from the front lines on their behalf could have saved Kryptonite millions of dollars. Not to mention decades of slowly-and-painfully built brand equity.

Without warning, Kryptonite's market got smarter and faster than they did. And it only took a couple of days to unleash the full wrath. Boom. You have been warned.

## **PART TWO:**

There's only one thing harder than starting a new business: Re-inventing an old one.



Start-ups are fine and dandy, most people reading this will know all about them.

But what about Start-agains? Are they an exercise in futility or a tremendous opportunity?

**Thought:** the future of advertising is clients increasingly asking their agencies to help re-invent not just their brands, but their actual companies. The future is agencies being increasingly unable to deliver on this.

Out of this wreckage a new industry will emerge ...

So how do companies, businesses, brands, etc., re-invent themselves?

Big, big question. Worth a fortune to know the answer.

Actually, the answer's pretty simple: The same way humans re-invent themselves.

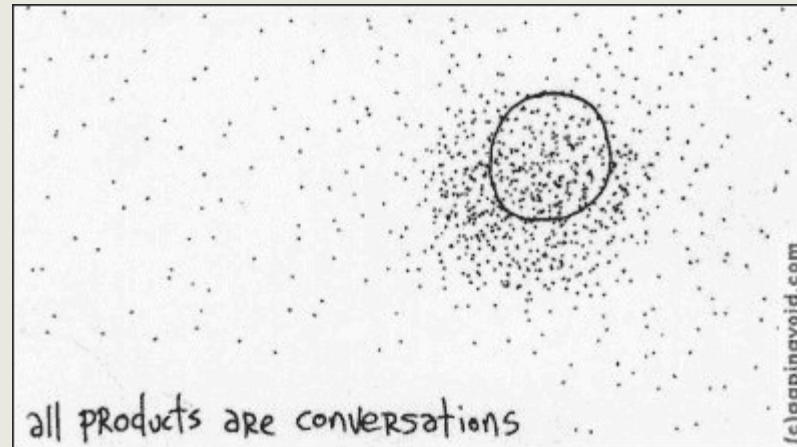
I know. It shouldn't be that simple, but it is.



: **A brand is a place, not a thing:** Media is not ‘entertainment’ or ‘information’. Media is an interface. Interface implies action. For example, I leave [Buzzmachine](#) (my favorite website) more switched on than when I entered. So for me, there’s an actual **kinetic quality** about visiting there. The same should be true (but mostly isn’t) for ABC, CBS, The NYT, Nickelodeon, MTV, etc., etc. I want the benefit of interacting with any given media brand I use to be more flamingly obvious, less vague and elitist. And this applies to non-media brands, as well. For example:

- » By interacting with Gerber Baby Food, she becomes a better-informed mom.
- » By interacting with *The Wall Street Journal*, she becomes more tuned into the world of capitalism.
- » By interacting with Apple, she brings her entrepreneurial dreams closer to reality.
- » By interacting with McDonald’s, her busy schedule is made slightly easier by avoiding a lot of fuss over lunch.
- » By interacting with Ralston Purina, she becomes more attached to her canine friend.
- » By interacting with your brand, she becomes...??????

In other words, welcome to [The Kinetic Quality](#).

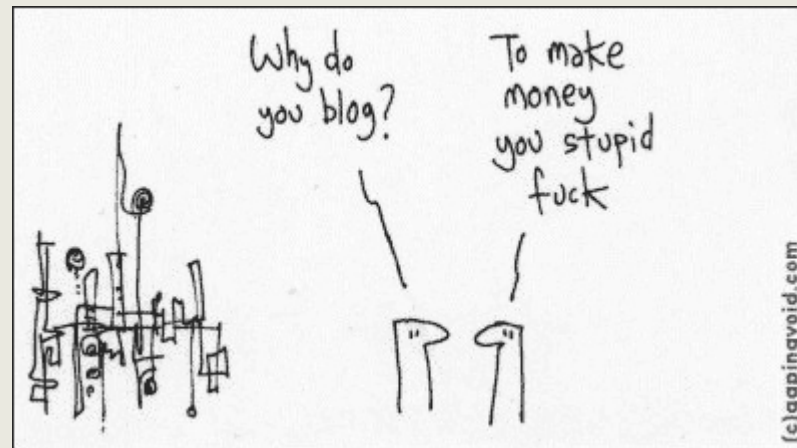


**: It's all about "smarter conversations." Business is the art of getting somebody to where they need to be, faster than they would get there without you.**



**Note to Self:** Your job is no longer about selling. Your job is about firing off as many synapses in your client's brain as possible.

The more synapses that are fired off, the more dopamines are released. Dopamines are seriously addictive. The more dopamines you release, the more the client will come back for more. Your client thinks he is coming back to you for sane, rational, value-driven reasons. He is wrong. He is coming back to feed.



**: I worked for my current boss for two years before actually meeting him in person.** This is why having a good personal blog is so useful — it allows you to convey a lot of essential personal schtick over a great distance.

**: Big media is currently having the same problems the Detroit car industry was having in the 70s, but that problem was easy in comparison.** All Detroit had to do was start imitating the Japanese until they could finally get with the program. But nowadays, Big Media has no one to imitate.

**: The big city is an anachronism.** All those skyscrapers, architecturally impressive as they are, were built to house large, tightly controlled, centralized bureaucracies within a very small area of land, geographically near the other like-minded bureaucracies with whom they did business. You wanted to work for Corporation X? You had to buy a house within commuting

distance to Corporation X's Central HQ. Ninety percent of the people you needed to talk to on a daily basis were within an elevator ride of your desk. Amazing how dated something so recent can seem. Now e-mail and its spawn are the new elevators.

**: Recent Conversation:**

ADVERTISING BUDDY: "[Procter & Gamble](#) are a pain-in-the-ass client to work for."

ME: "Clients with no money are an even bigger pain in the ass."

**: Every time a new toy arrives on the scene (internet, new media, blogs, etc. etc.), people get really excited.**

"This new toy will really let us TALK to our target market yak yak yak..."

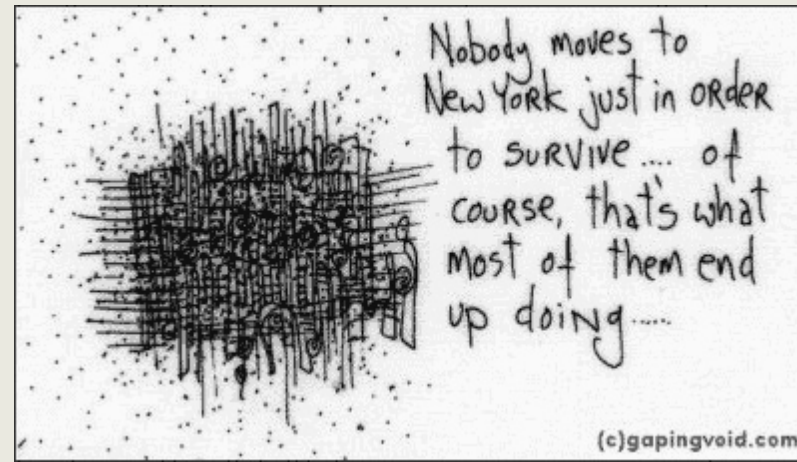
"This new toy will really let us INTERACT with our target market yak yak yak..."

"If we become REAL EXPERTS in this new toy our jobs will no longer suck and we won't have to hit the bars so often yak yak yak..."

Everyone knows the maxim, "A bad carpenter blames his tools."

There should be another maxim: "A bad carpenter thinks his shiny, new tools are going to save his sorry ass from oblivion."

## PART THREE



: **Been recently scouring the net and the bookshops and whatnot.** Hot marketing word du jour: “Transparency”.

Yep, we’re all transparent now. From the guy who cleans your pool to General Frickin’ Motors. Rock on.

: **“Advertising is Dead.”** Yep, bastards like me are no longer going to try to sell you anything. You heard it here first.

: **“Blogs cure cancer.”** Yep, so now you can go tell that expensive chemotherapist of yours to go f--k himself.

: **“Alternative Advertising” is really hot right now.** So instead of advertising on TV or *People Magazine* like a normal person, you show your boss you’re “with it” by hiring one of these “Alternative” advertising agencies and getting their army of freelance college girls to smear

their pert, young titties with your company's product and march around the campus a-giggling. Hopefully "word of mouth" is generated, the media "picks it up" and suddenly you're no longer referred to as "Cube Boy" around the office.

**: We're all about "empowerment" these days.** We have great need to be constantly reminded



by the brands we buy into that we're not the flaccid nonentities we spent most of our lives believing we are. So instead of it saying "Powered by Blogger" on your website (a perfectly reasonable and succinct phrase, in my opinion), you now have "I Power Blogger." So now people are going to laugh at you less. Right.

**: What makes the hi-tech/internet/dotcom client attractive to the ad business isn't their actual products, it's their customers.**

What is attractive is the idea of selling products made by smart people (computers, iPods, etc.) to other smart people (techies, entrepreneurs, college profs). As opposed to selling products made by smart people (baked beans, candy bars, soap powder) to dumb people (welfare mothers, redneck sports fans), the latter being 90% of what the ad business does to pay its bills.

Selling to people of your own caliber is generally a far more rewarding way to spend one's time than selling to people you wouldn't want to invite into your own house. Which is why the best agencies get to work on these hi-tech accounts, and why hi-tech accounts get more than their fair share of advertising and marketing accolades.

**: We seem overly fond of "Zen" imagery these days.** Whenever possible we like to design our company logos to resemble sumi ink drawings from 17th century Zen Masters and whatnot.

We like Zen because it has all that comforting, calming, meditative, spiritual schtick without the insistence that we believe in anything too specific or counter-intuitive. Unlike, say, Christianity or Islam.



So if your company cannot come up with its own spiritual schtick, Zen is the easiest “big one” to appropriate without appearing too tacky.

**: I am not in the factory-owning business.** If I have something that needs to be made on a large scale, I’ll call somebody up in China or Germany (probably the former). Let them worry about the machine operator’s pension fund. I have better things to think about. So do Coca-Cola and Nike, which is why most of their stuff is outsourced. I have ideas I want to see expressed. Being paternal on an industrial scale is not one of them. A company’s primary role is not to make or do stuff. A company’s primary role is to function as an “idea amplifier.” Making and doing are mere subsets. [Read more here.](#)

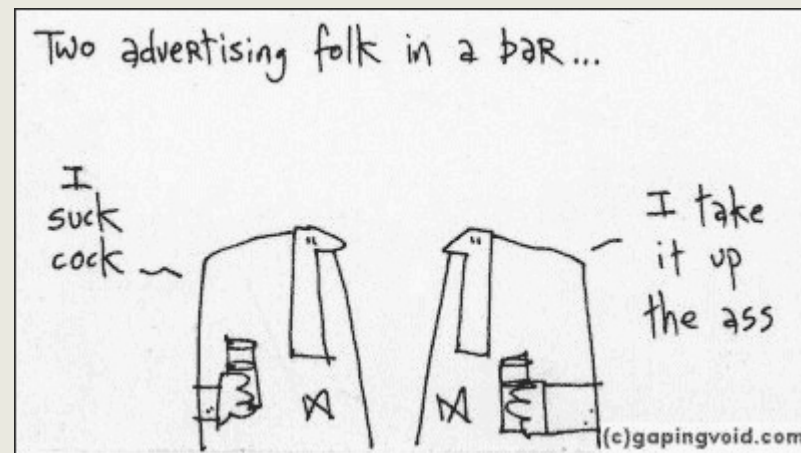
## PART FOUR



**: Merit can be bought. Passion can't.** The only people who can change the world are people who want to. And not everybody does.

: The hardest part of a CEO's job is sharing his enthusiasm with his colleagues, especially when a lot of them are making one-fiftieth of what he is. Selling the company to the general public is a piece of cake compared to selling it to the actual people who work for it. **The future of advertising is internal.**

: **Big Media think they're going down the tubes because of "market changes" or whatever.** It never occurs to them that maybe, just maybe their own bad manners could have something to do with their own demise.



: **Great advertising has far more to do with how great your company is than which ad agency you hire.**

: [Doc Searls](#) once incisively stated, "There is no market for messages." Agreed. Which is why TV networks had to create TV programs. So you'd watch them. Otherwise they'd just air the commercials.

## PART FIVE

: Write like you mean the words.



“Being creative” is not the hardest thing in advertising. That’s easy. Being able to write about the client’s product with conviction, with passion, with genuine humanity is far harder. Most copywriters can’t do it. If you can do it, there’s always going to be a market for it. Be excited.

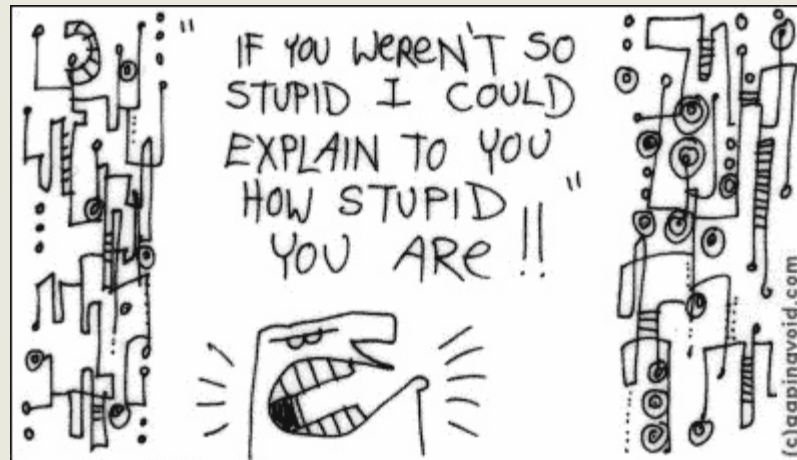
Most copywriters “can’t do it” for one of three reasons:

1. They’re hacks. Hacks cannot write. Not really write. They can futz around, make it look fancy and professional, but they cannot inject it with any resonant human spirit, for they lost all that themselves years ago.
2. Their clients are idiots and won’t let them write properly. Any time they try to write like a human being (as opposed to a whipping-boy-for-cash) their client kills what they do and sends him back to his cube for a re-write.

3. Fear. Also commonly known as “practicality.” It’s a competitive world out there, so to minimize risk and avoid conflict with their paymasters, they pre-emptively rid their work of any human quality, and replace it with dry, blathering, meaningless corporate-speak instead. If you do this often enough, it starts to feel normal.

I’m kind of hardcore about this. I think if you’re writing meaningless drivel, it’s your fault. You chose to work for this guy, you took his money, you cashed the check. It’s not his problem, it’s your problem. All writers are responsible for their own experience. “The client won’t let me” doesn’t cut it.

The thing to do is only work with people whose vision and character excite you. The only way to do that is to have vision and character yourself.



: **“Smarter Conversations” do not require the input of stupid people.**

Why marketers feel the need to emulate them on such a pathological basis is beyond me.

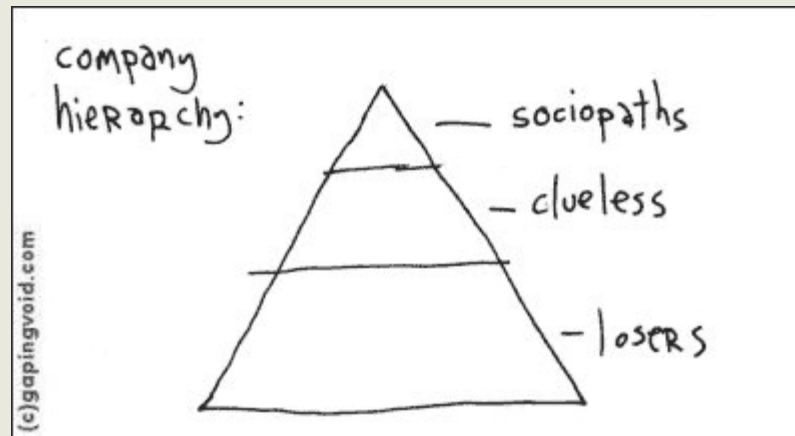
## PART SIX

: **The Madison Avenue's Cube Dweller's job is to convince the client that it's 1990.** Middle Management's job is to convince the client that that it's 1970. Senior Management's job is to convince the client that it's 1950.

: The word "Brand" has so many meanings now (some more whacked-out than others), that using it has ceased to be useful.

: Ad agencies market themselves as lions; in reality, they're more closely related to the hyena.

: The quickest way to lose that corner office is to come up with an original idea.



: **Watching the big Madison Avenue agencies trying to get with the program is a bit like watching a middle-aged married man hitting on a co-ed in a bar.**

: **It's not just the product.** People have to love the process as well.

: As long as your marketing remains the domain of your typical suit-wearing marketing jackoff (“Let’s call a meeting at 7.30am and talk about nothing for 3 hours!”), your marketing will be jacked-off accordingly.

# The Customer is a human being. The Consumer is a metaphor.

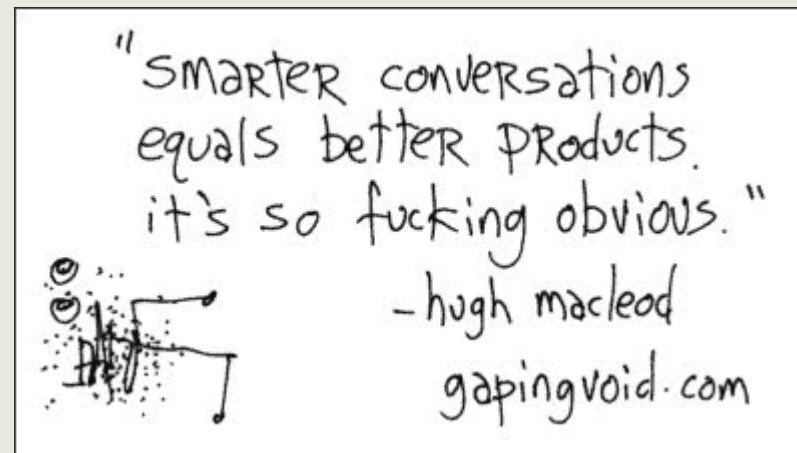
: The Customer is a human being. The Consumer is a metaphor.

: [Cluetrain](#) is basically a wildly uneven, insane rant that makes little sense. Nor does all of it stand up to intellectual scrutiny. But since when has marketing been sane and rational? Since when have people’s purchasing habits been sane and rational? If people weren’t inherently psychotic, my [day job](#) would be a whole lot easier. We need an insane book because insanity is much closer to the truth.

: The “advertising is an art form” spiel makes for dreary conversation.

## PART SEVEN

: “I believe we are living in the beginning of a new global spiritual awakening.” So why is this happening? No, I don’t think we’re all suddenly taking magic mushrooms, or Jesus has come back for second helpings etc. There are many reasons, a lot of them simple ones—technology bringing people closer together: Baby Boomers getting older and less into sex; materialism; etc., etc.



### :HOW TO HAVE SMARTER CONVERSATIONS.

1. Understand why what you’re offering to do for other people is interesting, important, meaningful, etc. Then start telling people about it.

Think about this one. Hard. If you don’t know, then how will other people know? Exactly. They won’t.

**2. Live like you know the difference between remarkable and unremarkable, like it matters to you.**

The more “remarkable” matters to you, the more likely that it will appear in the product you’re selling. The more likely other people will notice it.

**3. Seek out the exceptional minds.**

This is my basic mantra. It’s a good one to have. Not everybody gets it. Their loss.

**4. Start a blog.**

Blogs are funny things. Say something smart, and people pay attention. Say something dumb, and you’re ignored. We big media folk just can’t seem to get our heads around that concept, for some reason. Regular blogging can help train you to discern between smart and dumb. It makes it easier to extend this to the rest of one’s business

**5. Ruthlessly avoid working for companies that “don’t get it.”**

Yeah, you may have to turn down a few gigs, and that can really hurt when the rent is due. Still, anything that’s easy to get isn’t worth having.

**6. Ruthlessly avoid working for companies that think they know better than you.**

Luckily, if you get the whole “smarter conversations” thing, their “Yes, buts” will just seem rather empty, making them easier to “toss out like old furniture.”

**7. Be nice.**

Smarter conversations are fuelled by goodwill. Lose it and die.



**8. Be honest.**

Again, smarter conversations are fuelled by goodwill, etc.

**9. Karma is key.**

But you already know that. Or you're stupid. No middle ground on this one, sorry.

**10. Listen.**

Tongues are dumber than brains, brains are dumber than ears, etc.

**: If a CEO can see his company as primarily an idea amplifier, then he can understand his “brand” properly. Vision doesn't require molecules, it never did. What it requires is something worth believing in.**

This is a work in progress. Keep checking back for tweaks, new thoughts etc. More thoughts here: [The Kinetic Quality](#). (NB: This thinking was all inspired by [Cluetrain](#) of course, hence the name etc.)

# info

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hugh MacLeod is a brand consultant, copywriter and cartoonist. Born in America but educated in the UK, he has spent most of his life shuttling between the two countries.

He started out in straight TV advertising writing in the early 90s but with the advent of new media it evolved into new brand thinking and cultural transformation.

His website, <http://gapingvoid.com>, is widely read in the blogosphere.

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