



Being Heard
in a
Chaotic World

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Once upon a time in a galaxy far, far away, communication was a much simpler process.

Back in the good old days, there were fewer accepted means of communication, but in many ways it was easier to send and receive messages that actually got people's attention.

Today, we are connected in a multitude of ways and tethered to our devices 24x7. We have technology that allows instantaneous online delivery of content, including music, books and video. That same technology allows us to generate our own content and share it with the world. We have interactive social media tools that allow us to connect with communities we didn't even know existed a decade ago. And all of this is available from a mobile device that fits in the palm of your hand. New communication techniques and technologies are emerging at a rapid pace, continuously bombarding us with messages and reminders, with no end in sight.

In a world where it's hard enough to cut through the noise to get the attention of friends and family members, it's even more difficult for businesses and other organizations to reach prospects and customers. Unfortunately, many organizations try to solve this situation by talking louder and LOUDER until they are shouting at us from across a crowded room. They add to the noise, make us tune out, and continue their way down an unsustainable path.

What is Noise?

I'm trained as a classical pianist. Whether I'm playing a melodic piece like a Chopin Nocturne or a complex four-voice Bach fugue, it's important that I communicate the sense of the piece. No two listeners will hear the same piece of music the same way, because we each hear and interpret the sounds with our own different backgrounds and experiences. However, it's my job as a performer to remove as many of the distractions as possible—to offer a clear rendering of what I feel the composer intended—to be heard above the noise.

Noise, for our purposes, is the interference between a sender and a receiver. It's what gets in the way of a message being delivered. There can be external noise in the environment that

interferes with the sender transmitting a message, as well as static in the mind of the listener, who may be distracted or otherwise engaged.

In business, there are two types of noise. The first is the external noise of the marketplace. These are the factors that affect your ability to reach your intended audience: prospects, customers, shareholders, employees, suppliers, partners, sponsors, or even the local community. Some of this noise is environmental—competitors talking to your customers. Sometimes we add to the cacophony ourselves by sending too many unfocused or repetitive messages to the same customers. Who among us hasn't received a new customer solicitation from a business that you have been working with for years? Whoops.

The second type of noise is organizational. Think of this like the static on an old AM radio (Google this if you can't remember back that far!). This is the noise that we create in our own organizations as we compete for resources and attention with all the other functions in our businesses. It's the unpleasantness that happens when projects are held up by disputes between marketing and sales, or product development and customer support, or finance and IT. Like actual static, this is irritating and disrupts our ability to focus on what's important. It gets in the way of us being clearly heard.

Noise Can Be Fatal for Business

It's frustrating for individuals to deal with workplace noise on a daily basis. But for businesses, effectively handling noise can make the difference in whether or not the organization is able to grow and deliver successful results.

As a marketer, today's environment appears extremely noisy and chaotic from all angles. New marketing techniques are introduced on an almost daily basis. Consumers have an ever-increasing number of options for receiving messages—from traditional media to the now ubiquitous smart phones and tablets. And it seems advertisers and marketers are prepared to use all of these methods at any given time.

The problem for marketers, however, is that additional options don't necessarily make it easier to get through to consumers. They just add more complexity and more noise to an already loud and chaotic system.

That's why I stepped back to look at what really works to cut through the noise.

The Timeless Truths

Over the years, I've worked with a number of organizations from startups and entrepreneurs to Fortune 500 companies. What I began to realize was that those who were successful did a number of things right, starting with having a strategic vision. They were able to create the right product and service offerings, because they took the time to understand their customers, and to identify those customers that would be most ideal for them over time. They analyzed their target markets so they understood the environment in which they'd be competing. They built a strong brand and communicated effectively to their target audience, acting in partnership with their sales teams. Then they put metrics in place to measure their progress, as well as to evaluate best practices so they could continue to improve.

Strategy. Product. Customers. Brand. Communications. Market Analysis. Sales. Operations. I call these eight principles the Dynamic Market Leverage factors. There's nothing new or revolutionary about these concepts. In fact, it turns out that these factors are based on principles that have always worked in marketing, from the time when markets were first conceived thousands of years ago.

However, in today's technology-driven age, many marketers are distracted by the latest new and shiny objects in the form of digital marketing or social media platforms. They lose focus

and start with tactics and execution before they have a solid strategy. That's like getting in a car and starting to drive around before you've determined your destination.

Now, not every organization handles all of the Dynamic Market Leverage factors equally well. And not every organization actually needs to focus on each factor to the same degree across the board. But these are the factors that make a difference. It's not how many "likes" you have on Facebook, or how many people click on a particular web link. It's about putting together the right strategy to meet the business objectives you've established.

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Integrating Today's Realities

That's not to say that the marketing environment today isn't dramatically different than it was even a few years ago. And those aspects of marketing that have changed have transformed the equation. However, the good news is that there is already significant attention focused on what's new and different, which makes it easier to overlay these new realities onto a strategic marketing function.

What's changed? To start, the way we deliver products and services is dramatically different—from the availability of digital downloads to the creation of 3D printers. We now have the ability to customize not just the offering we deliver but how and where we deliver it. This opens a whole new world of possibilities for businesses.

Another change is that Big Data is attracting big attention, but what's important is that we now have access to data of all shapes and sizes. The question is how effective are managers at not just gathering and analyzing this data, but in using it to gain insights that can impact decision making at their organizations. New marketing automation tools allow us to customize demand generation activities to specifically target offerings to customers, rather than hitting them with a broader shotgun approach.

Marketers today can create ongoing conversations with their key audiences, provide a steady stream of relevant content to these audiences, and leverage the communities that are being built and populated in today's world. To be heard, we need to overlay these new capabilities on top of the eight timeless marketing truths.

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Necessary But Not Sufficient

However, even if a marketer covers all of the basics of marketing correctly, there's no guarantee of success. One reason is because marketers in organizations cannot succeed as lone wolves. It's not enough to work at marketing. It's just as important to know how to work within the organization to reduce the static of organizational noise. Marketers must work closely with the executive team, so that they are closely tied to the strategic goals of the organization. They need to align with product development, sales, customer support, and, more and more importantly, with IT.

Marketing teams need to have sufficient resources to be successful. They need the right people in place to deliver what's required, both now and in the future. They also need to make effective use of technology, which means investing where it makes sense, but not deploying technology solely for its own sake.

Finally, marketers need to understand the market environment in which they compete. They need to be aware of potential disruption factors that could turn the world as we know it upside down and inside out. Much better to be the next AirBnB or Uber—rather than to be the hotels or taxi companies that were blindsided when these startups emerged and blew up the long-standing status quo.

Social Media Is Part of the Mix

Social sharing platforms should be included in a marketing strategy where appropriate. The marketing world today is increasingly digital and social-focused, and it will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. But it's absolutely imperative that you match the tool with the audience you're targeting to meet your audience where they are—not where you'd like them to be.

An effective social media plan is determined by looking at the Dynamic Market Leverage factors first, understanding your strategy, and then looking for the best tactics for effective implementation. We need to remember that social platforms change and evolve over time. What seems like a reasonable solution today may not be the best choice in even the near future.

Starting to implement social media without an underlying business strategy is like putting the cart before the horse. You're just adding to the already overwhelming noise.

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You Get What You Measure

Some of the strangest employee behavior I've ever seen was inadvertently driven by badly chosen metrics. When employees are measured on whether or not X is achieved, they will go out of their way to achieve X—even if that means sacrificing factors like Y and Z, which may be more beneficial to the organization in the long run.

There are three keys to choosing an appropriate metric. First, it should be easy to understand and use. Second, it should be easily replicated (so that it can be easily measured on an ongoing basis). Third, measuring this variable should provide actionable information that can actually impact the business.

Too many organizations focus only on the first two points. In today's web-based world, we can drown in analytics. However, the question is whether measuring those things tracked by our analytical tools (such as likes, follows, clicks, etc.) gives us any intelligence that we can use to impact the business.

It's better to focus instead on one or two metrics that provide really actionable information, rather than tracking lots of variables just because we can. The true test is whether changes in that metric correlate with a positive impact on your business.

Taking a Rightful Seat at the Table

With all the competition in today's marketplace, the move to get to market quickly, and the ability to react ever more rapidly to changing customer needs, businesses need to leverage all the resources at their disposal. They need to fine-tune their marketing engines to get all the performance possible from their investments.

Successful organizations no longer have the leeway to look at marketing as a creative or implementation function. In today's world, a strategic marketing team can be a major competitive advantage, and the CMO can provide significant value by becoming a close advisor to the CEO. By downplaying their focus on implementation, marketers can be vital in offering a strategic perspective. This will not only help their organizations rise above the noise in the marketplace, but it will lead to marketing being seen in a more valuable light by other parts of the organization.

But none of this can happen if the CMO doesn't have the ear of senior management—if the marketing function is seen as a necessary evil rather than a strategic investment. That's why it's so important that marketers show senior management that they understand how to cut through the noise and get their messages heard.

Mastering the Marketing Performance

Great marketing leaders, like great conductors, know their sound must resonate and make an impact on their audience. They're aware of what will happen if their teams don't deliver. They know it's up to them to build a strong set of performers that feel empowered to act appropriately. They know that the result will be dependent on not just the individual skills of team members, but also on how well they come together to work as a group. They know it's incumbent upon them as leaders to gain the trust and support of the organization, as well as to provide the leadership and direction that sets the stage for the challenges ahead.

As a marketing leader, how do you know when you are doing this well and your organization is getting above the noise? Here are a few indicators:

- You'll see more definitive results from your marketing campaigns and initiatives.
- Your organization will be less driven by fire drills that waste people's time and energy.
- Your team will be seen as thought leaders.
- Marketing will be seen as a driver rather than an order taker.

- Marketing will be part of the core business discussions, not brought in afterwards to implement deliverables.
- You'll create buzz in your industry about what your organization is doing.
- You'll see higher engagement and loyalty from your customers.
- You'll make greater progress in establishing and building your brand.
- You'll make better use of scarce resources.
- And, finally, you'll see more bottom line growth for your business.

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Hitting the Wrong Notes

In my discussions with successful marketing leaders, a powerful theme emerges. They aim to fail quickly. It's not that these organizations want to fail, but those getting above the noise understand that innovation brings the potential for failure. Next-generation marketing leaders encourage their teams to try new things. Innovation is rewarded, yet leaders know not every opportunity will be successful. Their goal is to fail fast and move on.

This means there should be no scapegoats. It's important to correct missteps, without shooting the messenger. Share learnings and best practices in all situations—whether things go right or wrong.

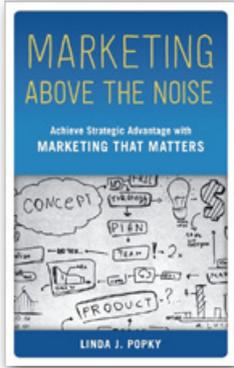
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Marketing, like music, is an iterative process. When you've hit the wrong notes, it's time to stop, understand what went wrong, determine the changes to be made, and then try again. Next time you'll take what you've learned and apply it in a smarter, more impactful way.

A Powerful Performance

Just as a good orchestra needs a good conductor, we need strong business and marketing leaders who understand both the business and the craft of marketing. We need leaders who can eliminate the noise, tune out the distractions, and produce organizational performance that really sings. **Only then will organizations, and the individuals who lead them, truly be heard above the noise.** 🎧

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Marketing expert Linda J. Popky, the founder and president of Silicon Valley-based Leverage2Market Associates, transforms organizations through powerful marketing performance. A consultant, speaker, and educator, Linda has been named one of the top women of influence in Silicon Valley and inducted into the Million Dollar Consultant® Hall of Fame. She is the past president of Women in Consulting and a member of the Watermark Strategic Development Board. She is the first marketing expert worldwide certified to offer the Private Roster™ Mentoring Program for consultants and entrepreneurs. Also a classically trained pianist, Linda produced a CD of piano music called *Night Songs*.

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