

The Big-Scary-Dog Approach to Marketing

The September sun was beginning to set on the peaceful neighborhood park. Peaceful, that is, until the air was suddenly filled with a screechy “Waaaaaaahhh!”

The little boy was about 5, and someone’s big, playful Great Dane somehow had gotten off its leash and run right smack up to him. Its apologetic owners quickly hooked their pet back up and led it away. But the boy was still freaked out by the intrusion, and continued to cry.

Walking by, I expected the child’s parents to try to console him by pointing out that the danger was past. “Stop crying. The dog’s gone.” That’s what I would have done. But they took a different tact.

“That was a big scary dog, wasn’t it?” mom was saying. The boy nodded firmly, as his volume dropped a notch. “You were afraid it was going to get you, right?” He nodded again, and his cries downgraded to a whimper. And then finally: “You’re safe now, right?” A small nod, and finally, a big sigh.

I continued on my way, and thought about what I had just witnessed. The child didn’t want his fears denied—especially from someone else’s logical assessment. Those fears were still viscerally real for him, and he needed them validated.

Once he got that validation, the world was once again in balance. There’s a lesson in here somewhere, I thought.

As a marketing person, I’m aware that our buying decisions generally include both logical and emotional components. But that smart parent inadvertently taught me that the most air-tight logical argument in the world might be meaningless until that person’s feelings have at least been acknowledged.

Okay, say we’re working on a website banner for a technical college. The headline could be something like, “Get the education and certification you need for new career opportunities.” That’d work. But it might work better if it was prefaced with, “Feeling stuck in a job you just hate?” Then, “Would you feel better about yourself if you were earning better pay?”

Heaven knows, a century of American print marketing is filled with sensitive appeals to peoples’ ‘pain points.’ But I notice that modern web marketing tends to focus on ‘gain’ (“new career opportunities”) rather than ‘pain’ (“feeling stuck?”).

My point is that, in most cases, I think we need both.

Notice how smart mom structured her appeals in a similar way as the website example: by first validating the deep, existing emotions, the final logical argument becomes meaningful on that same deep level.

Also note how in both cases, the leading-up statements are in the form of questions. We're not telling them what they should be feeling. We're asking if that's what they're feeling. That small nod in response, at the park or in front of the laptop, signals buy-in. Their final sigh signals that our final declaration has resolved both the emotional stress and real-world predicament. It's an approach that digs deeper, to help the curious creatures we call humans get what they needed all along.

In any case, I'm sure by now the little fellow at the park has gotten over his frightening episode... thanks to a mommy who understood more about 'selling an idea' than Mr. Professional Marketing Guy, who happened to be wandering past.