



Marketing 101 + 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
Lent 3, March 3 2024
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I never took Marketing 101 but I wish I had, because I am fascinated by branding. What image best represents the product or service you are trying to promote?

To develop a memorable logo, first you must be marketing something worthwhile, about which an image would ignite the imagination. You can't have a brilliant logo for a lackluster product.

Second, conciseness is key. The simpler the image, the better – and ideally, no words or even letters. The image alone should evoke the product.

SLIDE Here is a good logo for an organization with which I'm involved (ALCM)...[2nd slide]

SLIDE Obama campaign 2008: Its creators spoke of "The sun rising over the horizon evoking a new sense of hope." Takes its cue from the distinctive first letter of the candidate's name; the circular shape symbolizing the world; the flag, and forward movement in the way that the stripes are depicted. Of course there were opposing interpretations; one cartoonist saw it as "a zero and a sunset over a deserted highway."

SLIDE The Toyota logo is famous for its exceptional conciseness, consisting of three ovals. Its meaning is a mystery; some say the smaller oval could represent the client's heart, the next larger the heart of the Toyota car, and the largest encompasses the possibilities offered by the brand for both hearts. Others say the intersection of lines mutually beneficial relations between the company and client, and still others find all the letters of the company name hidden in the arched contours and intersections of the lines. GRACE SLIDE

Thinking of today's second reading, you might conclude that Paul never took Marketing 101, either. If he had, the first-century equivalent of the marketing professor at Temple's Fox School of Business would probably have given him an F. Why? Because, for Paul's first-century audience, he chose the worst possible marketing tool to convey his message – the cross.

[SLIDE] For centuries Christians have embraced the cross as a sign of Jesus' resurrection. We are therefore comfortable in featuring it around our necks, in our worship spaces, and on our buildings.

But to those in Paul's time living under the oppression of Roman rule, the cross instantly brought one image to mind – capital punishment at its worst. Death on the cross was a sentence that fell on pirates, insurrectionists, murderers and especially political agitators. The cross was the primary means of suppressing subversion of every kind, anything that denied the authority of the Emperor. Furthermore, it was the most humiliating punishment imaginable, a public spectacle in which the victims hung there in a gruesome death that could take hours. What it conveyed was: Toe the line, or this could happen to you.

Why would Paul have chosen to hang his message on such a symbol? Why not a lily or a sunrise? How could any first century person have been converted to the Christian faith through the preaching of Paul?

Because God has made foolish the wisdom of the world. The human wisdom that said “the cross is how we will crush all who oppose the Emperor” was shattered because that very instrument became the means by which the crucified God entered human history, and entered it through a suffering so complete that it embraced all of human experience. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his,” Paul says elsewhere, we shall surely be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

How else has the wisdom of the wise been destroyed? Through the cross, God brought an end to the myth of human self-sufficiency that goes back all the way to the Garden of Eden, where humans first thought, “God, we know better than you.” This kind of human thinking is a judgment on God’s activity. To take one contemporary example, this is why denominations continue to splinter, because factions have decided that the message of the cross is for some but not for all. In so doing they are passing judgment on God’s grace –out-thinking God -- and the institutional church is much the weaker for it.

How God else has made foolish the wisdom of the world?

- By exposing those who cower behind fortresses of their own making because they fear anyone who challenges the stronghold they have created for themselves – kings, dictators, the emperors of our time. The cross ultimately reveals them to be powerless.
- God has made foolish the wisdom of the world by exposing those who refuse to share from the abundance that they have been given. The cross ultimately reveals their misery while lifting up those who live generously and compassionately.
- God has made foolish the wisdom of the world by revealing it is fruitless to fight evil with evil – trying to get back at those who hurt you. The cross frees us to live without fear in the knowledge that God, who brings life out of death, will do the judging.
- God has made foolish the wisdom of the world by revealing all lies to be exactly what they are, especially those made in the public sphere. The cross ensures that the truth will always come to light and that the liars will become victims of their own duplicity.

So, Paul says, philosophers, lawyers, debaters, hang it up: Your efforts will get you nowhere as far as the truth of the cross is concerned.

For Paul, Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection marked the turning of the ages whereby God decisively judged and condemned the present age and began the process of bringing it to an end. That process, which we call the inbreaking of God’s kingdom, is still going on. But Paul makes clear that all those who remain captive to the former age are perishing, because for them it’s all over – they just don’t know it yet – while those who embrace the call of Christ and the clear truth of the cross are being saved.

Who would have pictured it? The cross, least likely place imaginable through which the salvation of the world would be accomplished. A scene that appeared to be so final that all but his most faithful followers gave in to utter despair. “So this is the end of the story, then?”

Ah—and then the glory of Easter morning. How foolish the wisdom of the world was shown to be! That which was embarrassing and even shameful was then revealed to be an instrument of glory like none that history had ever known.

This is the power of the cross in our lives – which is why Paul could not have chosen a more perfect tool for the marketing campaign that propelled his ministry over more than 10,000 miles and called the church of Christ into being. A message of life, through death, so clear that it no adornment. No decoration. No additional wording. Jesus died and was raised for us in a way that invites us into that same eternal life, not through magic or gimmicks but natural human processes. Death for us, that we might live.

So let’s say that Paul actually deserves an “A” in Marketing 101. Because he has in fact chosen the perfect symbol – that on which was hung the salvation of the world.

Amen.