

The awesome power of an apology

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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It is a window of opportunity that has opened up for perhaps just a few years but it is going to take the mass media, marketing strategists, ad agencies, and clients with titanium balls to really make the best of it.

But, get it right and the rewards will be enormous.

It is called the 'power of apology' and it all started when Enron was exposed a dozen or so years ago. Then came September 11 and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq followed closely by the sex abuse cover-up scandal in the Catholic Church, mayhem as a gay priest was appointed bishop in the Anglican church and all sorts of other misdemeanours among the world's religions. The list is fairly endless of occurrences that have left the world's consumers, those ordinary Joe's we call the 'man in the street', with their confidence in human nature shattered.

Business, politics and religion has let them down and now they're desperately looking for someone to trust.

This means enormous opportunities for companies prepared to throw away those 'We Care' plaques on their reception walls and stop using their ads as platforms for empty promises with 'We're the Best' and all that sort of guff. And then, to start making accountable, measurable promises to win the trust of the consumer by delivering quality on time and backing it all up with no-nonsense after-sales service.

Just say it: 'We screwed up and we're sorry' - and mean it

But, there is an even bigger opportunity for companies that really want to take maximum advantage of the social climate right now and win the hearts and minds of disenchanted consumers by hanging their dirty laundry out for everyone to see.

Because this is what the power of apology is all about. Not being scared to tell consumers that you're not perfect, that you made mistakes, what mistakes you've made and what you're doing to get things right.

It's a good start by saying you're not perfect but what's needed to get consumer confidence today is to say *why* you're not perfect.

It all boils down to the old adage our parents used to teach us when they insisted we go and say sorry to friends and family we had hurt. It is also in all those management training courses. Not just avoiding colleagues and playing 'no speaks' because you feel they need to apologise first, but rather taking the initiative no matter who is right or wrong and apologising - and the more profusely the better. Not only are fences mended but whatever relationships there were before are

strengthened. It is a management basic.

Companies that are going to milk this situation to the utmost are those that are going to include in all their marketing communications some serious, honest, breast-beating accompanied by measurable promises.

Going the extra mile... actually creating 'mistakes'...

Some companies overseas have already cottoned on to this phenomenon and seem to have had so much success that when they run out of things they have done wrong and for which they have apologised they're actually starting to concoct mistakes just so they have something more to apologise for.

What most companies don't realise, particularly in the field of customer service, is that the normal knee-jerk reaction employees have of defending their firm's actions is pointless, time wasting and counter-productive.

My biggest lesson in life came from my brother on my wedding day. "Always agree with your mother-in-law," he advised.

Why? Because arguing is pointless and in most cases it really doesn't matter who was right or who was wrong, all that counts is moving on to something more constructive than petty argument.

So, when customers phone to complain about some product or other, agree with them whether they're right or wrong. You have to resolve the problem anyway so you might as well get the unproductive part of the conversation over with in a few seconds rather than spend hours arguing.

Now, this is all moving into advertising and PR. Wide awake companies welcome something they've cocked up as a wonderful opportunity to apologise and win the trust of the consumer.

Because right now nothing is more trusted by mankind generally than the honesty of an admission of guilt.

No lies, no deceit, no smoke and mirrors, just the plain, honest truth. It not only works wonders but its profitable and then some.

Right, now who has enough titanium in their goonies to get this going?

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdykc@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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