

Dick Maggiore: Century-old book speaks to 2016 business challenges

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Solutions, when found, will be simple and obvious - but only in retrospect. Can the idea pass 5 tests?

By Dick Maggiore Special to The Canton Repository

The relevance of century-old ideas often are muddled by the torrent of information that technology delivers today, but thankfully some old gems shine through to inspire and enlighten.

Take the case of a long-out-of-print book that came to our attention about 10 years ago. Written by Robert R. Updegraff in 1916, the book "Obvious Adams, The Story of a Successful Businessman" is worthy of celebration and re-examination.

A book circulating around our ad agency recommended "Obvious Adams" as an absolute must-read. Though it was out of print, we were fortunate to find one used copy on eBay for 50 cents, plus \$2.50 for shipping. So we invested the \$3 and were surprised to discover it was a very short, fictional novel. It only takes about 20 minutes to read. Not what we expected. But what a read it was — and is.

The book's message is tightly aligned with the principles of strategic positioning. During our next visit with Jack Trout, the man who coined the term "positioning," we gave him our one and only copy of the book with the suggestion that we thought he'd really appreciate its alignment with his thinking.

After two years and no word from Trout, we figured he didn't think much of "Obvious Adams." Then Trout, a New York Times bestselling author and one of the world's foremost marketing strategists, mailed us a copy of his latest book, "In Search of the Obvious, The Antidote for Today's Marketing Mess."

In it, an entire page was blank except for a few words thanking and dedicating the book to the agency for introducing him to "Obvious Adams." Trout said. "'Obvious Adams' is the best book that I have ever read on marketing."

Because of his endorsement, the book is back in print and available at Amazon.

"Obvious Adams" can be distilled into five tests of obviousness. The author makes them interesting by illustrating them through the experiences of a young man who went from working as a grocery store clerk to running the largest advertising agency in New York City. The collection of anecdotes demonstrates the tests of obviousness in very real and relevant ways.

The problem when solved will be simple. The obvious is nearly always simple — so simple that sometimes a whole generation of men and women has looked at it without ever seeing it. It does take some thinking. One passage in the book (similar to a familiar Henry Ford quote) sums up the essence: "Thinking is the hardest work many people ever have to do, and they don't like to do any more of it than they can help." It's hard to get to simple. It takes some rolling around in the mud of the marketplace — research.

Does it check with human nature? If you feel comfortable in explaining your idea or plan to your mother, husband, relative, neighbors, hair stylist or anyone else you know, it's obvious. If you don't feel comfortable, it probably is not obvious. If your way of doing it does not conform to human nature, you might waste your time, money and energy trying to change human nature.

Put it on paper. Write out your idea, plan or project in words of one or two syllables, as though you were explaining it to a child. If you can't do this in two or three short paragraphs and the explanation becomes long and involved or too ingenious, then very likely it's not obvious.

Does it explode in people's minds? If, when you have presented your plan, project or program, do people say, "Now why didn't we think of that before?" You can feel encouraged. Obvious ideas are very apt to produce this "explosive" mental reaction.

Is the time ripe? Many ideas and plans are obvious in themselves, but just as obviously "out of time." Checking time lines is often just as important as checking the idea or plan itself.

In positioning, we're searching for that simple, obvious, differentiating idea, the idea that will be meaningful and relevant to your prospects and customers. The more meaningful, the better. At the same time, the idea should be different from your competitors' ideas. The more different the better.

After 100 years, it's surprising how relevant the tests of obviousness still are today. The solution, when found, will be simple and obvious — but only in retrospect.

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