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Words to forget: 'We tried that before and it didn't work'

Nothing succeeds like success." We have a million sayings like this. And it's true — right up until "success" fails.

"Keep doing what you're doing and you'll only get what you got." That's the negative version of the same thought. It's true, too — except in the case where "persistence pays off."

So what's a marketer to do? Stay with the tried and true successes? Or keep looking for the breakthrough?

Now that the rest of the advertising and marketing world has discovered the value of measuring marketing results, they're ready to fall into the trap that has tripped up some of the best direct marketers I've ever known. It's one of those things you hear when you're young and promise yourself you'll never say — like when your dad would yell, "Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about!"

But one day you'll find yourself uttering the dreaded phrase, "We tried that before and it didn't work."

You've fallen into the pit.

Those eight little words are mass murderers of ideas. They kill innovation. If you're at all perceptive, you can see the light go out of the eyes of the people around you.

Why is this sin so tempting? It's pride. Now that you can measure the results of all your marketing efforts you have the knowledge of good and evil — or at least the knowledge of what brought the hoped-for results and what didn't.

You don't want to be caught naked. Not again. So you flick the idea away with an "Interesting, but . . ." response. And pretty soon, nobody brings you good ideas anymore — at least nothing you haven't done a kajillion times already.

You can continue on that path for quite a while. You become a slave to the spreadsheets you created, and you're occasionally rewarded with incremental gains in response. You're in a limbo where nothing particularly awful happens, but neither does anything great. Sooner or later, your market will get as bored

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with your campaigns as you are. Response will slip. You'll continue to test the same old variables because one time, a long time ago, you tried something different and it didn't work.

Then you hit bottom. You discover that, lo and behold, someone else — a competitor — has succeeded with one of those ideas you dismissed years ago. You can bet that your staff

remembers bringing you this idea. You're humiliated. Your credibility is destroyed. You look like a Neanderthal.

You can escape from this hell in only one way ... by keeping an open mind.

Learning to open your mind can be a difficult and painful process. If you've been the boss and you're used to being right most of the time, taking risks that you see as unnecessary can just plain hurt. But well thought-through, controlled risks are absolutely necessary to succeed in marketing in the long run.

It took a client to pry my mind open. We were approached by a large national brand. You've heard of them. We were thrilled to have an opportunity ... until the vice president of marketing told us exactly what he wanted.

Previously, the regional managers had been responsible for lead generation. The vice president wanted to create a centralized program that would allow the regional managers almost as much flexibility as they had before, would bring in more leads, within the same time frames and (oh, by the way) he wanted better pricing than they'd had before — since this would be a national program.

From the bottom of my heart, I knew this was impossible.

If it had been a smaller client, I would have told him to forget it. It would never work and we could spend our energy on something that had a chance to succeed.

But my team wanted to try. And I wanted to make this big client happy. Now, here we are, three years later, still doing what I was sure would never work.

When you're thinking about new ideas in sales and marketing, keep in mind that human psychology has remained pretty stable over the last 6,000 or so years of history, so what we find persuasive works within certain fairly predictable rules. But styles and tastes definitely do change over time. The same campaign may have different results over time based solely on current trends and fashions. So what if it didn't work before? Maybe you were ahead of your time.

It's also very hard to predict results when two ideas may sound identical but are executed completely differently. If someone told you they wanted to promote your product using skywriting, before you said you tried that once and it hadn't worked, wouldn't you at least want to know when and where they were planning to do it — and what they were planning to say?

It may be that a brilliant idea was executed poorly the first time and that's why you've never tried it again all these years.

To remove some of the fear of taking risks, remember what G. K. Chesterton said, "Merely having an open mind is nothing. The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid."

You'll find that winner among your tests, and it'll be like finding the Promised Land after years in the desert.

Approach ideas negatively and you may insulate yourself from a spectacular failure. But approach things positively and you'll attract more ideas. You'll also create positive energy and increase the confidence of your team. When they're passionate about their ideas, they're far more likely to succeed.

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