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Some Thoughts on Strategy and Planning from the internationally known Cognitive Anthropologist, Dr. Bob Deutsch, Founder & President, Brain Sells

Question 1 – Tell us a little about your career.

The engine of my career has been what I call, “directed serendipity.” I have a plan, I start to move, and I see what I encounter that excites my brain and my heart. I started as an undergraduate math student. I was interested in very theoretical things. This led me to seek to develop a procedure to test whether a mathematical problem had a solution, an end point, because many do not. This led me to the idea of “framing” – how things begin and end. At that point I explored filmmaking and even architecture. But I wasn’t into making films or building buildings. I was interested in the film director’s craft of shaping an audience’s interpretation of the characters intentions and actions. And I was interested in how the built environment was a reflection of the structure of the human mind. Then I had a “Wow!” moment: I should study cognitive science and anthropology. I found a fantastic program at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. During that time I received fellowships to study certain human and nonhuman primate populations. It was great. Then onto Rutgers University for a joint appointment in the Psychiatry Dept. at the Medical School and in the Anthropology Dept. at the Liberal Arts School. I loved it at Rutgers, but I soon gave a talk in Paris and that led to an invitation to become a visiting Foreign Fellow at the Max Planck Society in Germany. Under its auspices I spent the next 5 years living in primitive societies studying how leading ideas take hold in a culture (in these cases, cultures with no media). Based upon my experiences in the primeval forest I was asked by the US State Dept. to give a speech on this topic of the formation of “leading ideas.” I did...and subsequently spent the next decade as an in-house consultant to the US Government on public diplomacy. I also always had the entrepreneurial desire to start my own business. So after much debate with myself, I began exploring how and where and why I could go out on my own. During that time I did a lot of op-ed writing and public speaking. This led to an invitation by the American Association of Advertising Agencies to give a talk to planners and other advertising executives. I gave a talk titled, “Before Advertising Can Move Forward It Must Understand That Life Is Lived Backwards.” The title implied the idea that peoples’ basic unit of creating meaning was narrative and storytelling. Two days after that talk I was consulting for two major ad agencies. Three months after that I created my consulting practice, BRAIN SELLS. That’s directed serendipity.

Q2 - Your academic training and experience has been interdisciplinary in scope, combining anthropology, cognitive science and media studies. What does it add to you work at Brain Sells, helping brands and companies to grow and have problems solved?

My training and experience in studying human nature and the nature of mind allows me many advantages. These advantages include:

- An ability to understand cultural context.
- An ability to recognize underlying patterns and structures that cause the surface manifestation of things.
- An ability to be curious about and respectful of everyday people's experience of everyday life.
- An ability to evoke, listen for, and understand narrative and behavior so I can "place it" in the naturally-occurring structures of human life. You need all three of these abilities to do good ethnographies. Ethnography is never just a matter of seeing people in their homes or taking pictures of their kitchen cabinets.

Q3 - What does Brain Sells do exactly? And what case/work best illustrates your work?

Humans are not built into the environment via instinct. Humans must make meaning. The brain is an incessant maker of meaning. The mind blends beliefs, emotion, and data to produce its singular brand of meaning, an interpretation of the world in terms of causality and outcomes. Given the current state of the world's economies one question I am currently dealing with focuses on how people should address their financial future. Here my clients are banks, investment brokers, and credit card companies. The question is: In a world in which predictability (and trust) is a quaint illusion, how do people relate to the idea of *financial planning*? What can supplant this notion while realistically taking account of a world of high complexity -- and do it in a way that does not deny the idea of diminishing realities but does not leave people in a perpetual state of waiting for things to get better (because waiting will eventually lead to its own downward slope of returns). I am drawn to problems that have market implications, but also have cultural and life implications.

Q4 - What's great advertising, in your opinion? And how do you think that planners can help that to happen?

There's not a lot of great advertising out there, but when great advertising happens it changes culture. That's big-time stuff. I like to say to marketing audiences: If you want to make great advertising, forget about advertising, think about LIFE. Then you will make great advertising. The very methods and

frameworks of the advertising profession too often cut off the possibility of producing greatness. One basic example that has implications for everything else is categorizing people before you really know anything about how people truly experience their lives. "Consumers" is too small of a box to put people in and to learn from in order for planners and creatives to create great insights, strategies, and implementations. Consumers – even when the advertising agency's intent is to do the opposite -- are viewed as linear, rational, easily persuadable stimulus-response machines. In fact, people are not anything like this. Advertising execs know this, but they continue to kneel at the alter of "we-did-it-in-the-past-this-way". Many ad execs also like to quantify everything such that they can stand behind the numbers and cover their behinds. Most importantly, to produce great advertising the people that produce advertising must be interested in people and respectful of them. The only way to make money and produce an uptick in sales for clients is to make magic for people – that is, uplift and expand peoples' ideas about themselves and the world. That's the function of art.

Q5 - In your opinion, what preconceived ideas about consumer behavior should be questioned by the advertising industry? And what well-established practices in brand strategy are you skeptical about?

I think almost all preconceived ideas about consumer behavior as lived by the advertising agency community are suspect (mostly for reasons just stated above). For example, brand is not a marketing tool, age 60. What marketers call "brand" is actually the process of "ATTACHMENT" whereby people connect and engage with an idea, person or product in an emotional, non-linear, non-rational way. This attachment process is age-old and age-less. It predates the industrial revolution. It predates modernity. Attachment is nothing less than the engine of history. Furthermore, brand is not name recognition plus positive attributes associated with that name – even though the concept is defined that way by most if not all the ad industry. Brand – or attachment – obtains only in one circumstance: when a person's story of themselves (their self-story) gets metaphorically merged with the story of the product. Advertisers can only guide this process of mind in such a way that helps people insinuate their own story onto the product story. The advertiser (and its client) cannot wholly control this process, they can only entrain it. In general, I think much of how the ad business measures brand, measures effectiveness and takes the measure of human life is, for the most part, invalid.

Q6 - What is the one ad campaign that made you wish you'd been a part of it, and why?

Apple's Think Different.

Q7 - In 2006, at the 4A's Account Planning Conference, you said that "Brand is a Metaphorical Merging of Product-Story and Self-Story", and also that "Branding is not a marketing tool, but an attachment". Can you tell us a little about that?

In question 6 I answer that Apple's "Think Different" idea is great because it allows for this merging. You also know you have brand when people (AKA: consumers) change prose into poetry. Here is an example:

"The iPhone, like Apple, is a CIRCLE. It's smooth and it glides. It's easy and feels good. All other phones and providers are a BOX; they have corners and squares, are highly structured, have many rules, are too technical and linear. And they are too corporate. The iPhone is fun and natural. It let's me do my own thing, create new things, and helps me create a more-me."

Another story might be instructive here. David Remnick, the editor-in-chief of the *New Yorker* magazine, writing about Bruce Springsteen, 30 July 2012, p. 52) tells a story of an argument Springsteen and Van Zandt (a member of the E Street Band) had. Van Zandt is telling Springsteen,

"People don't need you talking about your life. Nobody gives a *shit* about your *life*. They need you for *their* lives. *That's your thing*. Giving some reason and sympathy and passion to this cold, fragmented, confusing world – that's your gift. Explaining their lives to them. *Their* lives, not yours."

Springsteen knew immediately what Van Zandt was saying. Elsewhere in that article Remnick sights VanZandt describing Springsteen as the smartest person he knows. I agree with that assessment. (You, who are reading this article right now, should search the internet to find and watch Springsteen's speech in Austin, Texas, this past March, at the SXSW Music Festival.) Almost everything you need to know about being a good planner is in that presentation. If I opened the "Dr. Bob" Advertising Agency and I had one wish, I would wish I could sign on Bruce Springsteen as my head planner. (Fat chance of that.)

Similarly, I gave a speech recently to filmmakers who concentrate on making films for fashion houses and fashion lines. My message to them was: "You have a problem. The problem is the object of your lens is too beautiful. The clothes are so attention-getting. And so the filmmakers tend to focus just on that. My advice: Turn your camera around 180 degrees, at least metaphorically. Think about "the other." Think about people. Think about the merging of people and product stories.

The real task of advertising is to help people pave their own Yellow Brick Road, and, metaphorically, just as the characters did in *The Wizard of Oz*, learn they have courage and a heart, learn that they can "become themselves." That should be the aspiration of all advertising: To help people find the best of what is already latent in them, and help make that manifest.

Q8 - How do you think that planners should deal with research? What are your thoughts on that?

Research should be aimed at uncovering peoples' authentic selves and should lead to work that makes what is well-known, known well. Get under the skin and into the guts of peoples' lives. The real story of a life, any life, is a great mystery to be understood (even if we can only succeed partially). It's exciting to uncover life stories and it may even help you better understand your own life, professionally and personally.

Q9 - How do you know you have found a great insight? And how do you search for them?

A great insight can lead to a great advertising campaign, but that requires more than insight. It requires a collaboration between a great planning team and a great creative team and a great agency leader who provides the tools and creates the agency culture, such that you know you "go for the gold." Remember, don't give clients what they want. Then you're only a vendor. Give clients what they need. Then perhaps you're an artist. And only artists can be Business Shaman: Those that make sales rise and peoples' spirits soar. When that happens you will not have to measure advertising effectiveness. You will see it reflected most everywhere when you "make and shape" public opinion, and not just adapt to public opinion.

Q10 - What are the main lessons that planners can learn from Anthropology and other social sciences?

Exactly what I said in answering question 2.

Q11 - Finally, What should planners be paying attention to in order to keep themselves relevant in the near future?

Planners should pay attention to LIFE!!! Life is zigzag, life is ups and downs. Life's design is emotional and metaphoric. This design is something to behold. Observe it and partake of it. Get to know something about what is eternal and what is fleeting. Get to know humans not only as a jumble of interests and as Facebook friends, but also as true identities and real social beings.

Enjoy!