

The Fall of The New Rome:

The Untimely Demise of Substance

We seem, as a culture and society, to have walked through a door. A door, I believe that we may never be able to return through again. We celebrate celebrity. It no longer seems to matter how you became famous. It just matters that you are famous. Party girls, mistresses to the already famous, self-destructive entertainers. No matter how negative the fame, it can be turned into a profit of size directly proportional to the magnitude of the fame.

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In a previous age, Americans knew that the road to fame and fortune was paved with the sweat of hard work. Joe DiMaggio became famous because he played baseball better than anyone else in the world. Humphrey Bogart was famous because he became, after years of practice, a great actor. Fame was a result of achievement, not achievement itself.

Today, Paris Hilton has built a multi-million dollar business by being born rich and pretty and partying irresponsibly in front of cameras. "Snooki" Polizzi was paid \$32,000 to speak at Rutgers University and is paid similarly to attend other public events. Her qualifications? She misbehaves on a reality TV show more extremely than anyone else and has, consequently, become famous.

This desire to short-cut the path to fame isn't limited to TV personalities. Bob Mathias was an Olympic decathlon champion in 1948 and 1952. In a movie chronicling his path to Olympic gold, there's a point where he is discouraged. He looks up and sees a motto written on the side of the arena "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game." Inspired, he goes back out on the track and wins.

Think Barry Bonds lives by that motto? Think there is a professional sport anywhere in the world free of performance enhancing drugs? Athletes, too, have been seduced by the idea that winning is more important than playing well and/or fairly. So they do anything they possibly can to break records, win games, become famous. Being the best at what you do isn't as important as being lauded as the best at what you do. If you're not cheating, you're not trying hard enough, right?

Politicians are increasingly lured by essentially the same siren's song. Their words and actions are often guided by what will get them elected or re-elected rather than by what is best for their constituents. It's just another example of a misinformed desire to short-cut the process. I imagine many politicians begin their careers with the best of intentions but eventually buckle to the pressure of political realities. You can't help your constituents if you're not in office, right? Unfortunately, you can't help them if you make decisions based on how those decisions will affect your re-election prospects, either.

There is a logic to the pattern I see here that I find disturbing. It used to be, we would start at point A and say "I want to get good at doing this". That's point B. So we would work very hard to get to point

B. By doing so, we would, to varying degrees, depending on how competently we arrived at point B, be rewarded with fame, money, a corner office, etc. That's point C. Start at A. Go to B. Getting to B

allowed you to go to C. Today, no one seems to want to take the long road. They want to go from A to C, skipping B altogether. What's the problem with that? The problem is B is where the substance is. Without B, you're just another vacuous bimbo, another cheater unfairly rewarded, another lie. What does all this have to do with market research? Quite a bit, unfortunately.

What It Means for Research

There are a couple YouTube videos going around the marketing research community right now. Someone has built an app that allows you to type dialogue, import it into the app and create a video with animated characters speaking your dialogue. The two videos I've seen both show a conversation between a client and a supplier (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fh7U04rzz8M> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gSRRRjbSk4&feature=related>). In each the theme is the same. The client makes outlandish, irrational requests that seemingly have no connection to reality and the supplier, while offering mild push back, always agrees. While funny, these videos are depressingly accurate representations of many conversations between clients and suppliers. The videos demonstrate the shortcut mentality in action on both sides of the conversation.

The client clearly either does not know anything about the process of market research or chooses to ignore what he knows. In my experience, it is generally the former. Clients today often have very little understanding of research methodology, data analysis or project implementation. What's most disturbing is that they often show no interest in learning how their projects are being conducted. Their goals, like Hilton and Bonds, have become detached from that middle step, point B, what I call substance.

They want results that will impress their boss (and whether or not those results are actually true is usually irrelevant). They want to stay on budget. They want to stay on schedule. They are completely unconcerned if their objectives require a research design that costs more or takes longer than they've allotted. They are completely unconcerned about their role in making the project successful. This part actually makes sense. Why should they worry that it will cost more or take longer to address the objectives or that they will slow the process down by not participating when they are so determinedly ignorant of what the supplier is actually going to do?

The supplier in these video conversations is also illuminating. She obviously knows what she is doing. She is aware of the consequences of the client's unreasonable requests. And she keeps agreeing to requests that she cannot possibly fulfill. She agrees because her goal is not to do good research, it is to win the project. The supplier is more like a politician than entertainer/athlete. She wants to win the project. That is her first goal. You can't do a good research project if you don't win the RFP, right? Of course. But agree to enough of the client's demands and you can't do a good research project if you do win the RFP.

On both sides of the conversation, substance has been lost. Both client and supplier have lost site of the notion that their jobs are to do great research, to provide actionable insights - insights that are true, insights that will make the company that ultimately pays both their salaries a lot of money.

It's Visigoths at the northern gate, redux. And, in the long run, I'm afraid there won't be enough of us left to keep them out.

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