

A templative tale from
Mischief Marketing

Mischievous Elton John

[excerpted from Chapter 4 (print edition) ...]

... Culture jamming, therefore, is about using mischievous techniques to expose how giant corporations puppeteer us. It's about ripping open the curtain to expose the frail, little old man behind the smoke and mirrors, as Toto did in that famous movie.

Is there a way out of ... the society of the spectacle? Yes. You can take charge of your mental environment, and become a culture jammer. Culture jamming means semiotic jujitsu — using media power against itself. The Adbusters' Media Foundation does this all the time with famous spoofs of the Absolut Vodka ads ("Absolut death," etc.) Other culture jammers often take commercials or TV programs and replace the dialogue and soundtrack with something subversive. Yet others take to billboards or road signs and cleverly rearrange the letters to say something different. As one activist suggests, "where critique is no longer a possibility, parody is always an alternative response."

— Steve Mizrach

In the quote above, Mizrach is talking about parodying and spoofing our media-crazed culture. But those aren't the only ways to do culture jamming. Which brings us to the following.

When you're designing your mischief marketing goals, ask yourself:

- How can my product or service help educate people about how they're being manipulated, especially by my competitors — competitors like, oh, I don't know ... Microsoft, say. Or Sun Microsystems.

- How can I get the United States Attorney General to make my kids do their homework?

Simple Goals

Sometimes, your mischief marketing goals may be very simple.

In fact, you could say that, back in 1964, musician Reg Dwight's goal was simply to put himself in the same room as his VLPs — nothing more.

Of course, that room happened to be a recording studio. And Dwight's job as a messenger for Mills Music eventually led to the publication of his first song.

About two years later, Reg once again got after-hours access to a different studio. This time, however, he met studio-owner Dick James, who discovered Reg and promptly took on the job of nurturing his solo career.

By the way, Reg Dwight at one point changed his name — to **Elton John**.

So you see, your goals don't need to be terribly ambitious or complicated.

— Philip Norman. *Elton John*
Claude Bernardin and Tom Stanton. *Rocket Man*.

Setting alternate goals using the Knight Fork

But what really distinguishes a set of mischief marketing goals from a set of conventional marketing goals is the Knight Fork Principle.

In the game of chess, certain pieces (like the Knight; but there are others) can threaten two or more of your opponent's pieces at the same time. Such a configuration is called a fork, and the most well-known type of fork is the Knight Fork.

When you set up a situation like this, your opponent is virtually *bound* to give you one of those threatened pieces. In other words, you're bound to win *something* on your next move, no matter what your opponent does, no matter what happens.

Similarly, in mischief marketing, if you Knight Fork your goals properly, you are bound to achieve at least one of them **NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS**.

A book about mischief marketing could not be complete without at least a cursory mention of political activist Abbie Hoffman. — Shirley Yaerjo-King, 1999.

Here are some examples of Knight-Forking:

- A company invents a new kind of glue. Unfortunately, it doesn't stick very well. Goal A was not achieved.

~ **BUT** ~

The company then takes that very same glue, turns the whole situation around, and invents Post-It note pads — which suddenly have the *virtue* of not sticking very well (because now the notes are removable).

In other words, a new objective, Goal B, is identified and achieved. Et voila! Instant Knight Fork. And also an instance of the Judo principle, by the way. One way or another, the company wins.

If you were to plan this out in advance (which the inventors of Post-It did not, incidentally; they just got lucky), then you would ask yourself:

- What can I do with my product or service if it works the way I want it to work?
- What can I do with it if it *doesn't* work the way I wanted it to work?
- What is the *very least* objective this campaign can achieve? For instance, can my family members and I get a few laughs out of this thing? Can we make some politician look ridiculous? Can we expose an injustice, or an instance of consumer fraud in banking? Can we get media attention for something worthwhile? Can we at least write a good article, or maybe just a cheap TV movie about our project — ***no matter what happens?***

These are the kinds of questions you need to ask yourself before you sit down in earnest to design your mischief marketing goals.

[... Chapter 4 (print edition) continues at this point ...]

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