
EDITORIAL POSTLUDE

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Consumers, People, and Kim

Many decades ago, two young men broke into Uncle Lou's farmhouse and stole various valued and personal items, including his checkbook. The thieves then started writing checks on the bank account, forging my uncle's name for the signature. They were caught when they made the checks out to themselves since Lou was known to the people in the stores where they sought cash or products in Lou's name. Similarly, living in a relatively small campus town, I have never used a bank cash card since I can walk the few blocks from my office to the bank where several tellers know who I am.

Contrast that with an episode of the television program "Law and Order" in which the fiction accurately told the more common modern reality. Finding a house with large market value owned free and clear by the long-time owner, the identity thief went to a nearby bank and easily took out a huge mortgage on the residence. Having all paperwork sent to a commercial post office box as his mailing address, the thief then ignored the payment and tax notices, and the owner lost his home in a foreclosure. All the while, no one discovered that the real owner was an elderly black man and the person who signed for the mortgage was young and white. No one questioned the young white man's patently suspicious claims, such as how he managed to be the original long-time owner on property whose last title change predated his apparent date of birth, or why the paperwork did not go to the residence.

In many ways, identity theft is a product not of the technological age, but of the modern disconnect between businesses and their customers. The greater the distance, the easier it is for people to successfully claim they possess another person's identity.

Identity theft is a crime, but in many ways it is a more extreme case of the more basic problem of modern business: that the managers think of groups of customers only as market segments, and don't realize that they are dealing with people.

Howard Luck Gossage (1986, p. 146): "When advertisers speak of consumers they think they mean People, but they don't. A consumer is a functional being designed to

use whatever it is you have to sell. . . . all mouth or belly, but with just one foot in these hydromatic days. His structure will, of course, vary considerably depending on whether one is selling toothpaste, brassieres, or toilet paper."

When the consumer loses a face and identity, it is easy for a company's employees to not even realize there is a disconnect between consumer sales and potential customer abuse. It is the source of periodic gag lines in Dilbert cartoons, but the problems of an impersonal marketplace are very real as sales take precedence over a concern for the people who might be purchasers.

In the wake of various business scandals two decades ago, college and university business programs started to require ethics courses "to create more ethical managers," or so the faculty were told. But the problem is more basic than ever could be corrected by any academic course. When dealing with groups of consumers, humans labeled by their ability or interest in buying products, there is no person seen to be harmed by the amoral impersonal practices of various managers. As the managers seek to serve consumer "needs," they lose track of the needs of these same consumers as people, or the needs of society itself (Rotfeld 2001).

As a scholar and educator dealing with advertising, a constant part of my class discussions are the numerous examples of dumb and offensive advertising. Gas-guzzling, fuel-inefficient, oversized SUVs are "excused" by the same stream of media logic that managers use to explain their publication or broadcast of the numerous advertising messages for products that falsely claim to painlessly and swiftly alter human anatomy.

David Ogilvy (1963): "The consumer is not an idiot. She is your wife."

To make better advertising, Ogilvy, the late great icon of the advertising business, directed work toward thinking of the people who receive the messages as individuals. Yet the business environment and focus of decision making is in the other direction.

Modern surveys of general public views increasingly find people who define unethical as synonymous with getting caught. And to the business managers, there is no "person" harmed by cutting corners, withholding information, and doing whatever is needed to make a sale. To the identity thief, the victim is never met, so no one is really harmed, or so they might think.

Since many readers of *JCA* are university faculty, the distinction could be clear with examples from our own common magisterium of seeing education with students versus "classes."

Years ago, a teacher of a basic management course would come out of his office to proudly proclaim how low he had held down the grades in his class. In these days in which we face numerous criticisms of grade inflation, my recollection of his pride seems almost quaint. Yet I also recall seeing him visibly squirm when he later met with students whose grades were difficult decisions for him. Faced with a real person, he felt guilt or uncertainty as he explained that they deserved a B for the 89.5 point total.

My long-ago colleague was a scholar, a proud educator, but as class size grew, he never knew how to handle the increasing distance between himself and his students. His time was concerned more with academic standards and cheating prevention, with students he could not recognize flashing a student ID as they exited the final exam. And the students, in turn, acted as if each class was a trip to the movie theater, not seeing their own need to connect to the stranger on the stage.

Kim Rotzoll: "Hello, my friend."

Last fall, a year ago from this issue's publication, my doctoral advisor, academic father figure, and long-time friend, Kim Rotzoll, passed away. He spent more than three decades as a teacher, department head, and dean at a massive Big 10 university campus, yet he managed to know so many of the graduates as people. His greeting to everyone that came close to him made every student, graduate, and colleague feel that they were special. He wrote about advertising and society, and was a major force in advertising scholarship within his work on ethical decision making, yet in both of his areas of work, the emphasis came down to management decisions made by human beings that required understanding of people.

Some teachers are able to connect to individual students despite the restrictions of teaching to a couple of hundred bodies in the room. Like great entertainers, they make everyone present at the show feel like there is a personal connection. Better education comes from being able to make a connection, instead of just managing and assessing how many petty details are absorbed by every body in the room.

In business, better and more ethical decisions come when the managers realize they are dealing with individuals, with people, instead of faceless segments of consumers. Unfortunately, the modern trends are in the opposite direction. So the laws and consumers have to concentrate on handling the confusions and dangers in the marketplace.

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