

Problem solving occurs in at least three levels. The first level is best called firefighting.

Ch-ch-ch-ch changes... turn and face the strain

As an example, when someone has a heart attack the very first thing we do is have the person lie down and administer treatment to get the heart working somewhat normally so that the patient does not die. When this is done, you have saved a life. But, is the problem solved? No, of course not: we simply kept it from getting worse, and we have also removed much of the immediate pain and danger.

When the patient arrives at the hospital, additional drugs, rest and treatment are given to further alleviate the pain and provide symptomatic relief. If the patient is lucky, a few days later, he or she feels much better. Have we solved the problem? Of course not. Fast Company magazine reported in an article on change that three years after a cardiac incident fewer than 10% of the patients had stuck with any major changes in how they manage exercise, diet or stress in their lives.

This highlights the fact that most of us never truly solve problems; we simply deal with the symptoms. There are several reasons for this:

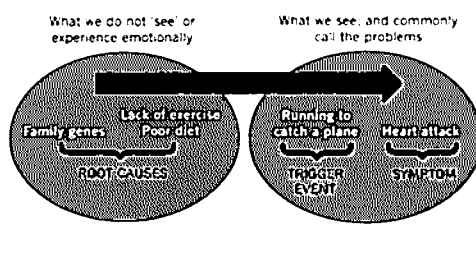
- 01. Once the pain is reduced, there is less, or even no, motivation to further problem solve.
- 02. The underlying causes are not as clearly linked to the problem as the intermediate causes.
- 03. All human beings and all organisations have built in defences to protect them against the emotional discomfort of their own view or behaviour being challenged.
- 04. There is often a sense of comfort in supporting the root cause factors.

The cause and effect diagram (figure 1) illustrates the above four points. The circle on the right shows how we usually experience a problem. When we remove the triggering event (running) and reduce the pain (heart attack), we are done. We feel better and move on to other problems or relax and enjoy a good meal.

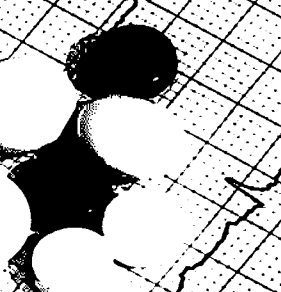
Two other "truths" about how we operate as humans and thus as business owners or managers are relevant to complete the picture.

- 01. All decision-making is emotionally driven. Of course we like to think we are rational, but the history of good and bad business decisions shows that the decisions we make have a strong emotional driver. Think how easy it would be for people to stop smoking and start exercising and eating well if we were truly rational.
- 02. Pain, or fear of pain, largely sets our priorities. Napoleon observed that all men are moved by fear or love and that fear was a more reliable motivator. In leading some three dozen major organisational change efforts it became clear to me that most were initiated by the pain or fear of poor performance. These were great motivators until enough improvements were made that the pain/fear dropped significantly. Then the client typically lost interest, focus and commitment to the changes. Only by understanding this tendency and by creating structures to prevent it will the change and improvements continue.

Fig 1



Thus, we find this frightening perspective in how we treat our own health and in how all businesses address problems. We vigorously attack the symptoms and rarely attack the underlying causes.



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Most of us never truly solve problems; we simply deal with the symptoms

We featured a trailer on transparency in our Bulletpoints column in August. Here is the full story from Trendwatching.com



Transparency tyranny or transparency triumph?

The non-competitive and the downright incompetent have very few stones left to hide under: never before have consumers' purchasing decisions been so strongly influenced by all kinds of transparency. In fact, transparency tyranny now rules.

Old economy fog is clearing: no longer can incompetence, below par performance, ignored global standards, antisocial and anti-eco behaviour, or opaque pricing be obscured. In its place has come a transparent, fully informed marketplace, where producers have no excuse left to underperform. Transparency tyranny for some, transparency triumph for others.

Transparency in action

Anyone who wants to see transparency in action should spend a few hours on flyertalk.com, igougo.com or TripAdvisor.com. The last site alone boasts more than 20m visitors each month and has amassed close to five million registered users and over seven million reviews and opinions covering 23,000 sites and 180,000 hotels, as well as more than 540,000 candid traveller photos of 40,000 hotels.

It's not just travel, though. Countless other sites, from opinions to Amazon, are inviting consumers to share their experiences on everything from kitchen knives to cars. No wonder some brands feel that transparency of reviews and recommendations has reached its zenith. However, what's out there today is nothing compared to the transparency madness that brands will have to deal with over the next few years.

One billion-plus consumers are now online and the majority of them have been online for years. Simply put: there will be many more consumers posting reviews and they will increasingly consider them an integral part of their relationships with brands and businesses. As more people are contributing, the sheer mass of reviews will lead to daily and, who knows, even hourly reviews on any topic imaginable.

One of the more pleasant side effects of the above is that mass postings will also unmask, outnumber and thus neutralise fake reviews posted by desperate brands trying to piggyback on the power of the transparency trend.

Transparency tyranny is also fuelling the trysumers trend: reviews on anything, any time diminish the risk of disappointment and of buying a lemon, and will empower and entice buyers to explore the niche side of consumerism like never before.

Transparency tools

Millions upon millions of eager consumer reviewers have at

their disposal an ever more technolusty arsenal of tools and sites, which help them to capture and expose their experiences, multi-media style.

As camera and video phones become both ubiquitous and more powerful, reviews of anything and everything will go multimedia (worldwide sales of camera phones accounted for 48% of total worldwide mobile phone sales in 2006, and will grow to 81% by 2010, according to new forecasts from Gartner Inc).

The impact? Well, a picture says more than a thousand words and a video says more than a thousand pictures. Everything brands do or don't do will end up on YouTube or on an undoubtedly soon-to-be-launched YouTube-clone dedicated to product reviews. Also, keep an eye out for "live" reviews, encouraged by companies like Comvu.com, which bills itself as the world's first live video broadcast service for 3G mobile phones and other portable platforms.

Let's not forget (maddening) phone conversations between customers and help desks, call centres, salespeople and customer service departments. With telephone calls rapidly moving to internet phone services like Skype, it will be easier than ever to record them. Case in point: plug-ins like KishKish, SAM and Hot Recorder can automatically record Skype and IM conversations.

What else? As mass always paves the way for niche, expect every industry, every sector, every product to get its own TripAdvisor. Case in point: niche-champion seatguru.com, "The ultimate source for airplane seating", was just bought by... TripAdvisor. Fasten your seatbelts for many more upstarts and M&A deals in this space.

Transparency intentions

Oh, and what if consumers not only share post-purchase reviews with the rest of the world, but also make their buying intentions transparent as well? For some inspiration, take a cue from these "intention 2.0" firms that are shaking up the traditionally not-so-transparent world of real estate in Finland, the UK, The Netherlands and the US.

Finnish real estate site Igglo.fi lets potential buyers "pre-order" houses that aren't on the market, Igglo has photographed every building in Helsinki and several other Finnish cities, and combines these photographs with satellite images and maps. Every property is listed, not just those that are currently on the market. Their tagline is: "Your house is already on Igglo."

Potential buyers can earmark a building, street or neighbourhood they're interested in, and post offers online.