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Monthly Motivation 11 – Judging the Source

In a generation we have seen an explosion in information resources. What once required a trip to the library, personal consultation or a phone call to a provider is now readily available to us, often unsolicited, through a broad range of media. Some messages are delivered overtly through television commercials or print advertisements that appeal to you taking a specifically stated deliberate action. Other messages are much more subtle and likely to cause problems in your life.

The first measure to keep in mind when objectively analyzing a message is to determine the motivation of the sender of the message. For commercials and print advertisement this is obvious and should lead to immediate suspicion as to the veracity of any claims or inducements. Their goal is to separate you and your money. Passing that first hurdle does not validate a claim though. You should also practice applying a logic measure to the claim. A Prilosec OTC commercial featuring Larry the Cable Guy is illustrative. Larry propounds the argument that the best way to manage heartburn is to prevent it. True enough. So far so good. He continues by suggesting that the effective way to accomplish that desired result is to ingest a specific chemical cocktail -- Prilosec OTC -- prior to consuming “foods” known to you to cause heartburn.

I can't speak directly about the experience of heartburn as it does not happen to me but I can clearly make the case that Larry's argument is illogical. What he has done is use a psychological technique called 'priming' to condition you to accepting his intended message. True enough the best management strategy for any ailment, whether it be heartburn, is prevention. What is not true is the implied message that the adverse result is best prevented by ingesting a commercially developed chemical product. If, however, you come to understand and accept that heartburn is not a natural consequence of healthy eating it becomes obvious that maintaining a diet consisting of only food which is absorbed in a proper manner is the best way to avoid heartburn.

I could expand this month's message about judging the source to the level of a book covering all aspects of life but instead I will keep it brief. For most of you lightly touching upon the food industry will be sufficient.

There are few things in our lives that are a need – air, water, sleep, food and discharging that which we have consumed – but amongst all, we will spend more money regularly on food. Food marketers know this which is why so much money and effort has been expended into conditioning our eating habits. The result of being rushed is to purchase processed and preassembled “foods” either at the grocery or through a drive-thru rather than practice effective time management skills. Rather than build meaningful social relations and engage in fulfilling spiritual practices these profiteers of misery would have you believe that happiness can be achieved by food consumption either in isolation or socially.

Marketers have taken a new approach to social aspects of food. In recent years marketing professionals have demonstrated a strong liking to social media and are now expending great efforts to effect purchasing decisions via that medium. Endorsements by athletes, celebrities and the like have often been used to affect purchasing decisions. This impact is muted in some people by the obvious motivation of the claimant – to get paid. Angie's List grew upon the concept that non-compensated peer review is a better source of information by which to make purchasing decisions. As has often been said about providers, the best compliment is a recommendation. You are much more likely to follow the advice of someone you know and trust than a paid celebrity. This concept hasn't been lost on those trying to extract your money from you. Fabricated reviews and reviewers are not uncommon.

Social media is being exploited to capitalize upon these truisms. Your “friends” are now being used as the medium to convey commercial messages to you. Businesses create photo opportunities at venues where you are having a wonderful time and can easily “share” those moments. The fun is rarely directly related to the product but you will find the product name prominently displayed in the photo – thereby establishing the subconscious psychological connection between fun and the product. There is also the manner by which “grassroots campaigns” are initiated and shared through social media. Videos or photos that “go viral” are many times spontaneous actions by non-compensated regular folks but more often they are now being produced by marketers using staged scenarios or paid actors which do not represent an overt message. Just because a friend shared it with you no longer means it carries the same weight that a personal endorsement used to carry.

On a daily basis we are bombarded with commercial messages. Now more than ever these are cloaked in a delivery intended to touch us personally. We used to only have to question who is the “they” who dispenses or follows all the truisms that we'd hear. Stream of logic disruptions have always been a way to confront false claims but those are becoming more challenging, especially to the passive viewer or listener. Always be cognizant of the “logic” that is used to support the message.

Logical conundrums aside there is a much easier way to judge the credibility of a message. Look to the source – Larry the Cable Guy – that is providing the advice. Counting on this bumbling, fat, buffoon for healthcare advice is the equivalent of seeking financial counseling from M.C. Hammer.

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