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# **THIS IS MARKETING**

**You Can't be Seen Until You Learn to See**

# **SETH GODIN**



# THIS IS MARKETING

In 2018, Seth Godin was inducted into the AMA Marketing Hall of Fame. That's the culmination of more than thirty years of teaching, leading, starting, collaborating, failing, engaging and seeking.

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# ➤ THIS IS ➤ MARKETING

You Can't be Seen Until You Learn to See



**Seth Godin**



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For Leo, Anna, Mo, Sammy, Alex, Bernadette, and Shawn . . .  
And for all the fresh voices that make our lives better



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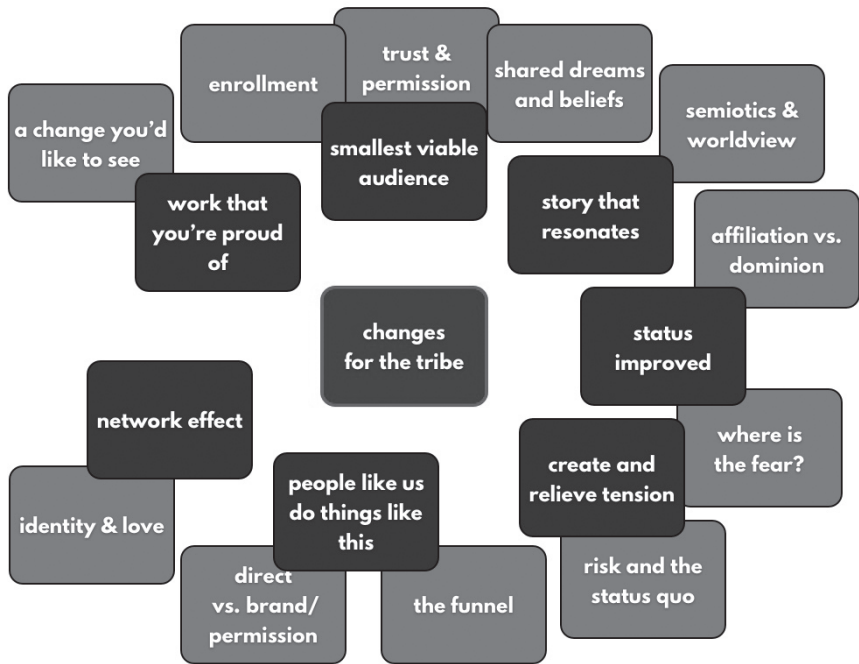
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[a sketch to show you what's to come]

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Marketing is all around us. From your very first memories to the moment before you opened this book, you've been inundated by marketing. You learned to read from the logos on the side of the road, and you spend your time and your money in response to what marketers have paid to put in front of you. Marketing, more than a lake or a forest, is the landscape of our modern lives.

Because marketing has been done to us for so long, we take it for granted. Like the fish who doesn't understand water, we fail to see what's actually happening, and don't notice how it's changing us.

It's time to do something else with marketing. To make things better. To cause a change you'd like to see in the world. To grow your project, sure, but mostly to serve the people you care about.

The answer to just about every question about work is really the question, "Who can you help?"

## This is marketing

- Marketing seeks *more*. More market share, more customers, more work.
- Marketing is driven by better. Better service, better community, better outcomes.
- Marketing creates culture. Status, affiliation, and people like us.
- Most of all, marketing is change.
- Change the culture, change your world.
- Marketers make change happen.
- Each of us is a marketer, and each of us has the ability to make more change than we imagined. Our opportunity and our obligation is to do marketing that we're proud of.

## How tall is your sunflower?

That's what most people seem to care about. How big a brand, how much market share, how many online followers. Too many marketers spend most of their time running a hype show, trying to get just a little bigger.

The thing is, tall sunflowers have deep and complex root systems. Without them, they'd never get very high.

This is a book about roots. About anchoring your work deeply in the dreams, desires, and communities of those you seek to serve. It's about changing people for the better, creating work

you can be proud of. And it's about being a driver of the market, not simply being market-driven.

We can do work that matters for people who care. If you're like most of my readers, I don't think you'd have it any other way.

### **It's not going to market itself**

The best ideas aren't instantly embraced. Even the ice cream sundae and the stoplight took years to catch on.

That's because the best ideas require significant change. They fly in the face of the status quo, and inertia is a powerful force.

Because there's a lot of noise and a lot of distrust. Change is risky.

And because we often want others to go first.

Your most generous and insightful work needs help finding the people it's meant to serve. And your most successful work will spread because you designed it to.

### **Marketing isn't just selling soap**

When you give a TED Talk, you're marketing.

When you ask your boss for a raise, you're marketing.

When you raise money for the local playground, you're marketing.

And yes, when you're trying to grow your division at work, that's marketing too.

For a long time, during the days when marketing and advertising were the same thing, marketing was reserved for vice presidents with a budget.

And now it's for you.

### **The market decides**

You've built something amazing. You have a living to make. Your boss wants more sales. That nonprofit you care about, an important one, needs to raise money. Your candidate is polling poorly. You want the boss to approve your project . . .

Why isn't it working? If creating is the point, if writing and painting and building are so fun, why do we even care if we're found, recognized, published, broadcast, or otherwise commercialized?

Marketing is the act of making change happen. Making is insufficient. You haven't made an impact until you've changed someone.

Changed the boss's mind.

Changed the school system.

Changed demand for your product.

You can do this by creating and then relieving tension. By establishing cultural norms. By seeing status roles and helping to change them (or maintain them).

But first, you need to see it. Then you need to choose to work with human beings to help them find what they're looking for.

## How to know if you have a marketing problem

You aren't busy enough.

Your ideas aren't spreading.

The community around you isn't what it could be.

The people you care about aren't achieving everything they hoped.

Your politician needs more votes, your work isn't fulfilling, your customers are frustrated . . .

If you see a way to make things better, you now have a marketing problem.

## The answer to a movie

Filmmaker and showrunner Brian Koppelman uses the expression "the answer to a movie," as if a movie is a problem.

But, of course, it is. It's the problem of unlocking the viewer (or the producer, or the actor, or the director). To gain enrollment. To have them let you in. To get a chance to tell your story, and then, even better, to have that story make an impact.

Just as a movie is a problem, so is the story of your marketing. It has to resonate with the listener, to tell them something they've been waiting to hear, something they're open to believing. It has to invite them on a journey where a change might happen. And then, if you've opened all those doors, it has to solve the problem, to deliver on the promise.

You have a marketing question, and it's possible that there's an answer.

But only if you look for it.

### **Marketing your work is a complaint on the way to better**

They say that the best way to complain is to make things better.

It's difficult to do that if you can't spread the word, can't share those ideas, or can't get paid for the work you do.

The first step on the path to make things better is to make better things.

But better isn't only up to you. Better can't happen in a vacuum.

Better is the change we see when the market embraces what we're offering. Better is what happens when the culture absorbs our work and improves. Better is when we make the dreams of those we serve come true.

Marketers make things better by making change happen.

Sharing your path to better is called marketing, and you can do it. We all can.

For more on the ideas in this book, please visit  
[www.TheMarketingSeminar.com](http://www.TheMarketingSeminar.com)

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## ► CHAPTER ONE ◄

# **Not Mass, Not Spam, Not Shameful . . .**

Marketing has changed, but our understanding of what we're supposed to do next hasn't kept up. When in doubt, we selfishly shout. When in a corner, we play small ball, stealing from our competition instead of broadening the market. When pressed, we assume that everyone is just like us, but uninformed.

Mostly, we remember growing up in a mass market world, where TV and the Top 40 hits defined us. As marketers, we seek to repeat the old-fashioned tricks that don't work anymore.

### **The compass points toward trust**

Every three hundred thousand years or so, the north pole and the south pole switch places. The magnetic fields of the Earth flip.

In our culture, it happens more often than that.

And in the world of culture change, it just happened. The true north, the method that works best, has flipped. Instead of selfish mass, effective marketing now relies on empathy and service.

In this book, we're working together to solve a set of related problems. How to spread your ideas. How to make the impact you seek. How to improve the culture.

There isn't an obvious road map. No simple step-by-step series of tactics. But what I can promise you is a compass: a true north. A recursive method that will get better the more you use it.

This book is based on a hundred-day seminar, one that involves not just lessons but peer-to-peer coaching around shared work. In [TheMarketingSeminar.com](http://TheMarketingSeminar.com) we assemble thousands of marketers and challenge them to go deeper, to share their journey, to challenge each other to see what truly works.

As you read through, don't hesitate to backtrack, to redo an assumption, to question an existing practice—you can adjust, test, measure, and repeat.

Marketing is one of our greatest callings. It's the work of positive change. I'm thrilled that you're on this journey, and I hope you'll find the tools you need here.

## **Marketing is not a battle, and it's not a war, or even a contest**

Marketing is the generous act of helping someone solve a problem. Their problem.

It's a chance to change the culture for the better.

Marketing involves very little in the way of shouting, hustling, or coercion.

It's a chance to serve, instead.

The internet is the first mass medium that wasn't invented to make marketers happy. Television was invented to hold TV ads, and radio was invented to give radio ads a place to live.

But the internet isn't built around interruption and mass. It's the largest medium, but it's also the smallest one. There's no mass, and you can't steal attention for a penny the way your grandparents' companies did. To be really clear: the internet feels like a vast, free media playground, a place where all your ideas deserve to be seen by just about everyone. In fact, it's a billion tiny whispers, an endless series of selfish conversations that rarely include you or the work you do.

### **The magic of ads is a trap that keeps us from building a useful story**

For a long time, the most efficient way for a commercial enterprise to make large-scale change was simple: buy ads. Ads worked. Ads were a bargain. Ads paid for themselves. Besides, they were fun to make. You could buy a lot all at once. They made you (or your brand) a little famous. And they were reliable: money spent equaled sales made.

Is it any wonder that, pretty quickly, marketers decided that advertising was what they did? For most of my lifetime, marketing *was* advertising.

And then it wasn't true anymore.

*Which means you'll need to become a marketer instead.*

That means seeing what others see. Building tension. Aligning with tribes. Creating ideas that spread. It means doing the

hard work of becoming driven by the market and working with (your part of) that market.

### On getting the word out (precisely the wrong question)

“How do I get the word out?”

The SEO expert promises that you will be found when people search for you.

The Facebook consultant tells you how to interrupt just the right people.

The PR professional promises articles and mentions and profiles.

And Don Draper, David Ogilvy, and the rest will trade your money for ads. Beautiful, sexy, effective ads.

All to get the word out.

But that’s not marketing, not anymore. And it doesn’t work, not anymore.

We’re going to talk about how you’ll be discovered. *But it’s the last part, not the first.*

Marketing is important enough to do right, which means doing the other part first.

### Shameless marketers brought shame to the rest of us

A short-term, profit-maximizing hustler can easily adopt a shameless mind-set. Spamming, tricking, coercing. Is there any other profession that proudly does this?

You won't find civil engineers who call senior citizens in the middle of the night to sell them worthless collectible coins. You won't hear of accountants who extract customers' data without permission, or orchestra conductors who proudly post fake reviews online.

This shameless pursuit of attention at the expense of the truth has driven many ethical and generous marketers to hide their best work, to feel shame about the prospect of being market-driven.

That's not okay.

The other kind of marketing, the effective kind, is about understanding our customers' worldview and desires so we can connect with them. It's focused on being missed when you're gone, on bringing more than people expect to those who trust us. It seeks volunteers, not victims.

There's a groundswell of people doing marketing because they know they can make things better. They're prepared to engage with the market because they know they can contribute to our culture.

People like you.

## **The lock and the key**

It doesn't make any sense to make a key and then run around looking for a lock to open.

The only productive solution is to find a lock and then fashion a key.

It's easier to make products and services for the customers you seek to serve than it is to find customers for your products and services.

## **Marketing doesn't have to be selfish**

In fact, the best marketing never is.

Marketing is the generous act of helping others become who they seek to become. It involves creating honest stories—stories that resonate and spread. Marketers offer solutions, opportunities for humans to solve their problems and move forward.

And when our ideas spread, we change the culture. We build something that people would miss if it were gone, something that gives them meaning, connection, and possibility.

The other kind of marketing—the hype, scams, and pressure—thrives on selfishness. I know that it doesn't work in the long run, and that you can do better than that. We all can.

## **Case Study: Penguin Magic**

Hocus has left the building.

Penguin Magic is the sort of company that they invented the internet for.

You may have grown up near a magic shop. There's still one in my little town. Dimly lit, with fake wood paneling, almost certainly with the owner manning the counter. While he may have loved the work, he certainly wasn't very successful.

Today, if you care about magic, you know about Penguin

Magic. It's not the Amazon of magic tricks (because being the Amazon of anything is difficult indeed). Instead, it has grown to significant size by being very different from Amazon and by understanding precisely what its audience wants, knows, and believes.

First, every trick for sale on the site is demonstrated with a video. That video, of course, doesn't reveal how the trick is done, so tension is created. If you want to know the secret, you'll need to buy the trick.

To date, their videos, on the site and on YouTube, have been seen more than a billion times. A billion views with no cost of distribution.

Second, the people who run the site realized that professional magicians rarely buy tricks, because they only need ten or twenty regular tricks in their bag. Since the audience changes every night, they don't worry about repeating themselves.

An amateur, on the other hand, always has the same audience (friends and family) and so he's hooked on constantly changing the routine.

Third, every trick is reviewed in detail. Not reviewed by the knuckleheads who hang out on Yelp or Amazon, but reviewed by other magicians. It's a tough crowd, but one that appreciates good work. There are more than eighty-two thousand product reviews on the site.

As a result, the quality of stock on Penguin cycles very rapidly. Creators see their competitors' work immediately, giving them an impetus to make something even better. Instead of a production cycle measured in years, it might take only a month

for an idea to go from notion to product on Penguin. To date, they've carried more than sixteen thousand different items on their site.

Going forward, Penguin continues to invest in building connections not just with the community (they have an email list of tens of thousands of customers) but across it as well. They've hosted three hundred lectures, which have become the TED Talks of magic, as well as going into the field and running nearly a hundred live conventions.

The more magicians learn from each other, the more likely that Penguin will do well.

### **You're not a cigar-smoking fat cat**

You don't work for a soap company. You're not an obsolete industrial marketer.

So why are you acting like one?

Your Kickstarter is nearing its deadline, so sure, you have a good excuse to spam every "influencer" you know, begging for a link. But they ignore you.

You work for a content marketing company, and you obsessively track how many clicks your articles get, even though the crap you write embarrasses you.

You make graphs of how many Instagram followers you have, even though you know everyone else simply buys followers.

You lower your price because people tell you your rates are too high, but it doesn't seem to help.

It's all the same old thing—the industrialized selfish same-old, made modern for a new generation.

Your emergency is not a license to steal my attention. Your insecurity is not a permit to hustle me or my friends.

There's a more effective way. You can do it. It's not easy, but the steps are well lit.

### **It's time**

Time to get off the social media merry-go-round that goes faster and faster but never gets anywhere.

Time to stop hustling and interrupting.

Time to stop spamming and pretending you're welcome.

Time to stop making average stuff for average people while hoping you can charge more than a commodity price.

Time to stop begging people to become your clients, and time to stop feeling bad about charging for your work.

Time to stop looking for shortcuts, and time to start insisting on a long, viable path instead.

## » CHAPTER TWO ◀

# The Marketer Learns to See

In 1983, I was a very young and inexperienced brand manager at Spinnaker, the startup software company I joined after business school. Suddenly, I had millions of dollars in my budget, fancy lunches with ad reps that I didn't ask for, and an urgent need: to get the word out about the software my amazing team had created.

I wasted *all* that ad money. The ads didn't work because the ads were ignored. Somehow, though, the software sold.

Over the years, I've launched dozens and dozens of projects and sold goods and services to businesses and individuals. I've worked with Jay Levinson, the father of Guerrilla Marketing, with Lester Wunderman, the godfather of direct mail, and Bernadette Jiwa, the doyenne of storytelling. My ideas have built billion-dollar companies and raised nearly that much for important charities.

Mostly, the journey has involved noticing what works and trying to understand what doesn't. It's been an ongoing experiment of trial and error (mostly error) with projects and organizations I care about.

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And now I have a compass for what marketing is today, about the human condition, and about our culture. This approach is simple, but it's not easy to embrace, because it involves patience, empathy, and respect.

The marketing that has suffused our entire lives is not the marketing that you want to do. The shortcuts using money to buy attention to sell average stuff to average people are an artifact of another time, not the one we live in now.

You can learn to see how human beings dream, decide, and act. And if you help them become better versions of themselves, the ones they seek to be, you're a marketer.

## Marketing in five steps

The **first step** is to invent a thing worth making, with a story worth telling, and a contribution worth talking about.

The **second step** is to design and build it in a way that a few people will particularly benefit from and care about.

The **third step** is to tell a story that matches the built-in narrative and dreams of that tiny group of people, the smallest viable market.

The **fourth step** is the one everyone gets excited about: spread the word.

The **last step** is often overlooked: show up—regularly, consistently, and generously, for years and years—to organize and lead and build confidence in the change you seek to make. To earn permission to follow up and to earn enrollment to teach.

As marketers, we get to consistently do the work to help the

idea spread from person to person, engaging a tribe as you make change happen.

## **This Is Marketing: An executive summary**

Ideas that spread, win.

Marketers make change happen: for the smallest viable market, and by delivering anticipated, personal, and relevant messages that people actually want to get.

Marketers don't use consumers to solve their company's problem; they use marketing to solve other people's problems. They have the empathy to know that those they seek to serve don't want what the marketer wants, don't believe what they believe, and don't care about what they care about. They probably never will.

At the heart of our culture is our belief in status, in our self-perceived understanding of our role in any interaction, in where we're going next.

We use status roles and our decisions about affiliation and dominion to decide where to go and how to get there.

Persistent, consistent, and frequent stories, delivered to an aligned audience, will earn attention, trust, and action.

Direct marketing is not the same as brand marketing, but they are both based on our decision to make the right thing for the right people.

"People like us do things like this" is how each of us understands culture, and marketers engage with this idea every day.

Ideas move through a slope. They skate through the early