

CHAPTER SIX

GO NEGATIVE!

“The strong live off the weak, and the clever live off the strong.”

NEIL STRAUSS

Tell me if you’ve heard this one:

A politician, at the start of his campaign, throws down the gauntlet, holds a big press conference for the world to hear, and says, “On this campaign, I refuse to run negative ads against my opponent.”

(No, this is not the setup for a joke.)

It seems like politicians are constantly swearing up and down that they’re not going to “go negative,” that they’re going to run a “clean, positive campaign” and “focus attention on the issues” instead of mud-slinging.

If this were the case, though, how come we're all bombarded with negative ads seemingly 24/7 during campaign season?

As a political marketer, let me make one thing clear: if our client's opponent swears off negative ads, that's the moment we lick our chops and go in for the kill.

Politics is a chess game. I've been doing this for over twenty years, and I've seen all kinds of strategies play out on the national stage when it comes to electing a president to a smaller stage like electing a local mayor. I've rarely seen someone win without, to some extent, going negative.

It's not always about decapitating your opponent. It's about drawing comparisons that make the voters question our opponent *just enough*. If done skillfully—for example, with humor—a negative ad isn't a hatchet job. If done correctly, the target of the ad might nervously laugh at it and says to their own staff, “Can you believe they did that? What an idiot. No one will take this seriously.” It takes a certain amount of time before they realize people *do* take it seriously, and the paralysis of fear sets in. They wonder what they should do, if they should respond. They decide to make some noise in retaliation. By the time they respond, though, if you're running a committed campaign, you're already running the next ad blunting their response.

You've put yourself one step ahead of them, and they're stuck playing the reactive game while your candidate stays on offense, thus continuing to innovate.

This tactic works in business just as well as it works in politics, and we see it all the time. Remember the “Get a Mac” campaign? Young, casual, hipster-looking guy explaining Apple product features to the camera, while an older nerd in an ill-fitting suit tries to counter with what PCs can do? These ads were everywhere back in the mid-2000s; Apple made hundreds of them. Nowhere in the ads, though, is it explicitly stated that PCs, or the Windows operating system, are *bad*—there's simply a comparison drawn between the two operating systems that leaves PCs looking like the inferior product.

Combine Apple's ingenious negative ad campaign with their concurrent innovations with the iPod and the very first iPhone, and you've got a recipe for launching their business into the stratosphere. Which is precisely what happened.

The strong live off the weak, and the clever live off the strong. If you can gain ground by drawing a comparison to your competitor in which you come off as the better choice, you should do it. This is especially true if you're the underdog in your market; going negative starts to look more like

David taking on Goliath in that context. And you don't have to choose only one competitor; once you decide you're going to draw negative comparisons, if you're clever and skilled about it, you can play the stronger players in the marketplace off each other as well—to your advantage.

GO AGAINST THE GRAIN

I want to be very clear: most business owners don't have the courage to implement this type of strategy.

But I promise that if you do implement it, and do it well, you will win.

Something to keep in mind: if your business has a Board of Advisors or shareholders, they are never going to want you to go negative. This goes back to their inherent bias toward the status quo, and the paralysis of fear. Simply put, most people are scared to rock the boat even slightly. They don't want to come off looking like the bad guy, or won't consider it because they think their business is successful enough. They're also terrified that their reputation will be laid bare if key distinctions are drawn between the company and its competitors.

They're not entirely wrong—after all, it's harder to hide your flaws when you're pointing out those of others.

However, where this fear really stems from is what I talked about in Chapter Five; it comes from the fear of showing too much personality and accidentally offending people. Many companies rely on canned, filtered, focus-group-tested, completely neutered messaging to speak to the lowest common denominator and avoid making a splash. But if you think about it, how does that make you different, make you stand out in your market? What is your key driver that makes you both relevant *and* unique?

The companies that live in that space, stuck in the status quo, will never break out the way Apple did, or rise to the success of a smaller company that's willing to show some humanity.

When Apple launched its “Get a Mac” campaign, what did they have to lose? They were the underdog in that particular market, and they had the unbelievable benefit of being led by one of the greatest innovators of our time, Steve Jobs. Jobs saw that the vast majority of the market belonged to PCs, because PCs were considered “business machines,” and Macs were “for artists.” The only way to break out and put the PC market on the defensive was to “go negative,” and draw the obvious comparisons not just in function and feature set, but in the very personality of the product's average user. The genius of the “Get a Mac” campaign was not that it pitted PC versus Mac, but that,

at its core, it pitted old versus new, stodgy versus hip... uncool versus cool. At the end of the day, everyone wants to be cool. Customers who watched the ads saw a vision of Apple as the cool kids' table, and they wanted to join it.

In launching this campaign, however, Apple wasn't just throwing anything at the wall to see what stuck. In entirety, hundreds of Get a Mac ads were produced, but less than ninety were ever broadcast. Steve Jobs was careful and meticulous about which ads went out to the public—he chose ones that were subtle, implicit, comparison-based rather than overt.

Before the campaign launched, Apple had seen a dip in sales throughout 2005 and 2006. Just one month into the campaign, the company had sold 200,000 more Macs than usual, and Apple ended the year with a 39 percent increase in overall sales.

THE OTHER SIDE ISN'T BAD—YOUR SIDE IS JUST BETTER

A few years ago, I was the digital marketing and strategy consultant for a congressional candidate who had enough money to start up a campaign and not much beyond that. We needed to make a splash early to get him in the game.

We were the underdog going in. When I say “underdog,” I don’t mean we were number two out of two candidates; this was a candidate field of *six*, and we were number six. We had zero brand-name recognition—literally zero.

We knew immediately that we would need to go negative to make our candidate stand out, but it would be idiotically inefficient, not to mention unaffordable, to go after each opponent one by one. With limited funds, and next to no visibility, we decided that the best way to go negative was to lump all the opposing candidates together as one, and paint a picture of our client versus the whole group of them.

Again, when you have a small budget and short timeline, you have to innovate. You have to get creative. So we did.

We created a vision of our campaign as our client versus the “gang of five.” We tarred all our opponents with the same brush, creating them as a unified “other” group that we could pit against our candidate. We pointed out each of our opponents’ inconsistencies on tax cuts and healthcare, and how our candidate was the only one who they could trust on those issues. We defined our opponents months before they defined our client.

At first, because we were the last-place underdog in the race, all our opponents laughed at our strategy. We

were mocked soundly in the press. Then, as more ads started running, our opponents got confused. *Where is this coming from? Why are they doing this? This guy is in last place; ignore him.*

The paralysis of fear had set in with our competition, and meanwhile, we were still full steam ahead.

Instead of reacting to our barrage of Gang of Five ads, our opponents did the first thing politicians usually think of doing: they ran some polls and tried to validate their opinion that we were full of shit and our campaign was a joke. The trouble was, these polls came back with data that showed that we were on a trajectory to win the whole race.

Our no-name candidate, with a small start-up budget, shot from dead last to first place within two months.

This is the point where our opponents realized they needed to take action and respond, and by that point, we were four months into a five-month race. We had gone from the underdog to the cusp of an upset.

WHEN GOLIATH BRINGS HIMSELF DOWN

When you “go negative,” you’re on the offense, looking to put your opponent on the ropes—looking to make

them defend themselves. Most of the time, by the time they react, it's too late, and you've moved on. They've been permanently weakened. Sometimes, though, the defensive reaction is spectacularly ill-conceived, and your opponent does all the hard work for you—they self-sabotage, and it can be fatal.

If you think Mac versus PC was an ad war, think back a little further to the 1980s, and the era of the “cola wars.” Coca-Cola had always been the leader in the U.S. and international markets, and had easily outsold its closest competitor, Pepsi, since the 1950s. By the time the 1980s hit, Pepsi was willing to try comparison-based “negative” ads in an effort to gain ground in the U.S.

Pepsi came up with an ad campaign that was, in many ways, a spiritual predecessor to “Get a Mac;” they used celebrity spokespeople and current pop music to position themselves as the cola for the younger crowd, then subtly poked fun at Coke for being the “older generation’s cola.” It was a hugely successful campaign, and all it did was set up a paradigm of young versus old, then continually and frequently draw from that well.

Pepsi also used physical comparison to its advantage. The company came up with the “Pepsi Challenge,” and filmed the public constantly choosing the sweeter Pepsi

in a blind taste test of the two colas. Again, they never came out and said something overt like, “Coke is bad!” They merely set up a situation where any comparison would put them on top.

A few years into the 1980s, Coca-Cola had lost its majority share of the cola market, hammered by Pepsi’s negative ads. They were squarely on the defensive, and they spun out in the craziest, potentially stupidest, most disastrous fear-based reaction of all time.

Remember New Coke?

If you are old enough to remember it, but can only remember it very faintly, you can’t really be blamed, because New Coke was on and off shelves so quickly that if you blinked, you missed it. Coca-Cola spent all its attention—and \$4 million in development funding—to create a new cola that would consistently beat Pepsi in the Pepsi Challenge. According to the reportedly 100,000 people they tested in their market research, they were wildly successful in meeting this goal; they did indeed come up with a new cola that consistently beat both Pepsi and Original Coke in blind taste tests, one that was sweeter, much more similar to Pepsi, and more appealing to younger consumers. Done deal, right?

Then they launched New Coke, and their world came crashing down.

Coca-Cola fielded millions of angry calls and letters from people who wondered what the hell had happened to their favorite drink. They forgot an important point about blind taste tests: *context matters*. If the participants had known that their choice of New Coke over Original Coke meant that they couldn't have Original Coke anymore, there's no way they would have been as enthusiastic about New Coke. Coca-Cola lost sight of the critical importance of heavy and super-heavy purchasers of soft drinks, who are the top consumers of the product. In doing so, they alienated their own heavy and super-heavy users, mostly blue-collar men who drank multiple cans of Coke every day.

There was a national outcry, and the media started hammering them hard with “they blew it” stories. In just three months, Coca-Cola pulled all New Coke from shelves nationwide and replaced it with regular Coke in the familiar Coca-Cola branded can.

The company was left with \$30 million in unusable inventory, and a heavily beaten reputation. Pepsi didn't have to lift a finger—their competitor had self-immolated spectacularly.

The decision by Coca-Cola to research and develop a new flavor of their own product was, in the first place, a reactive measure. It was a decision born in the fear of losing market share to Pepsi's "young versus old" onslaught. It almost cost Coca-Cola their company.

Going negative, when done exactly right, costs you very little, and can cost your competition the whole ball game.

GOING NEGATIVE IS LEAN AND AMPLIFIES YOUR MEGAPHONE

To run a negative campaign, you don't need a lot of money. You don't need to outspend your competitor. You only need to outthink them.

One of the partners at my political marketing firm used a simple tactic once at the start of a political campaign when he needed to drum up name recognition for his client/candidate who lacked the resources to be competitive at the beginning of the campaign. He identified the neighborhoods where the opposing candidate lived, and he sent negative attack mailers and targeted geo-fenced digital ads directly to the friends, neighbors, relatives, and donors of that political opponent. It's the most precise of micro-targets, and it cost around \$3,000. The reach was incredibly

small, but it was a precision strike, and the amplification was massive.

When the mailer and digital ads hit, the friends, donors, and neighbors immediately called up that opposing candidate and warned him that he'd been attacked; just like clockwork, the opponent responded by holding a press conference condemning the attack. The press picked up the story. It became a huge story, and was instant name recognition and credibility for our client. As my partner put it, "Our newfound stature gave us huge name ID presence, and then helped us raise money and momentum, and we ultimately ended up winning the race not because of the inexpensive negative ad strategy, but because we used it initially to give our candidate momentum, and it worked. Our opponent walked right into the trap we had set up for him. We were playing chess while our competition played checkers."

For around \$3,000, they elicited a reaction from the candidate that sets the wheels in motion.

You don't need to outspend your opponent on the ads themselves, and you certainly don't need to spend a great deal of money on background when it comes to negative ads. Sure, we conduct opposition research on every candidate in the field; sure, oftentimes some juicy details are

brought to light as a result. But most of the time, the juiciest details are right there in the opposition's voting record.

We live in politically turbulent times, and if we're going after an opponent who's been in politics a while, there's bound to be something in their past, or even their present, that can be used to win for our clients, no matter which party they're from.

Recently, I worked on a U.S. Senate race that was the latest in a long line of difficult and close Senate races in 2012 and 2014. We'd seen that incumbents were in an especially perilous position. Our candidate was an incumbent, running against an upstart. We were at a disadvantage.

Luckily, our opponent in the race essentially did all our own opposition work for us, just by going about his usual business. Early in the race, he gave a speech to a local club about a hot-button issue that was probably better left unsaid. It wasn't a campaign speech, and it was early enough in the process that he probably didn't even consider it a speech the voters would know or care about. He just so happened to be running in a state where this issue was toxic.

Our side got a hold of the recording of his speech. We spent ten thousand dollars—pocket change, in the grand

scheme of advertising—to create a simple yet devastatingly effective pair of attack ads centering on our opponent’s missteps. We put the ad on YouTube and targeted it specifically to known primary voters in the opponent’s state in five media markets.

The ad was released in early February and got more than 750,000 views. There are *not* that many primary voters in this particular state; voters re-watched the ad multiple times. It had a huge effect. Our opponent’s favorable rating plummeted, and his unfavorable rating skyrocketed; by February 23, his unfavorables had increased by 233 percent. Almost before our opponent even realized he was running, he’d lost his state’s primary, and his campaign was over. We crushed him.

Creativity is key in constructing a negative ad strategy—again, it’s not about simply coming out swinging and lopping the head off your competitors. That would be dumb. The best negative ads are highly innovative and make use of social factors that will help spur the spread of publicity.

Sometimes two businesses can collaborate with a “going negative” strategy in such a unique way that it creates thousands, if not millions, of dollars in free marketing, and doesn’t negatively impact the company.

Take the example of Moe's Original Bar B Que and Chick-fil-A. Recently, in Mobile, Alabama, these two chains entered into a spitting contest on the marquee boards outside adjoining restaurants.

It started when Chick-fil-A announced a new Smokehouse BBQ Sandwich on its marquee board. Moe's fired back with a response:

Chick-fil-A

I thought we were friends

Open Sundays

The last bit was a jab, referring to Chick-fil-A's famous adherence to closing up shop Sundays, as the day of rest.

Chick-fil-A responded on its marquee board:

Moe's we miss you!

Let's be friends again!

Moe's responded with a curt reference to their new best friend, the "gentleman's club" down the street:

Chick-fil-A I'm with Diamonds now...

But it would be my pleasure

Diamonds joined in the fun (and free publicity, as, at this point, the feud had gone viral and was being shared thousands of times across social media platforms on their own marquee board:

Let her go, Moe

The “feud” escalated until Chick-fil-A asked for Moe’s famous white barbeque sauce recipe, and Moe responded:

Shyeah, we'll send it over

When pigs fly

The marquee signs were photographed daily, and the collection of all the signs in the chain of conversation was eventually posted on the Facebook page for Moe’s Bar B Que. It was shared over seven thousand times, and the amount of Likes it received was exponentially greater, rippling out into the public with each share.

Moe’s Bar B Que engineered a situation in which they were sure to receive the *best* kind of free publicity. It was the

kind of exposure and goodwill from the amused public that a company couldn't buy with a million dollars in ads.

Going negative is one of the most powerful tools in the underdog's arsenal, precisely because of how little it costs. You don't have to spend a significant portion of your marketing budget on implementing this strategy; you don't even have to scale your attack to the size of the campaign. Done well, a tiny, micro-targeted negative strategy pulled off for peanuts can have a greater effect than all the rest of your marketing efforts combined, and the only resource you need to bring to the table in spades is creativity.

IF IT DIDN'T WORK, WE WOULDN'T DO IT

Being in the business of political marketing, I hear the same thing all the time.

“I hate those negative campaign commercials during election season!”

Here's the thing: I believe that the people complaining about negative ads *do* truly hate them. And being a voter living in what is often a swing state, I've been hammered with my fair share of negative ads over the airwaves. I'll agree—it's annoying.

That doesn't change the fact that *it works*.

This is the point I really want to drill for business owners: going negative *works*.

Again, it's not about pulling out a grenade launcher and blowing your competitor off the map. Going negative isn't about standing up and yelling that the other side sucks. It's about carefully using the power of comparison to create underdog status, engage with your audience, and ultimately craft an environment where your customer draws their own negative conclusions about your competitor, and chooses you, all by themselves.

Business leaders, and especially shareholders of large companies, are terrified to use this strategy for many reasons, not least of which is their constant and unrelenting terror of offending anyone in the slightest way. Businesses are so afraid to go negative at all that most of them don't even dip their toe in the water. They're afraid to take any kind of chance that a comparison drawn between them and their competitor—even if they're the ones controlling the comparison—might reflect poorly back on them.

Here's my question: are you in business to grow? Are you in business to gain market share and make money? Or are you in the business of being the same as every competitor

in the marketplace? If it's the latter, continue to take the path of least resistance and "hope" you grow. Remember, you must be both relevant *and* unique to the customer—from *their* perspective, not yours.

Our culture of late is a feelings-driven, quick-to-offend nightmare landscape of customer opinion. Anything that can be construed as a direct attack from one company to another, or one candidate to another, spreads like wildfire on social media. It's no surprise that most businesses would rather avoid this key strategy, but you can avoid blowups entirely if you carefully and skillfully craft and target your negative campaign.

Refusing to go negative at all, though, is incredibly shortsighted. It's like a pilot who refuses to fly because the possibility exists that they'll screw up and crash the plane. Well, sure, that possibility exists, but here's a thought: *just don't screw up and crash the plane*. It's simple.

Direct attacks aren't always bad news for the attacking company, either. Like everything in the realm of negative advertising, it's all about skill.

T-Mobile recently pulled off a hell of a first strike at its biggest competitor, Verizon, with a single tweet. The CEO, John Legere, tweeted an article from *Business Insider* that

showed that T-Mobile customers are more loyal than Verizon's, Sprint's, or AT&T's. He appended the article with the following line:

Probably because we treat them like actual people and not dollar signs! Looking at you, @Verizon... 🙄

My favorite part of this story is that he punctuated his tweet with the side-eye emoji, a move both hilariously humanizing and middle-finger sarcastic towards the target of his attack tweet. It's everything I've been saying—don't be a robot! Legere showed personality, humor, creativity, and above all else, strong leadership.

Also, notice how he only called out the biggest competitor, Verizon? He didn't mention Sprint or AT&T. There was no need—the press who picked up the story did all that work for him.

Most importantly, this wasn't an organic tweet from one CEO to another (i.e., a direct attack). This was a promoted tweet from T-Mobile's marketers. They realized, as the underdog, that the most powerful tool at their disposal was going on the attack. Their skill—the way they humanized the message, injected some humor, and kept it casual—is what made that tweet successful.

INTERVIEW: PETER KLEIN

Peter Klein might be most famously known as Gary Vaynerchuk's father-in-law, but more importantly, he's a former Corporate Officer of the Gillette Company and Nabisco Foods, responsible for Strategy, Planning, Business Development, and Global Marketing Services. He's also the co-author of *Think to Win: Unleashing the Power of Strategic Thinking*.

I recently interviewed him about the concept of going negative. Here's what he had to say:

There are hard and soft reasons why companies don't do it—especially public companies. The board, and the key shareholders, don't want to see their brand in a negative way. In the 70s, 80s, and 90s, I remember tons of articles imploring companies not to go negative. They had headlines like, "The Negative Side of Negative Advertising."

The mindset of these companies is that they can only be positive to communicate a positive branded position.

But there may be middle ground—Bill Korn at Pepsi did the Coke vs. Pepsi taste test, and if anything, it elevated Pepsi big time. They felt they had a strong message on taste, especially with younger consumers, and felt they had a strategic imperative to pull the light and medium Coke drinkers into the Pepsi franchise. The result was incredibly strong, and it's what drove Coke to create New Coke, one of the biggest marketing disasters of all time within the consumer products' industry.

Negative advertising sells big. It breaks through the clutter.

The mindset that a positive brand has to run positive communication is old and outdated. You don't have to be doom and gloom, but you can and should go negative in a way that paints a comparison to your competition, and is positive for your product or service.

YOUR OFFENSE VERSUS THEIR DEFENSE

In the more than twenty years I've been in this business, I've learned that there's no worse place to be in a campaign than on the defensive.

This is not to say that we don't play defense on political campaigns; of course, we do. We have to. Our intent, however, is to be on offense *much* more than we're on defense. After all, when you're on offense, you have the ball. You can take it downfield for a touchdown. If you're on defense, the other team is the one with the ball, and you have to find a way to stop them, or create a turnover, before you can run it in for a touchdown. Offense is innovation.

When people, and especially business owners, are put on the defensive, they instinctively become paralyzed and reactive. They move too slowly, and when they finally do make a move, it's usually in the wrong direction. They're thinking emotionally; they're thinking with the primal

part of their brain that tells them, *everyone is looking at you. Everyone thinks you're the bad guy.* Their sole focus becomes merely convincing customers that they're *not* the bad guy.

It reminds me of the five stages of grief. I call it the five reactive stages a business owner goes through with a negative ad:

1. First, they laugh at the ad made against them, and mock the other side for running it. *They're clowns. No one is going to take this seriously!*
2. Then they freeze; they realize people might be taking it seriously, and become paralyzed by fear.
3. Next, they fall into bureaucratic chaos. They flail around reactively: *We have to do something about this! Everybody think of something to do! Let's hold a bunch of meetings to come up with a plan!*
4. Acceptance. They realize that the comparison has taken hold in the customers' minds, and they've been left in the dust by their opponent.
5. Finally, they take action. They try to run a counter-attack ad, usually far too late to make a difference—or, it flops with a thud.

While they're busy working through the five stages, the business owners on offense are out gaining market share.

Business is a blood sport. Tony Robbins calls business owners “gladiators.” Why would you hesitate to put everything you’ve got into your fight for market share?

By being creative and innovative, and crafting skilled messaging that plays on the psychology of not just your customers, but also your competitors, you can position yourself as the dominant force in your industry without actually owning the lion’s share of the market. Pepsi did this; they were the underdog on the block looking to prove something, and they were hungry and willing to mix it up. Against Coke, they were David versus Goliath. And with the simplest ad concept that played on the human needs for social capital and acceptance, they managed to put Coca-Cola on the defensive to the extent that the bigger company backpedaled and blundered its way into destroying the very thing that had made it a juggernaut in the first place.

Also, consider what environment you’re in—are you in a cutthroat industry? If your competition is using a “go negative” advertising strategy, and you aren’t, you’re running a major risk to your business. In politics, the day a candidate actually forbids their campaign team from engaging in negative ads is the day they lose. You have to play the game you’re in if you want to win.

You can put your competitors on the ropes and gain market

share before they even realize they've lost it. By going negative, you can catch them off guard, and take advantage of their confusion, frustration, fear, and paralysis. You can go from the underdog to the top dog. Most importantly, by humanizing your brand with creative negative advertising, you can create priceless engagement with your customers and brand loyalty that money can't buy.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF: BE BOLD. BE SMART. TRY GOING NEGATIVE.

If you're still on the fence about going negative, try this exercise:

1. Identify your company's largest competitor in the market.
2. Using the "Challenge Yourself" brainstorming method from Chapter Five—pen and paper, with no electronic distractions, for thirty-five minutes—think of two ways your business is better than your competitor's, in the ways that matter most to your customers.
3. Get your team together and brainstorm ways you can draw comparisons based on the above results.

If you're all-in on going negative, make it fun! Map out a large-scale, humorous attack wherein you publicly challenge your competitor on one key element that matters to your customers—a place where you shine, and where your competitor can't measure up. Create a press campaign for this challenge, and go BIG!

4. Bring in your marketing team and use research to align your thinking toward subtlety and creativity—and have them create ads that imply what your competitor is doing wrong by highlighting what you're doing right.

Bonus: How did this challenge work for you? Did you execute this in a smart way? If so, don't forget to check in with your fellow readers at <http://facebook.com/ceophillipstutts>. Remember, if you crush this challenge, I really want to hear about it—especially when I write the sequel to this book.