

A Marketing Strategy: Include a Smile

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Last week, as I was traveling to give two presentations at Milton Hershey School (MHS) in Hershey, PA, I read an article by Kara Baskin that was recently posted in the Harvard Business School's Working Knowledge online publication I was intrigued by the title, "[A Free Marketing Tool that Actually Works: Smiling.](#)" It reported on research conducted by Shunyuan Zhang, a faculty member at Harvard Business School, and several of her colleagues.

In my writings and presentations, I've described the power of seemingly small gestures, including warm greetings and smiles, in creating positive emotions that contribute to the formation of healthy, supportive relationships and our overall well-being. To highlight the importance of a smile, I've often remarked with some humor, "Don't you become a little concerned when a physician or mental health professional's receptionist looks glum and doesn't smile? Not a promising way to begin an appointment!" This comment often evokes both nods and laughter.

The significance of a smile appears early in a child's life. For parents or other caregivers who are reading this article, think about the first time your infant smiled in response to your smile. I remember the excitement I experienced with my sons Rich and Doug and later with my four grandchildren. I smiled. They smiled. I smiled again, experiencing a sense of elation. Our reciprocal smiles felt like a major milestone, a strong indication of the bond between parent and child.

Smiles of the Host

Given my belief in the importance of smiles, I was eager to learn about its "free" impact in the field of marketing. I was to learn that the marketing research examined Airbnb, where all hosts are required to post a profile photo on their website. Baskin noted that while Airbnb hosts might focus on pictures of "their high-end kitchens or sparkling swimming pools," they might be missing a more valuable marketing strategy that's free—using a photo that showed the host with a smile.

Zhang's studies found that "Airbnb photos with cheerful facial expressions leave renters with more positive impressions of the house, which significantly increases demand for their properties." A smile proved to be even more important if the property was located in what was

described as a “less desirable neighborhood.” It motivated renters when “they were uncertain about the quality of a person’s accommodations or had concerns about interacting with the property owners.”

In reviewing these findings, Baskin observed that “smiles can make a difference not only in travel and hospitality but in any industry where trust is paramount, including those focused on customer service.” Zhang specifically addressed the relevance of a smile in a doctor-patient relationship, wondering how a patient might evaluate a medical provider based on that person’s website photo, adding that research indicated that while a prospective patient is certainly interested in a physician’s training and expertise, “they’re still looking at photos and making inferences about personal traits and characteristics about the doctor such as their warmth, competence, and trustworthiness.”

As I reflected on Zhang’s research, I wondered, “Don’t most people who have photos of themselves on their websites select those in which they are smiling regardless of their professions or businesses?” Although the results may vary from one profession or business to another, Zhang found in the Airbnb study that while the majority of hosts smiled in their website photo, 25% did not. A host who smiled was perceived as more “warm and competent than those who didn’t, creating a ‘halo effect’ that reduces the uncertainty of staying at that person’s property and interacting with the host.”

The implications of Zhang’s study prompted a number of thoughts and questions. Might unscrupulous individuals use the knowledge gained from these kinds of studies to “manipulate” people to do things they don’t want to do? Of course, this question can be asked of any advertisement or marketing for goods or services. As a psychologist I have learned that information gained from various studies can be used in a manipulative or unethical way (we see that with the many scams that especially target vulnerable populations). In most instances, research should not be prohibited because of its possible misuse by unscrupulous people. Increasing our knowledge about what motivates behavior can serve a very useful function, such as in schools or the workplace.

Daniel Pink, author of one of my favorite books about motivation, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, reminds us in another thought-provoking book, *To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others* that while the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported one in nine Americans is employed in sales, “dig deeper and a startling truth

emerges: *so do the other eight*. Whether we're employees pitching colleagues a new idea, entrepreneurs enticing founders, or parents and teachers cajoling children to study, we spend our days trying to move others. Like it or not, we're all in sales now." While not everyone may agree with Pink's perspective, Zhang's research, as I noted earlier, can be applied in an ethical way to gain a clearer understanding of human behavior.

"Don't Smile Until Thanksgiving"

Another thought I had while reviewing Zhang's study related to views I had heard about the impact of teachers smiling. Those of you of a certain age may remember that years ago, many teachers were advised not to smile until Thanksgiving. The reason (as absurd as it sounds) was based on the idea that if you smiled early in the school year, students might perceive you as weak and take advantage of you. I believe that almost all of us now accept that a teacher smiling does not imply that they are lax in discipline or do not provide structure and high expectations. If anything, a teacher's smile, along with other positive behaviors, helps to nurture a warm, accepting relationship with students that enhances learning and improves behavior.

I continue to be amused when a discussion of not smiling until Thanksgiving comes up in one of my presentations for educators. I recall during one such conversation, a teacher, hearing about the Thanksgiving deadline, said, "Thanksgiving! In my school we were told not to smile until Christmas! I was cheated out of an additional four weeks of being allowed to smile!"

Children are keen observers of which teachers smile and which do not. I saw a seventh-grade student in therapy who struggled with learning problems and anxiety. He reported liking all of his teachers except one, noting, "She doesn't like me and she never smiles." He diagnosed her as having "paralysis of the mouth." I must admit that when I met her at a school conference I thought his diagnosis was accurate. While his other teachers smiled and even laughed during the meeting, she never smiled. I was tempted to ask her if she suffered from "paralysis of the mouth," but I thought that would not be a wise question to pose.

In reading about Zhang's work, I realized it was closely related to the research I described in [last month's article about the significance of saying hello](#) and smiling when interacting with a stranger. Doing so not only boosted a sense of belonging but in addition improved one's mood. It was another example of the ways in which seemingly small gestures proved to be very impactful.

A Fake Smile

Another question I've been asked is whether we can distinguish a genuine smile from a "phony" or "fake" smile. I think most of the time we can, especially given the context of the smile, although there may be times when it is not as easy to discern. I'm certain we have all experienced a sarcastic comment accompanied with a smile—there is little doubt that the smile serves as a façade for negative emotions that are bubbling near the surface. I vividly recall a school conference in which a teacher's smile while describing a student (my patient) looked anything like a warm, caring nonverbal expression; instead, her smile, which gave way to clenched teeth, revealed the anger and frustration she held for this student.

The Benefits of a Smile

Studies have identified benefits of a smile. A blog posted on the [West Jefferson Medical Center in Marrero, Louisiana](#) stated that the benefits included a stronger immune system, more positive mood, lower blood pressure, and lower heart rate. These positive results were explained, in part, by noting that "smiling releases endorphins along with neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin. These hormones can help you feel good, which in turn has all sorts of positive impacts on your mind and body."

The blog acknowledged that while there are benefits to smiling, sometimes it is difficult to feel joy or to smile in our very stressful, divisive world. They offered strategies to maintain and strengthen a "smile-y mindset." These included: engage in a gratitude practice at the end of the day in which you list things for which you are grateful; set aside time to watch something funny; smile and nod at people, even strangers (see last month's article); and although this may feel a little childish, smile while looking at yourself in the bathroom. I should note that there is research that demonstrates that even if you're feeling a little down, an improvised smile can improve your mood.

Smiles at Milton Hershey School

The reason I mentioned my visit to the Milton Hershey School at the beginning of this article was because of my experiences while I was there, especially having just read Zhang's research during the trip there. MHS is a very special place funded by the incredible philanthropy of Milton Hershey and his wife Catherine (Kitty). [The following is a link should you wish to learn more about MHS](#). As I toured one of their schools and residences, spoke with staff and kids, and gave two presentations, one for staff representing different departments and the other for the Board of Managers (BOM), I was impressed by the many smiles I witnessed.

Truth be told, I was already in a very good mood before my busy day began. My stay began on a truly happy note while checking into The Hotel Hershey the prior evening. Not only did the receptionist have a lovely smile, but one of the first things she asked was, “Do you want a milk chocolate or dark chocolate bar?” As a chocoholic, could I have asked for a better choice on my arrival? And free chocolate kisses seemed available everywhere. As I consumed these chocolates, I realized that I would probably have to increase my exercise time when I returned home.

Perhaps the biggest smile I encountered was from a fourth-grade student who had been at MHS since kindergarten. He was assigned to give me a tour of the school. When he greeted me, he displayed a radiant smile that lit up the room, a smile that appeared throughout the tour. He pointed out different classrooms and activities and did so with a sense of pride. When I spoke in the afternoon with the BOM, I told them what a wonderful tour guide I had at the school earlier in the day. This child’s demeanor and smile were a testimony to the positive emotional culture created and maintained by the staff. It was evident that many “charismatic adults” work at MHS from whom this child and all of the children and teens “gather strength.”

In traveling back to Boston, and thinking about my tour guide’s smile, I quickly smiled and felt very happy.

A Quote

The late Leo Buscaglia, a renowned author and professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Southern California, captured the significance of a smile and related micromoments in the following quote:

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.

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