

Anyone for Snake Oil?

Time for Some Clarity

Recently on ITV's The Agenda, Peter Osborne accused all advertisers of being 'snake oil salesmen'. It got us thinking; are there virtues in being a snake oil salesman?

The Most Famous Snake Oil Salesman

Clark Stanley was born in Abilene, Texas in 1854. In 1879, after eleven years as a cowboy, he changed career and studied for two years with a Hopi Medicine Man, at Walpi Arizona. Here he learnt about snake oil, or more precisely squeezing the liquid out of rattlesnakes and mixing it with oil.

With the help of a Boston druggist he then refined his 'medicine', adding red peppers for soothing warmth, and traces of turpentine and camphor for the medicinal smell. With the help of the druggist, he then started marketing his wonder treatment for almost every imaginable ailment, at Western Medicine Shows.

His heyday was in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois. His act included the killing of rattlesnakes and squeezing their bodies to a cheering audience.

Flushed with this success he went on to establish production facilities in Providence, Rhode Island and Beverly, Massachusetts.

Game's Up

The end came in 1915 when the American Federal Government, using the powers of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act, decided to examine his concoction. He was fined \$20 and his business closed.

This defined the snake oil salesman; someone who knowingly sells fraudulent goods or is a fraud, quack or charlatan.

That Was in the Olden Days

Of course this couldn't happen today. People aren't so credulous, there is too much information around and the

authorities wouldn't let it. But it does and is encapsulated in the Ponzi scheme.

The recent recession and its aftermath has flushed out countless schemes and exposed its investors to the cruel realities. Despite all this, intelligent, well informed, people continue to succumb, often losing all their savings.

Snake Oil Salesman's Delusion

The more you explore stories like this the more you see common patterns. The most obvious is the person behind it believed in it too. Clark Stanley used his snake oil every day and was convinced it worked.

They work hard at it too. Clark prepared for 12 to 13 years before launching his panacea.

What Can We Learn?

In essence that selling and marketing are as old as the hills, but these days we need to be more diligent. Part of that diligence is being very open about where we learn things. So if Clark was still here, this is what we think he would be telling us:

- Make sure your promise is aspirational and motivating; as seen above, health and wealth are great motivators
- Look the part; Clark looked successful, with lots of charisma and people wanted to be like him
- Use a 'human' connection; whether through the individual or reflecting a human insight
- Find a way to disarm; empathise with the customer
- Use crowds to gain permission; something that Clark used to good effect, either in a face-to-face exhibition or via mutual endorsement with one customer getting another
- Be believable; in all aspects of presentation
- And to be believable, whatever you are offering has to work, be real and authentic; clearly this was Clark's mistake and where we'd take issue with Peter Osborne (and if you're not sure about your offer we'll test it and tell you)

The snake oil salesman teaches us not to succumb to delusion. We've got to be honest with ourselves and with others. For that you always need good evidence and reconnaissance.

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