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OPINION

Woolley Marketing: The fake dilemmas that plague marketing

Why is it A or B rather than A to Z? In his first regular column for Mumbrella, Trinity P3 founder and global CEO Darren Woolley examines the false dichotomy of decision making.

February 25, 2021 8:00
by **DARREN WOOLLEY**



Marketing is a challenge. Decisions get made daily. Hundreds and thousands of decisions every week, in every month, every year. And the options feel like they are ever-expanding. Media channels multiply with every new platform. TikTok last week, Clubhouse this week. While marketing budgets and resources feel like they are shrinking against all things that should or could be done. The complexity of it all! If only life could be easier.

It is no wonder the false dilemma, one of the 15 common logical fallacies, is so appealing. Imagine if these complex marketing issues could be reduced into a simple choice of A or B? When you reason from an either-or position and haven't considered all relevant possibilities, you commit the fallacy of the false or fake dilemma.



Cartoon by Dennis Flaid, with permission (2021)

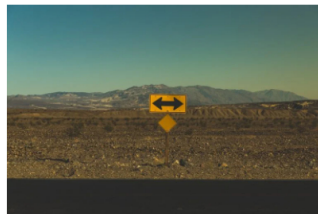
To prove the dilemma fake is easy. All you need to do is prove that the two options are not mutually exclusive or that at least one additional logically valid option is available. One of my favourite fake dilemmas is the choice between immediate tactical results and longer-term brand building, as if the two are mutually exclusive. On one side, we have the Gary Vees of the world deriding the practice of brand marketing and telling his disciples that the only way is getting immediate results today. On the other side of this dilemma are the Mark Ritsons of the world, the brand traditionalists, who at least acknowledge the need for tactics, but not too much. And we have Les Binet, who having analysed the entire library of IPA Effectiveness Awards declares the mix is 70% brand and 30% tactical for product marketing.

Of course, it is not just product marketing that is overwhelmingly complex in our modern world. But marketing is particularly susceptible to this fallacy.

First, there are many salespeople in marketing, selling increasingly complex technology solutions. Selling anything new and complex is going to be a challenge. Particularly as proof of efficacy is hard to provide immediately. But being able to reframe the sales proposition into a simple dilemma, a choice between A and B, where one is death, makes the whole process much simpler and, sometimes, more effective.

Why do you think headlines like "The Death of Television", "The Death of Content Marketing" or "The death of insert the main competitor here" are so popular? What a beautifully simple sales strategy, to position yourself through public relations as the must-have solution by framing your main competitor as dead, or at least on their last legs.

Second, this is because the trade media is largely on-board. What better story is there than David and Goliath? The either/or is the story of conflict, struggle and ultimately defeat, leaving the victor standing ready for the spoils. It is such a compelling headline in a media world that relies on clickbait to deliver the traffic to justify the advertising revenue.



The danger of this fallacy is that in choosing A or B, you can be completely missing the opportunity for much greater results in the other options. A friend of mine, a very talented marketer, joined a global online

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retailer, who were proud of their performance-marketing record, right up to just before he was recruited. This was when, for the first time, they noticed their CPA had increased dramatically and revenue was in decline. It took him months to convince them to move some of the budget from the bottom of the funnel to be used to fill the top of the funnel. Interestingly, he used television to remind the audience how the brand added value to their lives.

The result? Not just incremental growth, but a major multiplier that took them from falling revenue. And to prove the point, that his – as McKinsey calls it – “Full Funnel Strategy” worked, he could demonstrate the online traffic peaks against the television spot views.

So to remind you, as you go back to your day in marketing, a fake dilemma (a.k.a. false dichotomy) is a type of informal, correlative-based fallacy in which a statement falsely claims or assumes an “either/or” situation, when in fact there is at least one additional logically valid option.

In other words, as much as we would like the world of marketing to be either A or B, it is usually A and B and sometimes all of the options right through to Z. But that is the way the world is. And anyone who is telling you something different is usually selling you something.



Darren Woolley is the founder and global CEO at Trinity P3. Woolley Marketing is a regular Mumbrella column.

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