

Chapter 3

FIRST SIN: DECEPTION

Truth lives on in the midst of deception.

—Friedrich von Schiller

“Congratulations, you’ve won!” the letter said. Inside the envelope was an 8” x 10” glossy color photo of a new car and a car key. Mallory couldn’t have been more excited. She’d recently passed her driver’s test, and now she’d have her very own vehicle like many of her friends whose parents could afford to buy them new cars. No need to borrow Mom and Dad’s relic. All she had to do was go to the auto dealership between 9:00 am and noon this coming Saturday and claim her prize. Mallory awoke early Saturday morning and rushed to the dealership.

Mallory: [Beaming with excitement and holding her key like an Olympic gold medal.] “I’m here to get my car.”

Sales Manager: “Okay, right this way, young lady.”

The Sales Manager leads Mallory to a shiny red coupe, parked in the middle of the showroom, like a museum exhibit.

Sales Manager: “Go ahead, open the door.”

Almost shaking, Mallory grasps the driver’s door handle and gives it a gentle pull. The door doesn’t move. She steadies herself and tries again.

Mallory: “I think it’s locked.”

Sales Manager: “Yes, you need to use your key.”

Mallory blushes then quickly takes the key and inserts it into the door. She tries repeatedly to get it to turn but it won't.

Mallory: “It’s not working.”

Sales Manager: “That’s too bad; I guess you don’t get the car.”

Mallory: Stunned and in disbelief. “What do you mean? The letter said I won a car.”

Sales Manager: “The letter did say you won, but it didn’t say you won a *car*.”

Mallory: “But there was a big picture of a car and a car key. And, it told me to bring the key here to claim my prize.”

Sales Manager: “Don’t worry, you did win *something*. Let me see your key.”

Completely deflated, Mallory hands the Sales Manager her key. He turns it over and, trying to sound as upbeat as possible, reads a three digit code.

Sales Manager: “Three-Nine-Five. Alright, you’ve actually won *two* things: a free car wash and a free test drive of this new model.”

Mallory: “But I don’t have a car, and I don’t feel like test driving this one now.”

Mallory turns away and walks out of the dealership in tears.

Deception Described

Unfortunately, this story is based on the actual experience of a young woman I know. I’m glad to say she’s since recovered from the ordeal; however, she’s unlikely to forget how one organization abused its marketing influence. Instances like these are also regrettable because they propagate an inaccurate perception of the entire discipline and tarnish the reputation of marketers who have integrity.

Of course, it’s not hard to recognize that Mallory was wronged, but what was the specific means by which she was she taken advantage? Mallory was *deceived*. Hill describes deception as encouraging someone to believe something that you don’t believe yourself (2008, p. 129).

For reasons that I will explain below, I will add to this definition the notion that the deception works to the detriment of the communication's recipient. Taken together, this understanding of deception fits Mallory's situation very well. The car dealership encouraged Mallory and many other recipients of the direct mail piece to believe that they were new car winners. All the while, the dealership's management knew the incredible odds of anyone winning a car. The managers encouraged Mallory to believe something they didn't believe themselves, to her detriment. For the dealership, the deceptive promotion promised to increase foot traffic in the showroom, possibly leading to a few more test drives and perhaps a couple of vehicle purchases. For Mallory, the results of the deception were time wasted, shattered hopes, and emotional trauma.

Deception in the Bible

Even for those who are relatively unfamiliar with the Bible, it's likely no surprise to hear that Christian scripture condemns deception. In fact, biblical admonishments of deception are rather numerous and unambiguous, for instance:

- “Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another” (Leviticus 19:11).
- “For, whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech” (1 Peter 3:10).
- “The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception” (Proverbs 14:8).

In addition, Paul is quick to emphasize that he never used deception in his work of spreading the Gospel and influencing others for

Christ (2 Corinthians 4:1-2). A powerful lesson against deception can also be taken from the tragic case of Ananias and Saphira. Their decision to deceive others by suggesting that they were giving all of the money earned from the sale of their property to the Church led to the couple's untimely demise (Acts 5:1-11). Of course, one also should remember the ninth commandment, found in Exodus 20:16. The instruction to "not give false testimony against your neighbor" is an indictment against lying, which represents a specific form of deception.

It is important to note here that while deception generally involves the communication of false information, the conveyance of partial information (i.e., some but not all), does not necessarily constitute deception. For instance, if a small electrical fire starts in the projection room of a movie theater, the staff might turn on the house lights and tell people to leave quickly and orderly, rather than adding "there's a fire." Although the later statement provides more complete and accurate information, it can be argued that people don't need to know why they were asked to leave until they get outside. Plus, revealing the reason for the evacuation before it's complete could cause unnecessary anxiety and even incite a panic.

You might be thinking, "Okay, I understand that example, but how could withholding marketing information be beneficial to consumers in more normal situations?" One of the most common points of applicability involves product information. Yes, as consumers we want to know the salient facts about an item so we can make a good purchase decision, but do we really want to know every bit of information that a manufacturer or retailer could potentially tell us, for instance, how long it took to make the product, the name of the person who assembled it, or the shipping company that delivered it to the store? Personally, I'm glad to not have to expend unnecessary time and energy processing more than the pertinent facts.

One also can find biblical support for the practice of limited disclosure from the life of Jesus. In several instances in which Christ healed people, he told them not to tell anyone what he had done (Matthew

8:4; Mark 7:36; Luke 5:14; Luke 8:56). At times Jesus also instructed his disciples not to tell others who he was or what they witnessed (Matthew 16:20; Matthew 17:9; Mark 8:30; Luke 9:21). Why did Jesus on occasion restrict communication? We can't know the specifics, but we can be sure it was to help others and to serve the Father's greater purpose. Few, if any, would argue that Jesus acted immorally in these cases, so the withholding of information can't be categorically deceptive.

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Getting back to my qualifier of Hill's (2008) definition of deception, I believe what distinguishes these Messianic cases, as well as the other two examples described above, is that the communication is not to the recipients' detriment; rather, the partial disclosure is for their ultimate benefit. The withholding of information can be moral if it serves the interests of others.

Deception in Marketing

It's time to take the conversation back to deception and marketing. What are examples of marketing practices that are deceptive? Unfortunately, thanks to those who engage in unscrupulous marketing, an abundance of illustrations exist. The case of Mallory and the new car is just one. Like the auto dealership, certain companies take the short-sighted approach of trying to trick consumers into choosing them, with the hope that the deception will either go unnoticed or be tolerated.

Another common form of deception involves marketing communication that highlights extraordinary customer results, making it seem like most users can expect the same exceptional outcomes that a small set of unique users have enjoyed. Weight loss ads, showcasing people who have lost 50 or 75 lbs. have been notorious in this regard. Fortunately, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has tightened restrictions surrounding the use of ad disclaimers like "results not

typical,” which has served as a legal barrier to such misrepresentations (FTC Guides, 2009). Still, there is always the potential for unprincipled organizations to mislead consumers by suggesting unrealistic or improbable benefits, such as an ad that shows a young man suddenly becoming irresistible to the opposite sex after he starts using a certain body wash.

For salespeople, there can be a wide variety of temptations to deceive. In order to win a new account, a salesperson may feel compelled to lead a prospect to believe that his company has extensive experience

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in a certain type of business, which it does not. It also can be tempting for a salesperson to withhold information about additional costs like shipping, installation, or maintenance. In these cases, partial disclosure works to the detriment of the customer and *does* constitute deception. Salespeople also should be wary of deceiving customers by creating a false sense of urgency, for instance, by

saying that someone else wants to buy the same product or that there will soon be a price increase. If these statements are not true, the salesperson is lying, which is always deceptive. If true, there's still the potential that such statements constitute coercion, which is discussed in Chapter Four.

A subcategory of deceptive influence might be called *stealth*. It involves marketing promotion that's disguised to appear as something else, thereby avoiding detection by consumer “radar.” Advertorials are one example of stealth promotion: As you read the newspaper you come across an interesting story about the Amish making space heaters. Upon closer inspection, however, you see the small, obligatory word *advertisement*. Product placement is another tactic that might be considered stealth: As you watch your favorite television program, you notice that one of the show's main characters uses an Apple MacBook. Stealth influence is not restricted to mass media. One such example involves disguising promotion as research: You get a phone call from a

person who works for a “political action organization;” he asks if you’d complete a brief survey about your political views. The first question is: “Do you think Mark Stevens’ ten years of experience as a successful businessman, his extensive volunteer work, and his strong family values make him a good candidate for state legislature?” The remaining questions are similar veiled attempts to create a favorable impression of the candidate and to generate votes for him.

The problem with stealth influence is that it encourages consumers to let down their perceptual guard as they think they’re receiving product information from a non-commercial, unbiased source. Most of us will interpret a recommendation related to a particular technology brand much differently if it comes from a good friend versus from an agent of the tech company. There’s not necessarily anything wrong with a promotional message from the tech firm, it’s just that we’d like to know that the company is the source so we can judge the message accordingly. In determining whether a particular marketing tactic represents stealth influence, therefore, the pivotal question seems to be “Why does the organization believe it’s necessary for its communication to *not* be perceived as promotion?” If the firm is attempting to gain an unfair advantage that will work to the detriment of consumers, then stealth influence and deception are occurring.

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Non-Deceptive Influence

The good news is that successfully following the marketing concept does not require deception. In fact, deception is antithetical to facilitating mutually beneficial exchange and long-term relationships. People will generally avoid doing business with parties who they know act deceptively. Fortunately, the vast majority of marketing influence is effectively exercised without deception. For a marketer who has

developed a total product concept that meets the target market's needs, truth is the most powerful promotion.

Along the lines of legitimate marketing influence, there are a few marketing practices that may at first glance raise a red flag, but generally do not entail deception. I'm reminded of a television commercial in which a swimmer uses a certain brand of razor to shave all the hair off his head and body before a race. When the starter's gun sounds, he jumps off the blocks and into the water. His body is so smooth

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and frictionless that within a couple of seconds he squirts like a dolphin through the water and right out the other end of the pool, hitting his head on the opposite wall. Some may look at this ad and say it's deceptive because no one can swim that fast. Reasonable consumers, however, quickly recognize the over-the-top exaggeration as humor, not realism. The fact that no one could possibly swim that fast makes the

ad funny. At the same time, the ad conveys a legitimate benefit of using the razor—a close shave. The FTC considers this type of exaggeration legal, calling it *puffery* (FTC Policy, 1983). Clear puffery is not deceptive

As mentioned above, partial disclosure of product information also should not be considered categorically deceptive. If the details withheld are of no use to consumers in their decision making, then organizations do consumers a service by limiting the amount of information they need to process. I'm personally very thankful for individuals and organizations that can concisely tell me the important facts I need to know, while screening the details I would find superfluous.

Finally, some people believe it's deceptive for a company to promote the same features or benefits as does one or more of its competitors. The implication here seems to be that a firm shouldn't highlight a positive attribute unless it's the only company that can make the claim. My response to this belief is "Why not?" If a job candidate claims that

she's a hard worker, I don't interpret her as saying she is the only hard-working prospective employee, nor that she is the most hard-working one. As long as an organization doesn't illegitimately claim exclusivity or superiority, it's not deceptive for it to promote positive features it has in common with other firms.

When I ask my students for examples of unethical marketing, many of the responses fall under the umbrella of deception. I have clarified what deception is, why it's wrong, and how marketers can avoid it. Likewise, this discussion has sought to affirm that there is a broad array of effective marketing communication that is not deceptive. In fact, marketing not only has no need to deceive, deception is antithetical to the discipline.

Influence Tip #1: To avoid deception, don't lead people to believe something that you don't believe yourself and that would cause them harm if they acted on that untruth.

Reflection Questions – Deception

1. How would you describe deception?
2. What is the relationship between deception and lying?
3. Is deception always immoral, or are there instances in which it is okay or even desirable to deceive?
4. What examples of deceptive marketing have you seen?
5. Do consumers ever deceive marketers, and if so, how?