



# HONORABLE INFLUENCE

\*Adapted from the book *Honorable Influence: A Christian's Guide to Faithful Marketing* (Aldersgate Press, 2016) by David Hagenbuch.



## Introduction

Having recently passed her driver's test, Mallory was elated to receive in the mail an envelope from a local auto dealer containing a glossy photo of a new car, a key, and a letter saying "Congratulations, you've won! Come this Saturday to claim your prize!" Thinking she had won a car, Mallory hurried to the dealership on Saturday. Her excitement quickly ended, however, when she learned that all she had won was a carwash and a free test drive. Mallory had been deceived. She left the dealership utterly dejected.

Unfortunately, this story is true—it's based on the experience of a young woman I know. Some individuals and organizations will resort to all manner of persuasion in order to secure sales. Fortunately, such behavior does not reflect the true tenets of marketing, which aims to bring about mutually beneficial exchanges. Most marketers treat their customers with respect and provide them with good value.

Still, there's no business discipline that requires redemption as much as marketing. Nearly every year since 1977, Gallup has asked survey respondents to "rate the honesty and ethical standards" of individuals in various fields, and inevitably marketing-related occupations like advertising practitioners, car salespeople, and telemarketers, round out the bottom of the list.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, almost every year only 10-12% of respondents have rated advertising practitioners high or very high on morality, while 30-40% or more consistently rate the profession's ethics low or very low.<sup>2</sup> Although marketing doesn't deserve much of the criticism it receives, there is no denying that the field experiences its fair share of moral lapses, which have led to poor impressions of the discipline for decades.

Our world needs more marketers who take very seriously the persuasive power they hold and who seek to use it in ways that genuinely benefit others, especially given the far-reaching impact the discipline has on individuals, organizations, and institutions, including the Church.<sup>3</sup> For Christians, there's an all-important stakeholder, God, who asks that we do everything "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17, NIV). That everything includes marketing. Yes, it's very important that marketing's influence honors people, but what God thinks matters much more than poll results. If Christian marketers are not influencing honorably, they're failing to fulfill their Christian calling, and they're missing a great opportunity to make a very unique kingdom impact. Fortunately, God's Word provides the keys to honorable influence.

In Proverbs 31, the Bible describes the *Wife of Noble Character*. We love to hear God commend a businessperson who "sees that her trading is profitable" (Proverbs 31:18). There's tremendous validation of business here. However,

the *coup de gras* involves the implications of Jesus being a carpenter, which was his work before his years of public ministry (Mark 6:3). People who participated in trades like carpentry would have sold or traded their wares, not kept all of them for their own use. Consequently, Jesus must have been involved in marketing, which means there is nothing inherently sinful about the discipline.

Part of the challenge today is that marketing is a vast and diverse field, involving organizations from Fortune 100 companies to small church congregations, and individuals from CEOs to customer service personnel. This breadth and depth makes it difficult to offer a comprehensive set of prescriptions for the field, i.e., "do A, B, and C." Consequently, it makes most sense to identify what *not* to do, or to elucidate the pitfalls that all marketers should avoid. Similarly, when God described to Adam His policy on eating the fruit of the Garden, He didn't delineate tree by tree every type of edible fruit; rather, he pointed to one tree and said don't eat from that one; all the others are okay (Genesis 2:15-17).

## The Seven Sins of Influence

While there are hundreds of different dishonest actions that misguided individuals may commit, most, if not all, of these actions are related in that they violate one of a handful of moral/biblical principles, which may be called the "Seven Sins of Influence": Deception, Coercion, Manipulation, Denigration, Intrusion, Encouraging Overindulgence, and Neglect." What follows is a brief description of each of the Seven Sins and their biblical exegesis.

### Deception

Hill describes deception as encouraging someone to believe something that you don't believe yourself,<sup>4</sup> to which we can add the notion that the deception works to the detriment of the communication's recipient. 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 also can be taken from the tragic case of Ananias and Saphira, who died because they led others to believe they gave all proceeds from the sale of their property to the Church (Acts 5:1-11). Of course, there's also the ninth commandment to "not give false testimony against your neighbor," which is an indictment of lying—a specific form of deception (Exodus 20:16).



It is important to note that while deception generally involves the communication of false information, providing partial information (i.e., some of the facts) does not necessarily constitute deception. One can find biblical support for limited disclosure from the life of Jesus. In several instances in which Christ healed people, he told them not to tell anyone (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.

### ***Coercion***

Coercion involves pressuring people to knowingly do something against their will, which is essentially the opposite of deception. With deception, individuals are free to make any decision they like; however, they're not given adequate, truthful information. In contrast, when people are coerced they often have complete information, but they're made to feel that they have no choice, aside from the one alternative presented—the proverbial gun-to-the-head situation. Coercion removes free will, often through emotional pressure.

It's more challenging to identify Scripture that deals with coercion than deception, mainly because coercion is not a common biblical word. Deeper analysis, however, suggests that coercion is not consistent with Scripture. Since the beginning with Adam and Eve, God has given humankind free will and allowed individuals to choose whether or not to follow Him. If God preserves the freedom to choose, it seems that we should do the same. This absence of coercion can be seen through examples such as Paul using reason to persuade Jews and Greeks to believe the Gospel (Acts 18:4). Likewise, Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26), healing the sick (Matthew 14:14; Mark 1:34; Luke 4:40), and speaking with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), support the idea that Jesus used dialogue and empathy, not coercion, in sharing the good news.

Where examples of coercion can be found in the Bible, they are committed by individuals who appear not to be following God. Using prolonged emotional battery, Delilah coerced Samson into revealing the secret of his strength (Judges 16:4-22). Under threat of death in a fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar forced many people to worship his idol; although Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not concede (Daniel 3:1-30). Also, one of the most infamous examples of coercion in Scripture involved the Jewish leaders pressuring Pilate to crucify Jesus by publicly

questioning the Roman governor's loyalty to Caesar (John 19:12-16).

## Manipulation

*Manipulation* may be thought of as *scheming to achieve an outcome that would not otherwise be chosen*. If you're thinking that manipulation seems a little like deception and a little like coercion, you're right: If deception and coercion had a child, their offspring would be manipulation. Manipulation doesn't necessarily involve any overt lies, yet the entire process rests on an undercurrent of deceit. Likewise, when people are manipulated, they don't necessarily take a single action that's against their will, yet the combined effect of all of the acts is an outcome they would not otherwise have chosen. In this way, manipulation is a cunningly-designed combination of understated deception and inconspicuous coercion that requires some fairly sophisticated planning and the ability to implement several interdependent steps.

It goes without saying that manipulation is a behavior that does not receive Scriptural affirmation. Like coercion, manipulation is not a common biblical word, which makes its study initially challenging. However, there is another phrase readily found in Scripture that represents the same notion of scheming to bring about undesirable outcomes—*plotting evil*. Here are several examples of its repudiation:

- “Do not those who plot evil go astray? But those who plan what is good find love and faithfulness” (Proverbs 14:22)
- “Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds!” (Micah 2:1)
- “Do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely.” (Zechariah 8:17)

As one digs deeper into Scripture, specific instances of manipulative behavior start to surface. Haman's plot to destroy the Jews was both deceptive and coercive, as he shrewdly manipulated King Xerxes into issuing a decree that would have delivered death to many (Esther 3:1-15). Similarly, a contingent of underlings manipulated King Darius into passing an edict against praying that was intended to lead to Daniel's demise (Daniel 6:1-28).

One of Satan's best known attempts at manipulation was aimed at none other than Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). Satan's unsuccessful temptation of Jesus in the desert consisted of at least one invitation to perform an action that was not inherently wrong: eating bread. Satan also wanted Jesus to turn stones into bread, but even that act may have been acceptable for Jesus under the circumstances—he hadn't eaten for forty days and forty nights, and another time he was willing to turn water into wine (John 2:1-11). This seemingly benign invitation was Satan's first manipulative step in attempting to draw Jesus away from the Father. In asking Jesus to turn stones into

bread, Satan hoped that providing some physical satisfaction might make him a little more endearing, giving his second and third temptations a better chance of success. Of course, Jesus didn't succumb to any of the temptations, and Satan's manipulation failed.

## Denigration

*Denigration* can be described as *cheapening the inherent worth of people or things*. On the basis of their humanity, all people deserve to be treated with decency and respect. To denigrate people is to strip them of the fundamental dignity everyone deserves. Non-persons, both living and non-living, tangible and intangible, also can be denigrated. For instance, breeding dogs or roosters to fight not only harms these animals, it also relegates their existence to the satisfaction of morbid human pleasure. Littering on a pristine beach both diminishes its natural beauty and reduces the beach to a kind of garbage container. Likewise, partners' cheating on their spouses not only causes great individual pain, it also denigrates the institution of marriage.

Although the verb *denigrate* does not appear in Scripture, its absence does not denote indifference to the behavior. Closely related to denigration is the act of showing contempt, a behavior that Scripture resolutely condemns. Most of us don't use the word contempt very often in our everyday conversations; however, we may have heard of someone *casting a contemptuous glance*, or of an individual being *in contempt of court*. Both of these examples help to correlate contempt and denigration. A person's contemptuous glance suggests disdain for the recipient and diminishes his self-worth. People are found in contempt of court because they have violated some legal proceedings or disparaged courtroom decorum.

One of the most poignant biblical examples of contempt involves the sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, who received divine judgment for sleeping with the women who served at the Tent of Meeting and for abusing the rights of pilgrims who came to offer sacrifices to God (I Samuel 2:12-34; 4:1-11). More specifically, the two young men were deemed guilty of “treating the Lord's offering with contempt” (I Samuel 2:17). Unfortunately, Hophni and Phinehas hadn't learned from the mistake of their ancestors Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, who also died because they denigrated God's standards for worship (Leviticus 10:1-7).

Of course, the Bible also is replete with positive commands, exhorting believers to do the right thing. In terms of denigration, the opposite injunction is to show honor or respect: “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God” (Proverbs 14:31). Likewise, the first commandment with a promise implores: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). Some other passages that encourage honor or respect include:

- “Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God.” (Leviticus 19:32).
- “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron and his sons to treat with respect the sacred offerings the Israelites consecrate to me, so they will not profane my holy name.’” (Leviticus 22:1-2).
- “Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (Romans 13:7).
- “Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17).

### **Intrusion**

*Intrusion* involves entering another person’s physical or mental space without their complete welcome. The location can be a tangible place, like one’s home or office, or a psychological space involving one’s thoughts or feelings. Either way, intrusion results in an invasion of personal privacy. As human beings we often establish boundaries, tangible or intangible, that put limits on our social interaction. Intrusion occurs when people cross those boundaries and enter areas of our lives to which we have not fully invited them.

Of course, what represents intrusion for one consumer may not seem intrusive to another. We all have different likes, dislikes, and degrees of tolerance. While many people treat calls from telemarketers with contempt, some individuals relish the social interaction. Still, virtually everyone needs some physical or mental space to which they can retreat in order to rest, contemplate, or refresh without undesired outside influence. Similarly, the situation may dictate what’s intrusive, e.g., a phone call about a business matter that’s received at home versus at one’s office.

Intrusion is another word that is not common in Scripture, but the Bible *does* address the concept through several related terms and ideas which often focus on the positive value being upheld: privacy. Paul urges believers not to be “gossips” or “busybodies,” but rather to avoid prying into the personal affairs of others (1 Timothy 5:13). Similarly, Proverbs 11:13 extols the virtue of keep-

ing another’s secret, while condemning the betrayal of a confidence.

The Bible also supports the notion that humans need some personal space. Proverbs 27:14 says, “If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse”—kind of like a neighbor ringing our doorbell at 5:00 am just to wish us a great day! Perhaps the best illustration of the need to uphold personal privacy comes from Jesus’ own example. God’s son loves everyone, but even he sometimes needed time alone: “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). His humanity presented some of the same physical and emotional challenges that we experience. For refreshment, therefore, Jesus temporarily withdrew from others so he could commune with the Father and renew himself without distraction.

An even more forceful indictment of intrusion comes from Matthew 21:12-13, which describes how Jesus entered the temple area and proceeded to drive out the merchants who were changing money and selling doves. Some people use this passage to condemn commerce; however, there’s no evidence that Jesus ever took similar action

against merchants or that he had a general disdain for business. In fact, as mentioned above, there’s good reason to believe that Jesus himself was involved in some form of marketing related to his work as a carpenter (Mark 6:3). A more

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logical interpretation of the Matthew passage is that Jesus was acting against the intrusion of business into a very sacred space. Conducted fairly and *outside* the bounds of the Temple, it’s likely that the same activities would not have stirred Jesus’ righteous indignation. The problem was that business had intruded into a place where neither it nor a host of other activities belonged.

### **Encouraging Overindulgence**

Overindulgence is *consumption beyond what’s beneficial for a person physically, emotionally, financially, or otherwise*. Through typical marketing exchanges, consumers experience net gains in utility. Overindulgence, however, presses the principle of marginal utility beyond reasonable bounds, like a person who keeps eating more and more chocolate until he becomes physically sick. Of course it’s relatively easy to tell when we overindulge on food, at least when the gluttony occurs in a single sitting, but it can be harder to discern overindulgence on other products. Unbeknownst to us we might overindulge on entertainment, clothing, or even something as commend-

able as education, as when an individual pursues degree after degree in lieu of getting a job.

It's not surprising to find that Scripture takes a firm stance against overindulgence. After all, Jesus often taught others to deny themselves in order to follow him (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Likewise, Paul urged believers to put the needs of others ahead of their own (1 Corinthians 10:24, Philippians 2:3-4). Both of these directives stand in stark contrast to self-indulgence, which a variety of other passages condemn directly. For instance, James 5:1-6 denounces the exploitative and self-indulgent practices of the rich, and Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their self-indulgence, hypocrisy, and greed (Matthew 23:25-26). Certain Bible passages also warn against specific types of overindulgence, such as gluttony (Proverbs 23:1-3), drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18), and avarice (Proverbs 23:4-5).

Beyond repudiating overindulgence, the Bible demands that believers exhibit an opposite quality: self-control. Scripture describes self-control as a means of staying spiritually alert (1 Thessalonians 5:6) and avoiding "ungodliness and worldly passions" (Titus 2:11-14). The Bible also identifies self-control as one of the nine "fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23). When done in excess, even a good behavior can lead to harmful overindulgence, as Proverbs 25:16 warns: "If you find honey, eat just enough—too much of it, and you will vomit." The solution, instead, is to live a life of self-control and not be "mastered by anything" (1 Corinthians 6: 12).

It is important to emphasize that the choice of words *encouraging overindulgence* is very intentional in two specific ways. It is significant that the behavior is *overindulgence* rather than just *indulgence*. Overindulgence is by definition injurious, at least in a minor way, if not more substantially. Indulgence, however, is not necessarily harmful; some limited indulgence is often fine. Second, it is meaningful that the behavior under investigation is encouraging overindulgence, not just overindulgence. It sounds axiomatic, but consumers are the ones who consume products, not marketers. As consumers, we hold primary responsibility for our own consumption decisions, provided that marketing influence is free from other improper influence such as deception, coercion, and manipulation. Our decision to overindulge, therefore, is principally our own choice and responsibility. Still, marketers should at least be somewhat accountable if they *encourage* the overindulgence of consumers.

The Bible presents encouragement as a good thing, provided it is free from other sinful behavior (e.g., deception and coercion) and it is focused toward an acceptable end. For example, Paul exhorts believers to exercise their gift of encouragement, along with other spiritual gifts (Romans 12:6-8), and he recognizes the potential that encouragement has to build up others (1 Thessalonians 5:10-11). Not every aim of encouragement is acceptable, however, particularly if the outcome is sin. For instance, Malachi

rebukes priests who have caused the Israelites to sin, or "stumble" in their spiritual walks (Malachi 2:8). Similarly, Paul urges mature believers to do nothing to cause their less-experienced counterparts to stumble (Romans 14:20; 1 Corinthians 10:32). In addition, Jesus uses the vivid image of a person thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied to his neck, in order to dissuade anyone who might lead others to sin (Matthew 18:6).

## Neglect

There are many unenviable positions in which marketers can find themselves, but none is necessarily any more unpleasant than when they simply fail to do what they were supposed to do. While the first six sins have all represented sins of commission—you err if you do them, the seventh is the sin of omission—you err if you don't do it. *Neglect* is to *not provide the influence expected of a competent marketer*. Marketers are involved in relationships in which others depend on them to faithfully exercise their discipline-specific skills and use their given resources. When they fail to fulfill their basic responsibilities to their clients and other stakeholders, marketers can be deemed guilty of neglect.

In most Bible verses in which "neglect" appears, the word serves as part of an admonition against specific spiritual oversight or compromise, for instance: "Be careful not to neglect the Levites as long as you live in your land" (Deuteronomy 12:19); "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Timothy 4:14); "But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matthew 23:23).

The Bible also addresses neglect more broadly by describing how individuals *should* work: diligently, with fervor to produce excellent outcomes. Many Bible passages encourage diligence, for example: 2 Chronicles 24:13 highlights the diligent work of individuals who "rebuilt the temple of God according to its original design and reinforced it." Proverbs 10:4 counsels: "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth." Likewise, 1 Timothy 4:15 implores: "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress." Based on such scriptural mandates, one can reason that Christian marketers are called not just to do their work, but to do it well, which means working diligently to "the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

## Editor's Note

The author's book, *Honorable Influence*, contains more in depth discussions on the "Seven Sins of Influence" from a biblical perspective. Also addressed in the book are topics such as "Marketing and the Church" and "Christian Ethics in a Secular Workplace," which help Christian marketers

influence effectively and ethically in unique situations. Everyone markets in some way, but for Christians who market for a living, it is especially important for their work to have an “honorable influence.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lydia Saad, “Americans’ Faith in Honesty, Ethics of Police Rebounds,” *Gallup* (12/21/2015). Accessed at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/187874/americans-faith-honesty-ethics-police-rebounds.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> *Gallup Polls*, “Honesty/Ethics in Professions,” Gallup (12/2014). Accessed at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx>,

<sup>3</sup> The author’s book, *Honorable Influence*, purports to help move the needle on marketing morality and ensure that the field’s impact is more consistently positive.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Hill, *Just Business: Christian Ethics for the Marketplace*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008, 129).

### About the Author



**David Hagenbuch** is Professor of Marketing at Messiah College, author of *Honorable Influence: A Christian’s Guide to Faithful Marketing* (Aldersgate Press, 2016), and the founder of [www.MindfulMarketing.org](http://www.MindfulMarketing.org), which aims to encourage ethical marketing. Before entering higher education, he worked as a corporate sales analyst for a national Christian broadcasting company and as a partner in a specialty advertising firm. David’s journal publications include *Business & Society Review*, the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, *Christian Scholars Review*, and the *Journal of Marketing Education*. He also has written many popular press articles for media such as Forbes.com, Marketing News, CommPro.biz, and Entrepreneur.com. David holds an MBA from Temple University and a DBA from Anderson University.