

One Big Can of Awesome Sauce

By Randy Jones

What if bacteriologist and Penicillin pioneer Alexander Fleming thought mold was gross?

What if Atlanta pharmacist John Pemberton called it quits when his new Coke-coction didn't cure headaches?

What if Watergate Hotel security guard, Frank Wills, had not said to himself "well now, that tape on the parking garage door lock shouldn't be there. Anyone could get in this place."

What if my parents' return flight from New York City to St. Louis, Missouri had not been cancelled exactly nine months prior to my birth?

I have to hand it to my mom and dad for wisely making (re)productive use of unexpected free time.

Though "risk management" was clearly not my parent's strong suit, my father had nonetheless already embarked upon a lifelong career, beginning in 1956, in the insurance industry at Columbia, Missouri-based MFA Insurance Company. MFA, which my father jokingly alleged stood for "mostly fooling around," was eventually rechristened Shelter Insurance Company in 1981.

My sister, Paula, immediately joined Shelter after college graduation in 1981 with my sister Janice eventually landing there in 1982. Now, as our collective offspring reach adulthood, another generation of Joneses has begun taking up professional residence at Shelter Insurance Company. Though my *buck-the-system* path eventually led me, not only to Naples, Florida, but to a fine career involving creativity, editorial writing, speaking and media, in hindsight, there are strong similarities between **Insurance and Marketing**. Insurance is, after all, the ultimate "what if" business:

- ✓ **What if** I get in a car accident?
- ✓ **What if** my house catches on fire?

✓ **What if** I have to go to the hospital?
In marketing, we have equally critical *what if* scenarios to consider:

- ✓ **What if** I don't reach the correct audience for the product?
- ✓ **What if** I print the client's phone number incorrectly?
- ✓ **What if** I fail to have a "Plan B" in place for every situation?

The list goes on and on.

The difference: the Insurance



Industry's *best prospect* is absolutely a proactive or "what if" thinker. Speaking as someone whose marketing agency has had the great fortune of working with GEICO and their now legendary Gecko, I know this to be true. But, in my business, to be successful, strategic/proactive thinking resides squarely on *my* shoulders. And if don't ask myself 20 "what if" questions a day, I'm pretty much doomed.

When I was quite young, my dad

would occasionally take Paula and me to his insurance company office building on the weekends. Invariably, Paula and I would slowly creep downstairs to the dark and deserted basement in search of the human skeleton that "lived" in one of the equipment closets.

Dad never accompanied us on these secret missions. He understood the serious nature of this older sister/younger brother bonding time. That and he has a history of avoiding potentially chaotic situations at all costs.

Of course, I have absolutely no idea why there was a human skeleton in the basement of my dad's office building in the late 1960s. Had I asked, knowing my father, his answer would have been: "to remind people to pay their life insurance premiums on time."

Clutching tightly to one another, Paula and I would slowly approach the aforementioned closet, push open the giant wooden door, anxiously peek inside and, without fail, scream hysterically at the sight of the bare-bones skeleton hanging there. *Why* we were *surprised* I do not know. It's not like an employee was going to take a human skeleton home with them for the weekend.

At this point, with our combined squeals of horror still ringing in my ears, we would, as we said in Missouri, "turn tail and run." And without fail, Paula would intentionally remain just a few steps in front while goading me with comments like: "Faster, faster, he's gonna get you! He's gonna get you!"

- ✓ **What if** the skeleton man is right behind me?
- ✓ **What if** Paula is willing to sacrifice me to save herself?
- ✓ **What if** skeleton *man* burns off all my flesh and I become skeleton *boy*?

One important question I never bothered to ask myself:

✓ **What if** the skeleton is still just hanging in the closet where he always seems to be?

Skeletons in the Closet

Part of the advantage of being an editorial writer is that you (try to) choose which skeletons remain in the closet and, more importantly, which to expose and exploit.

Time to exploit.

Now I am not saying I am a fanatical follower of astrology, but it's difficult to ignore the irony between how Virgos are portrayed and how I developed after my 1962 swim in the Jones + Kyger genetic pool. I am the very definition of a Virgo male and I have the lists to prove it.

If you have ever spent a significant amount of time with a Virgo, you will understand when I describe myself as "Type-A impaired" which may also account for my somewhat obsessive-compulsive need to *what-if think* every issue to death.

As an adult, my client Tim, a marketing manager for a large national pharmacy retailer, once commented: "Knowing the way you are, I don't think I could ever work for you but I'm certainly glad you work for me."

Thank you, Tim – I think.

But I also have to wonder, knowing that Insurance is the definitive "what if" industry, were my (at times *crippling*) "what if" tendencies somehow influenced by constant exposure to insurance-based jargon and proactive philosophies while growing up?

But with the understanding that insurance is a profit-based business model built on risk assessment, wouldn't there be a tremendous benefit to all professional organizations to establish a corporate "policy" to promote proactive thinking as a *no-cost solution* to "insure" more creativity, efficiency and success in the workplace?

Wouldn't increased *what-if* thinking do more for minimizing professional risk than any umbrella policy on the market?

Mostly Fooling Around

Though I know my father did not really spend 40 years "mostly fooling around" in the insurance business, I have conversely met far too many people who spend way too much time mentally treading water while waiting for the end of each work day.

That being said, *think* about this?

- ✓ **What if** more individuals would employ proactive - thinking techniques?
- ✓ **What if** more people would take the time to read and understand all mission-critical information

contained in an email?

✓ **What if** more employees would allow for additional time to contemplate both the potential *upside* and *downside* of a pending project?

✓ **What if** more managers would just slow down long enough to "manage?"

✓ **What if** more business professionals were (*oh, the horror*) like me?

Admittedly, we chronic "what if" thinkers can be profoundly annoying but, that being said, don't we need a little more *what if-ing* and a little less *reacting* in the business community these days? Isn't there a benefit to idealists who automatically look beyond today's task to tomorrow's reality?

Plan Ahead

Typically, when I see proactive thinking fail, the collapse can be tracked back to the very *beginning* of a project—the Discovery Process—a crucial time when all players on the team must engage in obtaining a *complete understanding* of the attributes of and goals for the project.

Sounds like a "duh," doesn't it? But if you take a moment to stop and think about it, I strongly suspect you will almost immediately recall a situation where a lack of planning, preparation and premeditated deductive reasoning



resulted in less-than-favorable results?

Many people no longer seem to value the importance of the Discovery Process. With an overflowing email inbox staring them in the face and a boatload of afternoon meetings listed in Outlook, it's much easier to hastily check something off a to-do list and move on, cross some fingers, and basically pass the critical-thinking buck to the next guy on the list.

Yikes!

Does this method save time? Today: Yes. Tomorrow: Possibly. In the future: No Way.

Invariably, actions (or frankly, inactions) of this nature will directly or indirectly cause *someone* to pay the price through any number of corporate cash registers resulting in a need to **re-enlist, re-think and re-do**. All of which represent *unnecessary* measures taken just to, in a word, **recover**.

Learn from Mistakes

In my business, one involving words, images and hair-raising deadlines as well as a requirement to manage the needs of countless other people (clients, vendor partners, graphic designers, etc.), I have

seen, or been a part of, almost every mistake imaginable.

As a result, I have consciously *learned* from these mistakes and, almost more importantly, I take ownership for my role in these challenging situations. Though many are quick to equate professional *experience* with education and/or wisdom, part of the implication of being an "experienced" professional in any industry is not just an understanding of what works, but what does *not* work.

Plus, in a world that increasingly gets by on finger pointing, when strategic thinking has failed and a mistake occurs, I am personally more interested in how those involved take responsibility for the error by providing timely, no-excuses solutions.

Any error is also an *opportunity*: a chance to add to your mental checklist of proactive considerations for future projects. A time to teach your brain new ways to think ahead.

Breathe Deeply

Though we live in a hyperactive, interactive age where the demands on our time are increasing ominous, we owe it to ourselves *to take the time to just stop, relax and think*.

- ✓ **What if** we took more time to read and educate ourselves?
- ✓ **What if** we took more time to listen and understand other people's perspectives?
- ✓ **What if** we took more time to discover new approaches to achieve success?

To quote the very wise Elle Marie Ketcher, one of my many beloved "bonus" children who continue to entertain and inspire me, the more we contemplate likely benefits, evaluate possible consequences and *think ahead*, the more the business world can be "one big can of awesome sauce."

Now, that clever description is a breath of fresh air, don't you think?

Glad I listened.



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