

# Show Your Warts: An Honest Way to Make a Buck

## *By Bob Bly*

Legendary adman James Webb Young, who started selling fruit by mail around the same time that Harry & David did, tells the story of an apple-growing season that nearly ruined him.

Violent hailstorms bombarded his apple trees with ice pellets, bruising and pockmarking the fruit.

He feared massive complaints and returns if he shipped the bruised apples to his mail-order buyers. But if he didn't ship them, he would have to refund all their money – and his business would be destroyed.

The apples were damaged only cosmetically. The hail had discolored the skin, but this did not affect the flavor or freshness of the fruit.

So, Young went ahead and filled his orders with the pockmarked apples – and in each box, he enclosed a preprinted card that read as follows (I am paraphrasing):

"Note the pockmarks on some of these apples. This is proof that they have been grown at a high mountain altitude, where the same extreme cold that causes sudden hailstorms also firms the flesh and increases the natural sugars. This makes the apples even sweeter."

According to Young, not a single order was returned. In fact, when orders came in the following year, many order forms had handwritten notes that read, "Pockmarked apples if available; otherwise, the regular kind."

Young's story illustrates what experienced marketers know: If you do it right, you can gain substantial credibility with your buyer by being truthful about your weaknesses and flaws – and, in the process, increase loyalty, sales, and customer satisfaction.

Another example: Years ago, an industrial pump manufacturer, Blackmer, used this same "show-your-warts" strategy with great success.

As a former chemical engineer, I can tell you that not all pumps perform equally well in all applications. Instead of hiding this fact, Blackmer made it a primary advertising claim.

The company's trade ads showed a page ripped out of an industrial buying guide, full of listings for pump manufacturers ... including Blackmer. The Blackmer name was circled in ink and the headline of the ad read, "There are only certain times you should call Blackmer for a pump. Know when?"

The body copy explained (again, I am paraphrasing): "In many applications, Blackmer performs no better or worse than any other pump, and so, in those cases, we may not be a particularly advantageous choice." "But," the ad went on, "for certain applications (viscous fluids, fluids containing abrasives, and a few other situations), Blackmer has been proven to outperform all other pumps, and is the logical brand of choice."

Blackmer closed the ad by offering a free technical manual proving its claim.

My old friend Jim Alexander of Alexander Marketing in Grand Rapids, Michigan, created this Blackmer campaign and tells me it worked extremely well.

One more example: James DiGeorgia of 21st Century Publishing was initially concerned that including the disclaimers required by regulatory bodies would depress response to his email marketing campaigns promoting his stock-market and options-trading newsletters.

Instead of hiding the disclaimers in fine print, however, he put them in the same size type as the rest of the email promotion. He found, to his surprise, that being up front about the warnings and cautions actually increased response!

Here's how you can use this technique:

Pick one weakness of your product or company. Talk about it frankly in your marketing. Show either (a) why the weakness is not really important or (b) how you have designed your product or service to overcome, solve, or compensate for the weakness.

For example, let's say you're in the window-cleaning business – and your main competitor has very tall workers who are all former NBA players and can reach extremely high windows.

What do you do?

You admit that your window cleaners are of average height and can't reach that high. BUT, to make up for that, you explain that each one brings a pneumatic lift to the job – which raises him dozens of feet higher than your competitor's best former basketball player can jump.

That's an absurd example ... but you get the idea.

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