

Change

by Joe Holzer

As humans, we have an ambivalent response to change. While we generally regard it as endemic, and perhaps necessary, we also view it with trepidation. I believe much of that has to do with familiarity, as in "... breeds contempt". I think that also leads to our being content, which may explain another factor, with which I will deal in a minute. One need only look at the 356 faithful who wear shirts proclaiming "Sure they built cars after 1965; who the hell cares?", to see what I mean. Do people who drive 356's really believe Porsche has done nothing worthy of them since the demise of the air cooled four-banger with the offset rockers? I seriously doubt it. Do they really think that swing-arm axles, the same concept which launched Ralph Nader to fame, was the last suspension capable of giving them a thrill? I can't imagine it. So what is going on?

All change involves an investment of trust, whose corollary is the acceptance of personal risk of betrayal of that trust. Each of us has imbued these Porsche objects with such investment, and with few exceptions, that risk acceptance has resulted in return of reward, as basic a fundamental of the American Economic model as anyone will ever find. So what happens when we reap that reward? We invest even more in confidence in that which we have already seen to provide that reward, sometimes even when there is little other basis for that confidence. And sometimes we get ridiculous, assigning value in great disproportion to reality, often in mere memory of what the alternatives were at the time we first took the risk, rather than on the basis of its comparison to contemporaries now.

A personal case in point is in order. But not before I observe that you readers of this wisdom (a rose by any other name?) have never been subjected to a footnoted research dissertation, but rather a personal vision, however rose colored the glasses of its writer. Is it possible some of the pontification has been based on untruths stated as though they were facts? Certainly. Believing otherwise would mean you are gullible, and I see little correlating evidence (Concours notwithstanding). But, as usual, I digress. But back in my younger days (before the dinosaurs died so we could have hi-test), I was a "company man". And having repeatedly put forth my best efforts on their behalf, and generating value which continues to this day to provide the basis for their profitability, I became a redundant commodity, and had to convince a State Labor clerk that I was diligently looking for work to justify their releasing unemployment insurance funds I had earned manyfold. In most cases, I denied the evident reality that it was coming, convincing myself that I was somehow indispensable, which of course led to my learning I was anything but.

Such results challenge the very heart of self-image, and the relative frequency began to suggest that I was deluding myself in asserting that I still had value to warrant my compensation expectations. But a funny paradox began to appear as well; after suffering the emotional strain and clawing back from the abyss, I somehow was progressing FASTER than my contemporaries who had survived the downsizing around them to remain with their original employers. I also saw that those who left were often able to come back MUCH better off than they would have been had they stayed in the first place. Was this seemingly because the employer suddenly realized they actually WERE indispensable? Hardly. It was really a pure function of the law of inertia; unless something exerts some effort, everything pretty much keeps on as it has been.

So a few years back, having been again laid off by another of America's finest corporations, I decided that if I was to spend 20% of my time unemployed anyway, I better start getting paid at least 20% more while I was working. And the way to do that was to insist that "salary" was simply a means to steal effort from me for no compensation, and if they

wanted me to work for 50 hours this week, they would have to pay me for 55. But I also discovered another truth; supply and demand must be variable and flexible. So when the market stunk, I would cut my rate to remain a player, and when it got better, so did my rate. Of course, the clients wondered why I seemed to have little loyalty to the original price I agreed to when they were “good enough” to “give” me a job. A little violin music if you please; NOT! They got what they contracted for and I got what I agreed to accept. And we BOTH agreed to “at-will” terms, so neither of us had any constraint on seeking to change the terms at any time. The market gave them an advantage once, and me the advantage later.

You’re probably wondering where this is going, right? Bear with me. Fast forward a few clients and a poor economy, which has started to improve measurably. I am about to come to the end of another job. But trepidation is the last emotion I feel. See, along the way, I learned as well that I am a whore. Don’t read anything into that which isn’t really there, just appreciate that the term is used to describe a person who helps someone to feel good in return for pictures of dead presidents. But there are many different presidential pictures which are possible, so what does Hamilton have over Lincoln? For one thing, Hamilton commands a certain level of flexibility which Lincoln does not, simply because the number of possible providers for Lincoln is large, but those willing to be flexible enough for Hamilton are a little more unusual. So the tradeoff issue is really niche based; but Pet Rocks have demonstrated that it is possible to sell almost anything if you present it properly.

In my case, Duracell hired me to make a new package happen after three years of failing internally to get to square one. That required me to live all over the place, which is why I’ve seen so few of you all year. What I promised to give them was a solution to their problem, which required dealing with both domestic and international, production schedules, and a simultaneous change to the product to incorporate the “on-cell”tester. Obviously, thinking within THEIR experience box would not work. Go Radical. But their recent acquisition by Gillette made the marketing and manufacturing people nervous about such a radical departure; make modular systems which could be pre-assembled, adapted universally and rapidly in the field to multiple generations of existing machines, and which would allow the current package OR the new package to be produced, with as little as an hour changeover per machine. So they got cold feet at making the production change, and we only built the prototype to prove/disprove the concept. As I had projected, it worked right out of the box, because IT WAS ENGINEERED TO DO PRECISELY SO.

In Porsche’s case, the Boxster has been an overwhelming success everywhere. And I predict, having now seen some tech details about the new “soggy bottom” 911, that it will represent an all-new benchmark, the 356 lovers (and guys like me who love the sound of the sewing machine out back) notwithstanding. And eventually even I will acquiesce to its superiority at meeting the broader needs of its customer base, even if it must in some ways depart its “previous employers”. But this, too, is an economic reality, just as was Porsche’s hiring of the Toyota consultants to re-engineer their way of thinking.

For me, the loss of a year’s compensation for modifying machines may have created the opportunity to be an even BIGGER player in their enterprise-wide shared data systems, the foundation of whose data STARTS in the packaging area. So their comfort with that totally unrelated success led to their asking me to propose how they might eliminate their current tedium of manual re-key of all the data they use. And I have no doubt that if the project gets funded, they won’t even THINK of another person to manage it, despite my explicit lack of any actual experience at having done such a thing. THEY have even less. But they DO know ME. Comfort.

I may not recognize the color of the fluid which will leak out of my future 911. But the prancing horse and antlers and the black and red stripes on the hood crest have already earned my respect. I doubt I'll be disappointed. I'm content to keep an open mind, because I STILL haven't found a match for my Targa.