

6. The Secrets Story

The customer is always right, even if fatally stupid and misguided.

—*The Economist*

Tease Please

If there is one word that encapsulates the peddling of Harry Potter, that word is *tease*. The merest glance at Joanne Rowling's award-winning website reveals that teasing the customer is her preferred marketing method. Tricks, puzzles, mysteries, red herrings, supposedly secret rooms and all the riddling rest are sprinkled liberally throughout the site, which she writes herself.¹ She drops hints about the outcome of the saga, the fate of individual characters, the clues contained in various episodes and the significance of forthcoming book titles ("I can't reveal the title of the final book. My publisher would kill me!") What's more, she torments her readers with the ultimate questions: Who's for the chop? Can Harry survive? Is Ron a goner? Dumbledore's doomed, isn't he? Will a hit wizard whack Hagrid?

And she's not alone. Taking their lead from Joanne, Harry's handlers go out of their way to torment customers. In the nicest possible way, naturally. The *Philosopher's Stone* DVD, for instance, contains numerous hidden scenes that can be accessed only via a cryptic combination of clicks on the bricks of the back wall of the Leaky Cauldron. In the computer games, the grounds of Hogwarts are seething with secrets, subtle hints, concealed clues and what have you. None of this is unusual in computer gaming or extras-enhanced DVDs, admittedly, but it is particularly conspicuous in the Harry Potter franchise, where most tie-ins involve tricks and puzzles of one kind or another.

Another aspect of the same teasing ethos is good old-fashioned denial marketing. That is, making life difficult for the customer, thereby increasing his or her desire to acquire the merchandise in question. Denial relies on the elemental marketing principle that people want what they can't have, and the less they can have it, the more they want it. This psychological premise – what Germans term *Torschlusspanik*, the fear of doors closing – is employed by exclusive nightclubs (impossible to get in), top-notch restaurants (try again next year), high-end retail outlets (not for the likes of you), to-die-for West End shows (tickets are so hot they spontaneously combust) and individually customized superbrands (only the best need apply, and there's a waiting list for the waiting list). It is equally evident at the bottom-feeding end of the marketing spectrum, where sales pitches like "last few days," "limited time only," "hurry while stocks last," and "the Lego Hogwarts Castle kit won't be in until after Christmas" are well-nigh ubiquitous.²

Denied!

Marketease, moreover, was standard practice in Hollywood before the blockbuster revolution. Whereas today's mega-movies open wide, with a view to generating massive first-weekend grosses that are then used to publicize the movie further and

give it legs, old-time movie marketers often restricted availability in order to lengthen lines, increase interest, inculcate a must-see mentality among cinemagoers and generate the all-important Big Mo (momentum). When *Jaws* was set for release in 1975, it was booked into a then record 900 theatres. The legendary head of Universal Studios, Lew Wasserman, promptly dropped 300 of them in order to foment the frenzy. “I want this picture to play all summer long,” he said. “I don’t want people in Palm Springs to see the picture in Palm Springs. I want them to get in their cars and drive to Hollywood.”³

And they did.

Such movie-marketing tactics are rarely used nowadays, more’s the pity, but when Christopher Columbus claimed that *Chamber of Secrets* was way too scary for younger children, arachnophobes especially, he was treading the time-worn path of tantalization. Nothing is more guaranteed to get children excited than the suggestion that a film’s too frightening for them. No doubt the same don’t-go-there tactic will be employed when *Goblet of Fire* is released. It features the death of a key character! The kids might be traumatized!! Cue stampede to the box office!!!

Rowling’s much-publicized doubts about meretricious merchandising work in a similar way. When she urges parents not to buy certain products, as she often does, she’s merely adding to the items’ intrigue and thereby increasing customer interest, arousal, desire and ultimately acquisitiveness (“if Jo doesn’t like it, it must be worth investigating/investing in”). Her say in what goes memorabilia-wise is a boon to Warner Bros. as well, since Jo’s possible disapproval can be deployed when negotiating with would-be licensees. The threat of incurring JK’s wrath is a powerful weapon that can be used to beat suppliers down on price or any other negotiable (superior quality, better delivery, promotional support, you name it).⁴

Tease Books Are Made for Hawking

The quintessence of Pottertease, nevertheless, is secreted among the book marketers. Although denial-based bookselling strategies are nothing new – the anti-marketing of books began in 1967, when Harper & Row refused to release review copies of William Manchester’s *The Death of the President* and the ensuing publicity propelled it to number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list⁵ – there’s no denying that Bloomsbury and Scholastic are modern masters of tantalizing, teasing and tormentation.

The marketing strategy for *Goblet of Fire*, for example, involved a complete blackout on advance information. It started with a teaser campaign consisting of “Harry’s Back” posters and a countdown to the rapidly approaching publication date. However, the title, pagination and price were kept secret until two weeks before the big day. Review copies were withheld, author interviews were prohibited and foreign translations deferred for fear of injudicious leaks. Juicy plot details, including the death of a (minor) character and Harry’s sexual awakening, were drip-fed to a slavering press corps immediately prior to the launch. It was even announced, with some solemnity, that the original manuscript had been kept locked in a carefully

guarded safe after it was almost stolen from under a Bloomsbury executive's nose. Gasp! Shock! Don't these people keep back-up copies on disk?

Printers and distributors, meantime, were required to sign strict, legally enforceable confidentiality agreements. Bookstores were bound by a ruthlessly policed embargo, though they were allowed to display the tantalizing tome (in locked cages) for a brief period in the run-up to Harry Potter Day, 8 July 2000. Fake television footage of heavily armoured security vans delivering the precious Potter cargo to online booksellers was also produced and broadcast a week before publication. Twenty advance copies of the top-secret book were accidentally sold by The Supermarket That Must Not Be Named and one of the "lucky" children was miraculously tracked down by the world's press and splashed across every front page worth its salt. Another copy inexplicably landed on the news desk of the Scottish *Daily Record*, though it was returned unopened to the publisher by the paper's noble news hounds. Curiously, the story of the accident – and the journalists' righteous response – somehow found its way to the front pages. Only a cynic would infer that the incident was prearranged.

The *Order of the Phoenix* strategy followed a broadly similar pattern, albeit the restrictions were even tighter this time round. Scholastic's stealth campaign, as Beahm notes, included: no review copies; no book signings; no media coverage, bar one BBC and one NBC television interview; the trusty countdown clocks on the publishers' websites; and the by now traditional midnight opening fandango. Deliveries to bookstores came in special tamper-proof boxes featuring ostentatiously opaque wrapping and overprinted with the magic marketing words, "Do not open before 21 June 2003."⁶ Still, the best stunt of all was pulled by J.K. Rowling herself on launch day. Just after midnight, she turned up unannounced at Waterstones in Edinburgh, and started signing copies for stunned kiddie customers. Pandemonium ensued. PRmonium swiftly followed.

Harry Potter Pricked a Peck of Pickled Ps

It is arguable, I grant you, that the author is more of a beneficiary than an instigator of Bloomsbury's and Scholastic's marketeasing. The evidence nevertheless suggests that Rowling is the guiding spirit, not least because the teasing didn't really begin until the third book, when Jo became conscious of Harry's marketing clout, and only took off with book 4, by which time Potter was the hottest marketing phenomenon on the planet. As noted previously, it is not in an author's professional interest to flaunt her sales ability, let alone her self-promotional prowess.

Yet regardless of who was responsible for what, the evidence in *Phoenix* is irrefutable. Rowling is not only conscious of marketease but uses it as a fundamental narrative device. The antagonist of *Phoenix*, devious Dolores Umbridge, is undermined by a masterpiece of denial marketing when her attempts to spread disinformation about the boy wizard are thwarted. Upset by the High Inquisitor's insinuations, Harry tells his side of the story to Rita Skeeter, the hackette nonpareil. When the piece is duly splashed across the front cover of *The Quibbler*, acting headmistress Umbridge makes the mistake of banning the periodical. But far from

killing the story, her act of denial merely piques people's curiosity, and in very short order her authority crumbles:

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

*Any student found in possession of the magazine
The Quibbler will be expelled.*

*The above is in accordance with Educational Decree
Number Twenty-seven.*

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor

For some reason, every time Hermione caught sight of one of these signs she beamed with pleasure.

'What exactly are you so happy about?' Harry asked her.

'Oh, Harry, don't you see?' Hermione breathed. 'If she could have done one thing to make absolutely sure that every single person in the school will read your interview, it was banning it!'

And it seemed that Hermione was quite right. By the end of the day, though Harry had not seen so much of a corner of *The Quibbler* anywhere in the school, the whole place seemed to be quoting the interview to each other.

(Order of the Phoenix, pp. 512–13)

Now, there's nothing like a ban to inflame consumption, as marketers of everything from Frankie Goes to Hollywood to *The Passion of the Christ* attest. Nevertheless, there's more to teasing than denial. Like so many marketing terms, *tease* is an acronym. Its five components are: tricksterism, exclusivity, amplification, secrecy and entertainment.⁷ Harry Potter epitomizes *marketease*. Tricks are repeatedly played on the public (Rowling's website, the "lucky" schoolkid). Exclusivity is actively practised (special limited editions in Ancient Greek, Latin and Gaelic) or cunningly alluded to ("drat, not enough copies to go round"). Amplify, amplify, amplify is the publishers' byword, since everything that is remotely newsworthy is shovelled into the media's insatiable maw (the shovelling is also shovelled constantly). Secrecy, furthermore, is central to the whole operation in everything from the titles of forthcoming books to rumours of the deaths of major characters. The stories themselves are mysteries, remember, a judicious mix of Tom Brown and James Bond.

Above all, the Harry Potter phenomenon is enormously entertaining. The books are wonderfully entertaining. The reaction of the consuming public is incredibly entertaining. The reaction of the Harry-haters is entertaining too, as we shall see very shortly. And, needless to say, the marketing campaign itself is a wonderful example of promotional razzle-dazzle, hocus-pocus, hubba-hubba.

Marketease is the antithesis of conventional marketing, which aims to satisfy consumers' every conceivable whim. Giving people what they want, when they want it, at a price they are prepared to pay, is the basis of modern marketing. As marketing bases go, it goes very well indeed. It works. It has proved itself. It's all fine and dandy. It's not the only way to sell stuff, however. In truth, too much pandering to customers is unhealthy: it makes them harder and harder to satisfy, more and more demanding, less and less appreciative.⁸

Fisherman's Friend

The conventional marketing approach, appropriately enough, reminds me of one of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, "The Fisherman and His Wife." A tad un-PC for today's taste, the tale tells of a fisherman who catches a flounder one day, an enchanted flounder that asks to be released. The kindly fisherman agrees, but when he tells his wife about his selfless act, she scolds him for failing to demand a wish in return. "What should I have wished for?" he asks. "Ah," says his wife, "Don't you think it's awful that we've got to keep living in such a hovel? It stinks and it's disgusting. You should have wished for a little cottage. Go back and call him. Tell him we want a little cottage. I'm sure he'll give us one."

The fisherman returns to the seashore, where he delivers the following oration:

Flounder, flounder in the sea,
If you're a man, then speak to me.
Though I do not care for my wife's request,
I've come to ask it nonetheless.

The flounder appears and grants his wish. When the fisherman gets back home, their hovel has been transformed into a cottage. However, his wife soon grows dissatisfied. She demands a castle instead of the cottage, and the fisherman goes back to the seashore, where he repeats his rhyme. The flounder reappears and does the needful. The same sequence of events duly transpires, only this time his wife demands to be king. King she becomes, with riches befitting her position:

There were sentries standing in front of the gate, along with many soldiers, drums and trumpets. When he entered the palace, he found that everything was made of pure marble and gold and had velvet covers with large golden tassels. The doors to the hall were opened, and he could see the whole court. His wife was sitting on a high throne of gold and diamonds, and on her head she had a big golden crown and in her hand a sceptre of pure gold and jewels. Two rows of ladies-in-waiting were standing on either side of her, each lady a head shorter than the next. The fisherman stepped forward and said, 'Oh, wife, now you're king aren't you?'

'Yes,' said his wife, 'now I am king.'

Still unsatisfied, she asks to be emperor. Granted. She wants to be pope. Sorted. She wants to be like God, says the fisherman to the flounder. Done. The fisherman returns home and finds her living in a hovel once more.⁹

There's a lesson in there somewhere.