

## **Evil Plans: Having Fun on the Road to World Domination.**

Hugh MacLeod—2011

### **Introduction: everybody needs an evil plan.**

- Everybody needs an evil plan. Everybody needs that crazy, out their idea that laws them to actually start doing something they love, doing something that matters.
- But looking back, I realize it all served a common purpose: to unify work and love. I was writing about what was most interesting and important to me, and trying to turn it into a career somehow.
- I just want 10,000 people giving me money every year.

### **The market for something to believe in is infinite.**

- Near the tail end of my advertising career, I wrote a little rant on my blog that was eventually christened “The Hughtrain Manifesto.” It encompassed everything important I knew about marketing, up to that point.
- It’s no longer enough for people to believe that your product does what it says on the label. They want to believe in you and what you do. And now go elsewhere if they don’t.
- What do marketers sell that scales? Belief. Belonging. Mattering. Making a difference. Tribes. We have an unlimited need for this.
- A film is only as good as the reason for making. What is true for Hollywood is also true for products and businesses. It’s not what you make, it’s what you believe in. And this is what people respond to. That is where your enterprise lives or dies.

### **Create your own global micro-brand.**

- In the Internet era, if people on the other side of the planet aren’t loving what you do, you are doing something wrong.
- It seems to me a lot of people of my generation are stuck on this high priced, corporate, urban treadmill.
- Frankly, it beats the hell out of commuting every morning to the corporate glass box in the big city—something I did for many years. Just so I can make enough money to help me forget that I have to commute every morning to the corporate glass box in the big city.

### **Keep it simple.**

- Instead of our usual route via 1– 10, we decide to take the slower but more scenic route through the Texas Hills. At about half way we pulled into Chapel Hill Texas, a sweet little hamlet of maybe 300 people. Right next to the gas station is a small storefront, called the Chapel Hill meet market and Café. A traditional lunch diner taking up most of the building, and to the right, a tiny grocery store. Turns out that this hole in the wall grocery stores sell some of the best Texas sausage and jerky you ever did come across. They have their own smokehouse in the back, and everything is prepared right there on the premise. My friends in Austin are having a barbecue that evening, so we buy about \$40 worth of sausage and jerky for the party. We eat some of the jerky in the car—outstanding! We have a great time in Austin seeing our friends. Everybody loved the meat that we brought for them. On the way home to Houston, because my sister and I liked the Chapel Hill meet market so much, we decide to stop in again and buy some more sausage for my dad and his wife. As I’m paying for the food I complement the person serving me, the owner, and a nice lady named Sissy. “This is a great little place, I love your meats, and I bet you sell a lot of this stuff” –“sure do, about 1000 pounds of meat every day.” Boom! A moment of clarity. A tiny little hole in the wall in the middle of nowhere, Texas. Selling 3 ½ tons of world-class product a week. Doing the math in my head, assuming we’ve got a reasonable margin that’s a lot more money than me or any of my other New York cronies were making. For a lot less hassle and overhead.

### **Join the overextended class.**

- Welcome to the overextended class. You may opt out of it if you want, but over time it's going to get harder and harder to make ends meet, let alone be successful, if you do.

### **Have a world-class product.**

- [www.Englishcut.com](http://www.Englishcut.com).
- We had a few things going for us:
  - **A great product.** Thomas is one of the best tailors in the world. His suits really are that good. If we were just selling commodified track I doubt anyone would have paid much attention.
  - **A unique story.** When he started, Thomas was the only Taylor writing a blog, and this gave him a unique voice in the blog community. This field in the interest. Had masses of tailors already been blogging, it would have been much harder for his own unique self to spread.
  - **Passion and authority.** Thomas has both spades. That's are kept people coming back.
  - **Continuity.** He kept at it, he didn't expect the blog to transform his fortunes overnight. Blogs don't write themselves, if you want a blog to transform your business, I'd say give yourself at least a year.
  - **Focus.** It was always about suits. It was never about what he had for breakfast, Google traffic or any other bloggers.
  - **Thomas spoke in his own voice.** Thomas is straightforward, and the voice of his blog is the same voice you meet in real life.
  - **Sovereignty.** The only people we had to please where the two of us. No bosses or outside investors to keep happy.

### **Make art every day.**

- Like a very talented pianist once told me when I was a boy, it's better to practice a musical instrument for five minutes a day than to practice for two hours once a week.

### **Fill in the narrative gaps.**

- A little present tense success forgives a lot of past tense bullshitting.

### **Remember who you really are.**

### **Treat it like an adventure—an adventure worth sharing.**

- We like telling you stories because they defy the odds—and that's what gives us hope. Hope of filling in our own "narrative gaps." Whatever your evil plan might be, there has to be some sort of sense of adventure, some sort of triumph over adversity baked in. Otherwise, people won't want to talk about it, and your story won't spread. People aren't merely buying your product, your evil plan: they are buying the story you are telling... A story that's not just about you, but about them, and what they could be.

### **Sleep rough.**

- They wanted to bust out of that routine—and here was their chance. Not a huge chance, but a chance nonetheless. And they were going for it, no questions asked. Like Anna, the equally tiny skinny lead guitarist told me and her cute little Limerick accent, "we don't want to go home. We want to keep this going for ever." Would you be willing to put that kind of effort and commitment to make your evil plan a success? How willing to sleep rough are you? Are you that brave? Am I?
- What people say they want and what they are willing to work their ass off to get are two different things.

## **Create social.**

- [www.boingboing.net](http://www.boingboing.net) one of my favorite blogs.
  - Boing Boing acts as the sharing device, allowing you to connect with others.
- It is not what the product does that matters to us so much, it's how we socialize around it that matters.
- So ask yourself, how are people going to socialize around your evil plan? How is society baked in? How is your evil plan a social object? User questions you should take seriously.

## **Create snowballs.**

- Evil plans are like snowballs, they require “random acts of traction.”
- My friend James Governor, certainly understands this. Since he and his business partners can only realistically execute 10% of their ideas, they don't seem to mind giving away the remaining 90% for free, via their blogs. If one of their free ideas gets “random acts of traction” and ends up spreading around the Internet, it's great PR for their business. It eventually leads to conversations. Conversations that eventually lead to paid gigs. Evil plans by James, of course only work if you can make your snowballs quickly and inexpensively enough. If you spend too much time worrying about it, you lose. If you try to control with the snowballs go after you release them down the hill, you lose.

## **Embrace crofting.**

- Crofting is a great metaphor for the new world of work we are now seeing a marriage.
- Every day they had something else going on. One day it might be looking after their sheep. The next and might be a job working on the roads to the local Council. I knew one crofters who drove the mail van. Another who ran the local post office.
- But since the big corpse job for life is becoming a thing of the past, expect to see more crofters out there.

## **The Tao of Undersupply.**

- For every made level managing job opening, there are scores of people willing and able. For every company needing to hire an ad agency or design firm, there's dozens out there, willing and able. For every person wanting to buy a new car, there are a ton of car makers and dealers out there. I could go on and on. I could also go on about how many good people I know who are caught and oversupplied market, and how every day they wake up feeling chilled to the bone with dread and unease. Advertising and media folk are classic examples. Maybe the thing is to get into the tao of undersupply. If only 100 people want to buy your widgets, then just make 90 widgets. If only 10 million, make 9 million. It isn't rocket science, but it takes discipline. It also requires you to stop making the same stuff as other people. This requires originality and invention. Harder than it looks.

## **Don't be “middle seat guy”.**

- No, we don't want to give your law practices \$7500 to create a living will in order to help you pay off your six-figure student loans from law school. We'd much rather download something off the Internet that does the same job for \$99. No we don't want you interrupting our favorite reality TV show and making us watch your commercials so you can show us your well-crafted, multimillion dollar marketing message about how wonderful your clients automobiles are. We'd much rather get the skinny from an online form. Now we don't want to buy your generic, cardboard tasting mass-produced cookies from the local convenience store, we got it what are some online from a Buddhist monk weirdo lumberjack who makes them by hand in tiny batches.

## **Cheap, easy global media: the revolution is already here, and it's permanent.**

- But what blogging represent back in 2004 is never going away, save for the total extinction of the human race. I'm not just talking about blogs, talking about something much bigger. It's here forever. It's not a fad. This is what Shirky was talking about: cheap, easy, global media.

## **The 20: control the conversation by improving the conversation.**

- When trying to articulate how marketing works on the Internet, famously quipped, "all markets are conversations." From your standpoint, that means you have to start owning the conversation of whatever space your business occupies.
- Conversation ownership isn't rocket science. Owning a conversation simply means that regardless of what enterprise you are in, the higher up the food chain/social hierarchy you go, the more likely they are talking about you and not about somebody else. I would suggest that, right this minute, you make a list of the 20 or so people in your space who matter the most. Then ask yourself, who on this list is actually reading your stuff, actually falls what you are up to, actually knows that you exist? If most of the people on the list are checking you out, everyone else will follow you eventually. If they are not, then you've got a wee bit of a marketing problem.
- How do you get your stuff on the radar screen of the 20? By creating brilliant stuff. By creating brilliant stuff that speaks to the market in a way that has never been spoken to before. If your stuff is different enough that it changes the conversation of your market for the better, other folk will notice, even the big boys. Improve the conversation by improving the language. All great marketing breakthroughs are evolutions of language.

## **No, you can't have it all.**

- How many PhD's have quit their stellar careers in academia to go play for the NFL? How many MBAs stars, after they retire from basketball, go off to run a division of IBM? The sacrifices are utterly, utterly enormous to be the best in the world at something, or even really good at it. Have it all? Are you insane? Everybody knows this.
- Of course, this "have it all," sacrifice free attitude isn't just the domain of the ho-hum beer brands. It's the domain of the ho-hum individual careers, as well. You can only hope that yours is not one of them.

## **Get other people to hate you.**

- The bad news is, the better your evil plan, the more people are going to hate it.
- The good news is, the better your evil plan, the more people are going to love it.
- Walk into any supermarket and you'll see again a similar phenomenon. I'll after I'll follow products that most people, frankly, don't really give a hoot about. Sure, there might be a perfectly good brand of paper towel or breakfast cereal, but at the end of the day, they offer no more than they please. And so how much do people care? Answer: diddley squat.
- And go visit these products corporate headquarters and you'll meet their human equivalent. I'll after aisle of people in cubes. Sure, they'll be perfectly nice, educated, polite and all, they'll be efficient and good at their jobs and all, but how many people would care if one of them lost their job tomorrow. Answer: no one.

## **A good customer base is the best marketing plan there is.**

- My college buddies were self-appointed team members of one of the greatest marketing departments in history: "the dead heads"—the collective term for the Grateful Dead's massive and legendary fan base. Probably no other band in history had so many fans, spending so much time and energy trying to convert so many other people to the cause. I'm guessing a lot of them felt that the more people they could convert, the more successful the dead would become, and therefore the longer the band would be around.

## **Continuity is key.**

- But none of it works without discipline. Early in my career, I was told that success demanded one thing above all others: turning up. Turning up every bloody day, regardless of everything.
- Continuity, anyone can draw a good cartoon... Once. But not everyone can draw a good cartoon every day.

## **Create expressive capital.**

- Expressive capital. Our products make it easier for the end-user to find and/or express meaning, narrative, metaphor, purpose, explanation and relevance in his/her own life than our competitors products do.
- This is why techies get so fussy about what computer they own or code they use. Or why construction workers get so into what tools they buy. It's not just about which products get the job done, it's also about identity. What product expresses its owner most favorably and powerfully to the world?
- Not all products have expressive capital, of course. Was products are commodities. The trouble with commodities, of course, is that everyone has one. And anybody who's ever dealt with a Walmart or China knows what happens to those people...
- Whining is not an exit strategy.

## **“This is it.”**

- When new dancers come to work for my company, I tell them, this is it. In other words, this is as good as it gets. They're here to do at their life's best work, or lease part of it, they're not here just to fill time and pay the bills until what they really want to do finally comes along. And I only work at dancers who can sincerely operate at that level—the people sincerely doing their life's work here and now, not dancers waiting for their lives to one day begin.

## **Death by stuff.**

- An evil plan is really about being able to do both at the same time: unify work and love.
- So how do you do both at the same time? Easy: you love what you do. How what do you love what you do? You make the decision to do so. The earlier in your life you make that decision, the easier your evil plan will be to pull off.
- So please decide to love what you do—the sooner, the better.

## **Human beings don't scale.**

- Larry Ellison, the CEO of Oracle, may have 1 million times more money than me, but he isn't going to live 1 million times longer than me, watch 1 million times more sunsets, make love to 1 million more women than me, drink 1 million times more fine wines and me, listen to 1 million times more Beethoven than me, or have 1 million times more grandchildren than me. Human beings don't scale.