
Bob Stone

The Life of a KISSer

Bob Stone is widely heralded as one of the true pioneers of direct marketing. Among his many professional achievements, he is co-founder and Chairman Emeritus of the direct marketing agency Stone & Adler. Currently Bob is Professor of Direct Marketing at the University of Missouri. As a former director of the Direct Marketing Association and a member of the board of the Direct Marketing Educational Foundation, he has worked to establish college programs in direct marketing. A member of the Direct Marketing Hall of Fame, Mr. Stone has won virtually every award for direct marketing excellence. He is the author of numerous books including the direct marketing bible, *Successful Direct Marketing Methods*.



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Introduction

I've decided to come clean today by revealing a deep, dark secret: I am a certified, lifetime card-carrying member of KISS. All members worldwide start each day by uttering the four magic passwords: Keep-It-Simple-Stupid. All that follows reflects the sentiments of a dyed-in-the-wool KISSer.

Receiving the Ed Sisk Award from DMAW is very special to me. I regard you as the most hospitable club in the nation. I feel I am being honored by genuine professionals. In short, you folks have class.

It was my privilege to meet Ed Sisk just once, but it was an unforgettable experience. Here was a man who had not only remarkable vision, but who gave and taught with a passion. I've never known a really successful person who didn't have a deep passion for what he or she did.

In memory of Ed's passion, I am dedicating this address to college students, who are the true future of direct marketing. And I tip my hat to the professionals in this audience who have made a bright future possible.

You have a right to know when it was I started in direct marketing. Honesty is called for here. Actually the term "direct marketing" didn't even exist when I started in the early 1940's. There were a few colleges teaching a segment on sales letter writing. That was it.

TV was just starting to catch on. You could watch TV in any color you wished as long as it was black. The commercial you are about to see and hear was about as good as they got.

(It's okay if you laugh.)

The commercial I showed was narrated by a circus pitchman. If you were to ask about "reach" and "frequency," you would have been asked another question: "What's reach and frequency?"

Direct marketing is a different story today. We've got tools, lots of tools.

- Market segmentation
- Databases
- Socioeconomics
- Pricing models
- Lifetime value computation
- Qualitative methods
- Quantitative methods
- Interactive methods
- The Internet, the Web
- And on, and on.

All these wonderful tools are ours to use and to abuse. I warn college graduates that all these goodies are available not only to them but to graduates and non-graduates alike. What their diplomas buy them is a level playing field.

You can't play the game today without making the computer your slave. But computers in and of themselves are dumb. They do only what you tell them to do. The greatest computer ever invented sits right on the top of our shoulders. That's where the creative chips fit.

I tell college students that, in their careers to come, there are just a few simple things they have to do better than most everybody else in

order to be successful. These simple things are to be found in six tenets:

1. Whenever you run into a problem, step one is to ask yourself - "What is the simple solution to this problem?" There is a prevailing misconception that big problems call for complex solutions. It's more likely that complex solutions cause big problems.

Consider this problem. An 18-wheel trailer truck gets stuck under a viaduct. Traffic is backed up for miles. Engineers are huddled together, earnestly discussing a possible solution. In the meantime a little kid is tugging at an engineer's sleeve². "Mister, I know how to get the truck under the bridge."

"Go away, kid. Can't you see we're busy?"

Well, the kid kept insisting he knew how to extract the 18-wheeler. Finally, in exasperation, the engineer asked, "Okay, kid, how would you free the truck?"

His answer..."Let the air out of the tires."

2. Whenever you see an idea that excites you, ask this question: "How can I adapt that idea to my line of business?"

When American Airlines conceived the loyalty program that rewards those who fly frequently on their airline, creative people didn't say, "What a great idea. It's a shame we're not in the airline business." No. They looked for a way to adapt that idea to their own line of business.

3. You can't be a successful person unless you are a student of human behavior.

If I were a dean of a business school, I

wouldn't let a student graduate unless he or she mastered a course in human behavior.

When it comes to direct marketing, only inquisitive minds need apply. Creative people keep asking - "Why? Why? Why?"

--- Why are older people more likely to enter a sweepstakes? Why does a deadline increase response? Why do more people respond to a credit card offer than a cash offer? Why? Why? Why?

4. It's okay to fail. . . if you fail in trying to do better.

Nobody likes to fail. That's for sure. But it's not a sin to fail. The real sin is in not having the guts to fail. In direct marketing, failure begets success. We call that testing.

5. Get a mentor.

I'm prejudiced, of course, but I know of no group of people who are more generous in helping others than direct marketing people. And it just seems to me that the more successful they are, the more generous they are with their time.

One piece of advice I always give a college student is, "Get a mentor." Don't be shy, don't be afraid. It really is true that only busy people seem to have time.

When I was a beginner, my mentor was Homer J. Buckley, the man who actually created the term "direct mail." When I was stupid enough to think that I knew all about direct mail, I had the audacity to write a book about it. He never said, "Hey, dummy, you don't know what you're talking about." No. He took the time to show me what I did wrong. Then he

led me towards doing it right. None of us is ever too old to benefit from a generous mentor.

6. Leave some room for dessert.

Remember when you were a kid? Chances are your mom often said, "Leave room for dessert." She might also have said, "If you don't finish your dinner, you don't get any dessert."

What I tell college students is that they will do better in their careers if they follow a philosophy of delivering surprise desserts no matter what task they are asked to deliver. It's another way of going the extra mile.

Let me give you an example of applying the surprise dessert technique. In my years in the agency business, I was often involved in new business presentations. Most often we were competing against two or more agencies, and we were always concerned that potential clients, upon review, wouldn't remember which agency presented which idea.

We solved the problem by delivering "dessert." After we knew all presentations had been made, we found an excuse to make one last phone call on D-Day.

A phone call was made, and the prospect was told we had one more gangbuster idea which we'd like to present before they made a decision. That gave us the final crack at the account. For sure. And guess what? Our batting average was over 400%. All of which goes to prove it pays to make sure you fire the last shot. KISS. KISS!

Simple ideas solve problems. One problem most direct marketing clubs face is getting

enough traffic to satisfy their exhibitors.

If, when you get back to the office tomorrow morning, somebody asks you what that guy Stone had to say, here's what I suggest your reply might be.

"Well, actually, he admitted to being a cult member. He was pretty simple, really." Then you could deliver the six Stone tablets which most successful direct marketers use:

1. Whenever you run into a problem, ask yourself - "What is the simple solution to that problem?"
2. Whenever you see an idea that excites you, ask yourself, "How can I adapt that idea to my line of business?"
3. You can't be a successful person unless you are a student of human behavior.
4. It's okay to fail . . . if you fail in trying to do better.
5. Get a mentor.
6. Leave some room for dessert.

Now, before I say, "Adieu," I'd like to close with a little story. If the story had a title, it would be called, "Casting Bread Upon the Water."

The central character is a nun by name of Sister Mary Angelica. One day she received a registered letter from a prestigious law firm in Washington notifying her that a long-lost uncle had left her a million dollars.

Sister Superior got wind of the happening and called Sister Mary Angelica into her office.

“What will happen to your vow of poverty?” was her very first question.

“Well,” Sister Mary Angelica putting Sister Superior at ease in short order, “I’m going to give all the money away” was her reply.

“Whew!” said Sister Superior.

So the very next day, Sister Angelica started walking the streets of Washington looking for needy people. Her first recipient looked particularly “seedy.” She extracted a \$100 bill from her purse, handed it to the man, said, “Godspeed” and continued on casting bread upon the water, so to speak. “Godspeed. Godspeed.”

The next morning, the very first person to whom she had given \$100 knocked on the sister house door and asked to see the good sister. When Sr. Mary Angelica greeted the woebegone character, he reached down into a tattered raincoat pocket, pulled out a wad of bills big enough to choke a horse, and handed the loot to the good sister.

Startled, she drew back and asked, “What is this, pray tell?”

“This is your take. Godspeed won and paid you 100 to one!”

And so I say to all of you - - “Godspeed!”