



Making The Phone Your *Student Value Amplifier* - Part II (a case of co-creation)

article by Michael Smolens ©2010

Lateral Marketing

If you recall from the Part I of “Making The Phone Your Student Value Amplifier”, I created a challenge for teachers to use the phone as a tool for creating value for students. I pinpointed and outlined three examples for: 1) the initial intake phone call, 2) the follow-up call after the first lesson, and 3) when making or answering a request to change a lesson time. Why are these so critical to a teacher’s success? The answer is simple, yet very deep in its implications—*people remember much more how they are treated rather than what product or technical concept they received*. In other words, if a student feels that the teacher is supportive and genuinely interested in their success, they are far more likely to not only continue their lessons, but also support the teacher in their allied activities.

Well-conceived offerings designed specifically for students—workshops, books, play-along recordings, and instrumental aids*—inevitably create more interest in a teacher’s personal recordings, performances, and charitable activities. These latter offerings are examples of “lateral” or “cross marketing.” I have observed how each group of products helps to reinforce and synergize the other in my own career, as well as for many other teachers whom I have spoken. *The feeling of interest and support that a student feels usually translates into positive in-person comments, on-line reviews, and actual referrals.*

Getting Married To God

I’m going to illustrate this concept with a case study from my own practice that involved such “lateral marketing.” The path that my client took over a period of several years was this: first as a *receiver* and listener to my regular performances at a church, also as an *attendee* to several of my original music concerts, next as a *participant* in my Chant Writing Workshop, and finally as a *patron* to have me compose music for his event.

Six months ago this client attended one of my workshops on how to write an original chant. His piece was very clear and had the potential to grow into something compelling. That modest fragment stayed in my file until I received a call from him asking me to provide music for his Ordination. He outlined his preferences for three specific pieces and the other details were handled very easily.

The next day I called him up and said, “You know, I’ve been thinking about your Ordination and I feel there’s one piece of music really missing from your list—yours!” I reminded him of the excellent fragment he created in my Chant Writing Workshop and invited him to bring that piece to full fruition as a declaration of his intention to grow as a composer within his community. “When couples get married, nearly all of them I’ve ever played for make special requests for

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particular songs. And I've seen many a bride or groom create a piece, whether a song, poem, or dance, just for that occasion as well. Well Reverend, aren't you getting married, so to speak?"

To this he replied, "Come to think of it, you're absolutely right, although I've never seen an Ordination where that person created an original chant or song."

And I said, "Considering how central music is for most churches, I'm pretty surprised to hear that, but no matter. Your chant would be a great contribution to everyone, including yourself."

"OK, you're on. Let's set-up a time to flush out my little idea and see what happens."

Session One

By the end of that first session we completed three phases of the project:

- 1) refined the text
- 2) completed the final rhythmic setting of that text
- 3) set that text to specific pitches

That was a significant amount of work and we were both pleased with what we accomplished in a single session. At the end he asked if our next session needed to be a full hour-and-a-half session, (my usual length), and I assured him that we would need that time to talk about form and create harmony for the whole chant.

A few days later I reflected on his question and remembered that he was bearing the entire cost of his ordination—from the hotel room, food, and programs to hiring me to perform as well as co-write his chant—and that his concern about costs were quite understandable. And with this concern in mind I called him that night, prepared to assure him that if we somehow finished his piece before the hour-and-a-half was up, I would be happy to prorate his session.

Case In Point

What emerged in our call was a very different conversation. I fully intended to make the offer I just mentioned, yet I was inexplicably drawn to communicate three more fundamental points: *acknowledgment*, *assignments*, and *his future*. I am going to purposely outline these points to highlight the fact that they were completely unplanned.

A. Acknowledgment

- 1) preparation for his Ordination.
- 2) regular contributions to our congregation with his talks.
- 3) deep musical listening and support during all of the services.
- 4) becoming a role model for other Reverends in his community by creating his own chant for his Ordination.

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B. His Assignments

- 1) to refine his text based on our discussions of the first session.
- 2) to listen to as many different styles of songs as possible, focusing on text and melody, including:
 - a. text setting — identifying the stress patterns that quickly communicate the meaning.
 - b. melodic rhythm — observing long vs. short notes, high vs. low notes, on the beat vs. off the beat notes.
 - c. melody pitch — listening for high vs. low notes, skips vs. leaps, notes in the scale vs. out of the scale.

(Given his lack of any formal music training, I purposely ignored larger musical issues such as musical form, chord changes, arrangements, etc. which would have likely overwhelmed him. I restricted my list to only deal the matter at hand—creating compelling text and setting that melodically).

C. His Future

- 1) spoke to his musical potential by challenging him to create additional chants for our church.
- 2) invited him to consider vocal training, allowing him to tap into his composing more deeply and be an added voice in the choir.

A Love Supreme

By the end of our half-hour talk the Reverend was so excited that he closed the conversation saying that he wanted to immediately work on his text and new listening assignment. As a result, I never really had a chance to make him the offer of a pro-rated session, nor did it seem very relevant.

He came into our second session claiming to not have done his homework, yet he was clearly excited at how things had progressed. He told me that he was walking down the street, speaking and singing his new chant (a key activity from the Chant Writing Workshop), when a homeless person called out to him from across the street and said, “You’re singing John Coltrane!” Truth be told, the Reverend was in fact incorporating the words from *A Love Supreme* by that composer into his chant. He felt that the universe was routing him on to follow his intuition, and he did incorporate those words into his text.

The Reverend not only clarified his text, but he also expanded the phrasing, which in turn enlarged the form and complexity of his chant. After looking at his new version I explained that his chant had grown from an in-law unit to become more of four-bedroom, three-bath home and that we had to reformat the entire piece to make it really work.

Epilogue

By the end of the third session we completed a truly expansive chant, larger than any I have co-written with anyone before. In fact, the Reverend felt the same and took my suggestion to hire a drummer for the premiere to support the expansive quality of his new work. Even though the work had complex rhythmic elements, modern jazz harmony,

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and significant contrast between verses, we felt it would be completely manageable for a group to participate in, since the more complex verses were sung by a soloist, and alternated with a simpler refrain sung by the audience. (Having just returned from his Ordination, I can report that his chant was very enthusiastically received by his guests and all of the presiding ministers).

When I look back at the whole process of creation, I am convinced that the phone conversation following Session One served as a major catalyst for the Reverend's inspiration. Acknowledging different aspects of his accomplishments, giving appropriate and targeted assignments, and speaking into his future musical participation created a new level of ownership and enabled him to create beyond what he thought was possible.

And what do excited clients tell their friends?

**instrumental aids: I'm now selling small diagonal blocks to my piano students to make their benches more ergonomic—a great tool for keeping the weight forward effortlessly.*