

## Shop, Vote, Start: Responding to Today's Marketplace

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"So how do you really feel about it?" Ever hear that sometimes droll, sometimes snide comment when you express a strong opinion?

I've always been a pretty passionate enthusiastic person. Mostly, by far, a very positive optimistic guy, a "possibility thinker." But what gets me going in the negative, denunciatory direction is when the strong harm the weak. I've always hated bullies. My only school boy fisticuffs were when I pounded a bully who was picking on a little person. Otherwise I saved my physical aggression for the sports field.

It's amazing to me how many people are cowed into submission by the powerful. Think about all the priests and pastors who, because of the rich sitting in their pews, hesitate to preach the biblical texts about the "love of money" and the "rich fool" who lives only to tear down his barns to build bigger ones and then admire himself in the mirror. Think about the editors and program directors who, fearing loss of advertising revenue, pull their punches. V-Ps and managers bite their tongues as their own bosses indulge their greed. Boards of directors (and regents) smile silently and acquiescently as the executives they are supposed to ride herd on take companies to the brink of disaster and loot the company treasuries. Personally, I could care less how much money an Arab sultan or venture capitalist or home run hitter or software entrepreneur or entertainer or business leader or gambler makes and accumulates.

The only thing that gets me going is when those profits come at the expense of others in a manifestly unfair and harmful way. I don't have to watch Oprah Winfrey or buy tickets to the baseball game or Madonna's latest CD. I don't have to invest with Berkshire Hathaway or use Microsoft products or fill up my car at an Exxon station. I don't have to make charitable donations to United Way if I don't like their way of operating. But I do have to pay taxes to support AIG, Fannie, Freddie, and GM bailouts. I do have to buy my gas and electricity and water from state-supported monopolies that have no competition. I do have to pay taxes to support a public school and university system, whether run well or poorly.

But how should we respond to bad, even corrupt, business and organizational practices. We feel so powerless. But there are at least three things we should all be doing.

### Shop

First of all, no matter how small and ineffective it may seem, we must all "vote with our pocketbooks" as we used to say. In other words, stop shopping at businesses whose values and practices you do not support. Move your investments and bank accounts to an ethical, probably local or regional, bank. Don't give your banking business to Citibank and then complain about their leadership. Don't buy GM, Ford, or Chrysler cars if you don't approve of how they operate. Buy Toyota or some other brand. Shop at Costco not WalMart or Target if you prefer their culture and values. Fly Southwest not United, American, and Delta if you prefer their values. Eat at In-n-Out and boycott MacDonald's if you agree with *Fast Food Nation*. Patronize your local bookstore and produce stand, if you prefer what they stand for to the alternatives.

Yes, I've mentioned some of my preferred businesses but I am actually not trying to advertise for them. Honestly, if your values line up with Citibank more than with Wells Fargo or the Mechanics Bank, take your business to Citibank. That's my point. Don't just have opinions but put your money and business where your values are. Be self-conscious and pay a little extra to support the businesses you believe in.

### Vote

Second, be politically thoughtful and active, especially at the local level. There are no perfect political platforms, parties, or positions. Politics has been called "the art of compromise" and so it often is. But just because it is compromised doesn't mean all politicians and positions are the same. There is a huge

ideological division in our society today between those who feel that the chief purpose of government is to protect your freedom to serve your self-interest and those who want a government that protects the weak and the poor from harm, even if those of us with more, have to give a little bit more. You see this in the health care debate. Some argue that the supreme value is for me to be able to choose my preferred physician for me. That's the value that decides everything. The other side thinks that the supreme value is for all sick and injured people in our society to get at least a minimum of basic care. Once that basic level is achieved for everyone, we should be free to augment our personal health care, get those botox treatments, etc., to our heart's content. But first, every soul needs a guaranteed minimum level of care. The point here is this: don't just fume about these issues, vote on them. Don't complain if you don't vote or if you vote for someone who turns out to be a thieving bozo in office.

Locally, support movements to hold utility companies much more accountable. Lobby and vote to replace incompetent school boards and boards of regents with people who lead with your values. Vote for politicians who will represent the people as a whole and not just their donor base. Vote for politicians who will hold both government and business accountable. In my view, the most important action of government is often to combat and reduce the power of organizations. As we see every day now, the giant corporations were unleadable, unreformable, and now "too big to fail." That has got to change. Government needs to ensure that companies are manageable in size and scope. "Power corrupts...."

### **Start**

The third strategy is the most important of all: start something better than we now have. Be an entrepreneur. Start, or help start, a new business or organization. Innovate better ways of doing things in your present company to the extent that is possible. In the ashes of our current disaster, just one thin layer up from the ashes of the Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, etc., disasters of seven or eight years ago, is opportunity. We need a huge flourishing of new businesses carried out in new ways. I believe the consuming public is ripe for plucking away from the corporate losers we are now "rescuing." This is the "turn your lemons into lemonade" or "light a candle instead of curse the darkness" approach. Don't just gripe about the crooks and losers, create some winners. This is the hour.