Too Much Success *Can Be* Dangerous

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Last year we finished an interactive training CD for one of our state agencies. Although they've had many CD's built for them by other vendors, ours has had an unintended consequence—it ended up threatening their very existence.

How could the latest addition to a training library threaten the existence of the parent organization?

By being *too* successful.

The agency may have brought part of the problem on themselves—they took our course to a national convention in their industry and showed it around. Word of its uniqueness spread across the country. Orders for copies began to roll in. First by ones, and then tens, and finally hundreds. The states of Alaska and New York placed orders for hundreds of copies—to put one into every judicial and police office in their states ...even though the course has never been advertised, marketed, or offered for sale.

Our state legislature noticed. They began to think that with all these orders rolling in, our judicial agency might be able to fund itself, and no longer needed state funding.

This put our client in a very difficult position. Do they fill the orders and confirm the legislature's impression, and risk loosing their future funding? Or do they not fill the orders or requests for copies from other states, and face other issues—such as withholding "public" property which has been developed with government money?

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With our help, our client got the situation under control, but it did bring back a painful memory.

We once created a marketing piece for a startup client that was so successful, it literally put him out of business.

I had just completed my behavioral research in communication development for the Ford Foundation and was beginning to experiment with how to use this knowledge to make more powerful and effective communication tools.

For this particular client, all I did was design a new business card—but it was the instructions in how to use it that got him into trouble. I had designed the card, and his process for delivering it, to have the greatest **behavioral** impact on the people he delivered it to. We also helped him identify his best delivery targets, and the most effective way to approach them.

Following our instructions, his new card and marketing process quickly began to bring in more business than he could handle. He hired extra people...but the copies of the card he had already put out kept bringing in more and more work.

Eventually, he became so overloaded that he fell behind on deliveries—and even had legal action taken by several customers to get the services they had ordered. Facing two law suites, and unable to manage the load, he shut down the business after only 14 months.

I learned a hard lesson—never give a customer a tool more powerful than they can handle.

These events remind me that the communications tools we already have contain more power than we will ever learn to use. Sometimes we spend more time and energy jumping from one "new" tool to the next—from multimedia, to CD's, to the web, and on to whatever the next "new" tool is—without ever staying long enough to master the ones we already have.

As communications developers, we have serious responsibilities to our customers:

- First, to build the most effective tools we can for them.
- Then, to make sure those tools fit their exact needs—not delivering more than our customers can handle, nor less than they need.
- And finally, we must do a better job of teaching our customers how to use and manage the tools we are asked to build for them.

Remember the lowly business card…a very old tool.

Yet with the right design and training, it still had enough power in it to kill a promising business. Too much of anything *can* be dangerous—success included.