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Godin on Initiative



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What's the most important trait that separates successful marketers from the rest?

Is it analytic skill or creative acumen? Do you require an innate sense of consumer insight? Should you be affable or demanding? Should you be reserved or gregarious? Do you need to be a great presenter?

According to author and marketing guru Seth Godin, the most important key to our success as marketers in today's complex and fast-paced marketing environment is our ability to take initiative.

In his latest book, *Poke the Box*, Godin implores us to let go of the parts of our brain that make us afraid. The production culture of the past valued conformity, but today's economy thrives on innovation. Those who act may fail from time to time, but they will win over the long term. It's an important message that CMOs and their reports should heed. *Poke the Box* should be required reading.

After graduating from Tufts in 1979 with a degree in philosophy and information technology, Godin began his career as a product manager at Spinnaker Software, an educational software company. He became an entrepreneur in 1986 when he launched a book packaging business out of his apartment and he later created Yoyodyne, one of the first Internet marketing services companies, which specialized in permission-based direct marketing.

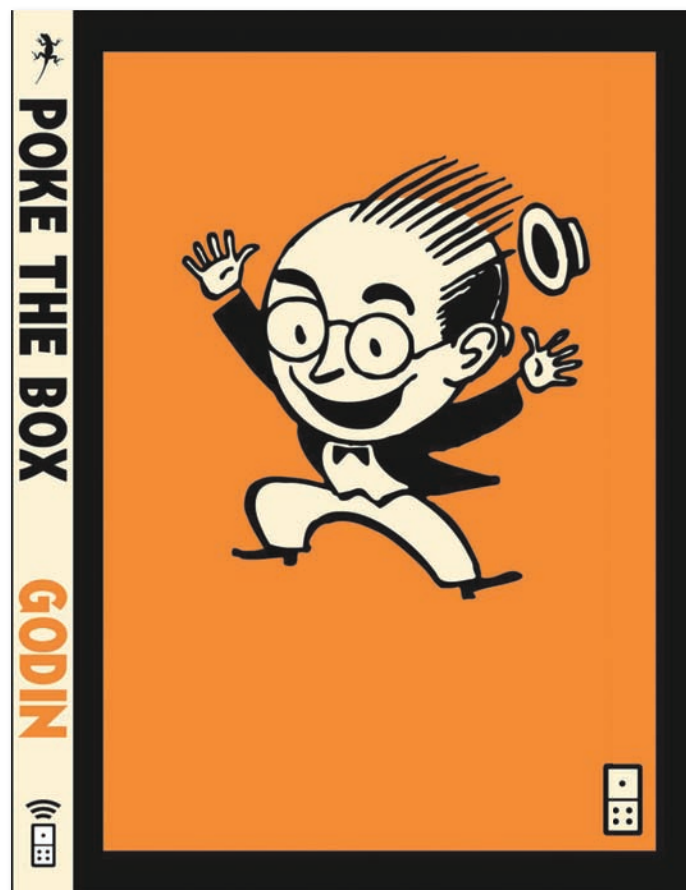
Godin sold Yoyodyne to Yahoo! Inc. for \$30 million in 1998 and became Yahoo's vice president of direct marketing during the height of the Internet boom. He left Yahoo in 2000 and has focused on his true passions of writing, speaking, blogging and teaching ever since. He has authored 13 books: *Poke The Box*, *Linchpin*, *Tribes*, *Meatball Sundae*, *The Dip*, *Small is the New Big*, *All Marketers are Liars*, *Free Prize Inside*, *Purple Cow*, *The Big Red Fez*, *Survival is Not Enough*, *Unleashing the Ideavirus* and *Permission Marketing*.

I called Godin a few days back, saying: "Seth, I love *Poke the Box*. Taking initiative is crucial, but lots of people just can't do what you do. They can't step up, stand up, be outspoken and lead the way you can."

"That's ridiculous," Godin replies in a soft-spoken voice. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've heard all day. What do you mean, people can't do that?"

Falling back on my heels and trying to recover, I say, "Seth, you're a terrific change agent, but can everyone take initiative?"

"Yes, completely. Take initiative," he says. Then he explains how all of our ability to initiate, take risks and lead gets tamped down as we grow. "When you are 5 years old, everyone is capable of drawing a picture. Everyone is capable of singing a song, telling a joke and telling the truth.



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Everyone. It's not in our DNA to avoid change. We grew up not fitting in. Then we get brainwashed for 10 or 15 years. For some people, that brainwashing is stickier than for other people," he says. "Everybody has the ability to go to work and make a difference if they can overcome their fear."

Godin explains why initiative is so important in today's economic environment. After World War II, the emphasis was on economies of scale and producing products efficiently and at low cost. He argues that today, producing products at low cost with high quality simply makes you a commodity. You need to constantly initiate change to win in the market and find the next opportunity.

"In 1947, taking initiative was economic suicide. In 1962, if you worked for Gainesburgers [dog food], you probably weren't going to get ahead by taking initiative," he tells me. "Today, if you asked me to make a list of every successful person I can think of, every single one of them is somebody who is successful because they did just that: They took initiative."

"I'm sitting here saying, I am not a freak of nature. Nor am I saying, I can do this, and you can't. What I'm saying is, I know it can be done. I know how to teach people to do it.

And I see it happening all the time," he says.

As Godin writes in *Poke the Box*: "Please stop waiting for a map. We reward those who draw the maps, not those who follow them." If that's not enough to get marketers moving, think of this: "How often do our heroes stand still?" Godin writes. "It's hard to imagine [Star Trek's] Spock and Kirk landing on a planet and just relaxing for a month or two."

"The factory has programmed the adventurous impulse out of us. The economic imperative of the last century has been to avoid risk, to avoid change and most of all avoid exploration and the new. An efficient factory fears change because change means retooling, and risk, and a blip in productivity," Godin says. "Avoiding risk worked then, but it doesn't work now."

Godin recognizes that not all marketers will find their initiative efforts valued by the C-suite. He knows that each of us, as marketers, faces our own economic reality. He doesn't tell us to all go out and quit, but he does say this: "If your organization refuses to start, is so busy harvesting that they have no interest in planting, perhaps your investment of time and effort is misplaced."

CMOs should take note. **m**