

BEWARE THE RISE OF ZOMBIE BRANDS

WALTER HIGH

HOW B2BS CREATED THEIR OWN EXISTENTIAL
THREAT. AND HOW THEY CAN FIX IT.

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WALTER HIGH

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DEDICATION

To **George A. Romero** for dehumanizing us enough in films to expose the frailties that make us human.

And for implanting indelible imagery in my head that would eat away at my brain long enough to eventually force me to channel it into something useful.

MILE MARKERS

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FOREWORD

By **Dan Holt**, creator of the hugely popular social media comic strip **Mary's Marketing Adventures** and Chief Mary Officer at his newly rebranded marketing firm Mary (formerly Boss Digital) in Burnham, England.

Grown up digital marketing.



mary.co.uk

B2B has never been more exciting - rapid product development, AI integration, big data unlocking killer customer insights.

Yet somehow, the marketing it emanates has never been so dull. An ocean of bland and beige competitors all fighting over the centre ground, desperate to avoid being seen.

- Vision statements that begin with the words “We exist to challenge the status quo...” and then describe how they are exactly the same as everyone else.
- Value sets that all feature the words “integrity”, “honesty” and “teamwork”, each accompanied by a generic quote and turned into shit wall art.

- Colour palettes that lead with blue while being supported with a slightly lighter blue and then contrasted with three other shades of blue.
- Content strategies that take a long accepted, self-evident industry truth, and find a slightly different way to say it. Most likely in a 50 page white paper no bastard will ever open.
- Tone of voice frameworks that ensure you have absolutely no voice.
- Channel strategies that measure everything in their ability to churn out low quality leads. That aren't actually leads, but rather email addresses for people who aren't in market, don't know who you are and definitely don't want a fucking phone call.

In short, the average B2B communications strategy is a master-class in how to say absolutely nothing.

But why is that?

Well, we have this weird notion that the moment someone puts on a suit and tie the normal principles of effective marketing cease to apply. That they are now perfectly rational beings capable of evaluating information exclusively in terms of features, data and bar charts.

But your decision makers are just people. Ordinary people with dreams and fears and bad hair days and hangovers and holes in their socks.

And just like other ordinary people, they like beautiful things. Interesting things. Surprising things that catch them off guard and make them say “Christ on a cupcake, would you look at that..?”.

The good news is that in this world of mindless mediocrity, a little bit of creative ambition goes a long way indeed.

This magnificent book by Walter High describes exactly how B2B brands go wrong. And more importantly, what to do about it.

Despite the educational heft, the book is fast paced and (like a well cooked brain), easy to digest. The metaphors and illustrations bring life to a subject so often devoid of energy and soul. And the immaculate structure makes the entire thing immediately actionable.

B2B marketing is in a tragic state, and now AI can help you make all these mistakes faster and more efficiently than ever.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Be the exception. Be a smiley human in a room of miserable, suit-wearing zombies. Your brand and your bottom line will thank you for it.



PREFACE

STAKES TO THE HEART

Fun fact: For a zombie, multiple stakes through the heart would not be a life-ending event.

But for humans it's definitely not recommended.

That's why I wrote this book. I couldn't take any more stakes to the heart.

Crappy marketing has always felt like a personal affront to me. Like an opportunity lost. A possibility forfeited. And a crime without purpose.

But depending upon the severity of the crime, it can be a stake to the heart.

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The stakes to the heart generally come from companies I respect or see as having a level of potential that makes their approach to marketing indefensible. They're the ones that hurt the most, because they have no excuse. With even a little effort or a glint of vision, they could be championing their cause.

But instead they're pissing all over it — and their prospects, too.

It makes zero business sense.

And yet, it's more the norm today than the exception.

And that's why this book exists.

I've been in marketing for the past 40+ years. During those years, I witnessed some remarkable social and technological change including the emergence of:

- Car phones
- Pagers
- Personal computers
- The floppy disk
- MTV
- Photoshop
- Pocket cell phones
- Email
- The internet
- Search engines
- Cameras on cell phones

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- Digital cameras
- The Dot-com Bubble
- The September 11th attacks (in which my best friend died in the South Tower)
- Social media
- Blogging
- File-sharing
- Digital music
- The iPod
- iTunes
- Satellite radio
- The Great Recession
- Digital TVs
- Streaming services
- WIFI
- Bluetooth
- Gaming
- Flash drives
- Bots
- MeToo
- Black Lives Matter
- The Pandemic
- Virtual reality
- Robotics
- And artificial intelligence, to name just a few.

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Those are truly monumental technological advancements and social transformations for a world that was largely focused on hair styling mousse and Michael Jackson's moonwalk when it all began back in the early '80's.

But perhaps the most amazing thing about all of it is the fact that during those four decades the world changed completely, and yet the approach to marketing taken by far too many B2B brands largely remains the same.

Sure, the tech stack is more advanced today, but the attitudes really haven't changed. And in some cases, they've gotten worse.

For too many companies, marketing may be a nice-to-have, but it's not seen as a critical discipline to the health of the business. Brand is not seen as a strategic asset. And sales is still the go-to strategy for growth.

As far as many B2Bs are concerned, it's still the 1980's. Only without the shoulder pads.

And marketing is still the Rodney Dangerfield of business. It don't get no respect.

The result of all this stagnation in the face of tectonic change has been the formation of a giant chasm that has opened up between B2B brands and their buyers. A chasm that an embarrassing 71% of B2Bs aren't even aware of. (Gold, Geen, and Hounsell 2024, 16)

To make matters worse, B2B perceptions of the problem are the

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exact opposite to those of their buyers — figuratively doubling the width of the chasm between B2B brands and those who buy from them.

The Superpowers Index is the largest ever systematic study of global B2B buying behaviors. It's backed by research compiled over 4 years from studies of over 25,000 B2B brand buying experiences and interviews with over 14,000 B2B buyers.

The Superpowers Index revealed that while 71% of B2B marketers rate their own performance as strong for “communicating a distinct brand position or strong unique selling proposition,” nearly the same percentage of buyers — a whopping 68% — believe that the B2B brands they encounter through their work “all sound and act the same” (Gold, Geen, and Hounsell 2024, 16).

This is a problem for B2Bs, not just because buyer perceptions of B2B brands are the polar opposite of B2B perceptions, or because buyer perceptions will ultimately determine a B2B's success, or even because brand issues take months to years to correct, but also because many B2B marketing departments today lack the experience, skillset, priorities, knowledge, and C-suite support needed to solve this problem.

And what's more, this problem didn't arise overnight. It's actually the culmination of years, even decades, of questionable and often misguided marketing practices by B2Bs (and more recently a wave of misguided digital marketers) that have stripped marketing of many of its core tenets and focused instead on departmental efficiencies and repetitive, short-term

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marketing tactics.

As a result, solving this problem will require a majority of B2B brands to overhaul many of their current marketing approaches.

With that in mind, this book provides a step-by-step guide to recognizing, resuscitating, and rejuvenating brands that have fallen victim to a contagion I am calling the Zombie Brand Crisis — based on the uncanny similarities between zombies and far too many B2B brands today.

A few observations about this book before you get started.

Upon first glance, this book may not strike you as a serious business book or even a business book at all for that matter. Business books, after all, don't typically come with either graphic novel style imagery or such an enthusiastic focus on zombies.

But last I checked, the world didn't need another boring business book. So I chose a different take for this book, because I believe salient information about serious topics need not be limited to stodgy business book formats.

In fact, one of the many observations in this book is about doing whatever you can to make your marketing interesting, emotionally relatable, and ultimately memorable. The format of this book is designed to hopefully do just that.

Also, this book is written in similar fashion to a zombie movie — with ever increasing stakes. And while there may be a touch of hyperbole in the message, there is also a great deal of truth that should be and hopefully will be heeded by C-Suites and boards of

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zombie brands everywhere.

So, please, have some fun and maybe in the process learn a little about how to keep your brand and ultimately your business from joining the ranks of the walking dead.

And thanks for reading.



BEWARE THE RISE OF ZOMBIE BRANDS





CHAPTER ONE

CONSIDER YOURSELF WARNED

They're real. And they're out there.

And make no mistake about it, they're a public menace that's affecting millions of lives on a daily basis.

They drift through our world erratically, lurking in the shadows, feeding off others.

They have no language of their own, making them lousy communicators who are unable to form emotional connections.

They're aggressive in pursuing their interests, but seemingly unaware of their actions or the consequences they carry.

And, oh yeah, they eat the brains of their victims.

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Sure, you may not believe that zombies are real.

You may be one of those who thinks the idea of a zombie apocalypse looming just over the horizon is the stuff of horror flicks and scary stories.

And you might be so cavalier as to not even have a go-bag in your closet, just in case any of the zombie lore you've heard is true.

That's your choice.

Denying the existence of zombies is a perfectly level-headed response — albeit one some might argue to be a bit reckless, given the more than 600 hundred zombie films (some would say documentaries) made since 1920, not to mention the fact that 70% of them were made in the past 25 years alone. (Leading indicator, anyone?)

So believe what you will. You might even survive the apocalypse.

But what you shouldn't do — no, make that what you can't do, is deny the existence of zombie brands.

Because as was stated in the first line of this chapter, they're real and they're out there. And there's a reason the first word in the title of this book is Beware.

Zombie brands represent a threat, not just to the companies that own the infected brands, but to the buyers who purchase from those brands.

CONSIDER YOURSELF WARNED

They're a menace in waiting. They blend into the shadows, manifesting the mundane, failing at forming connections, following while calling themselves leaders, cannibalizing their competition, and ultimately eating the brains of their would-be customers.

Sound like hyperbole?

It's not. Metaphorically manipulated perhaps, but as you'll learn in reading this book there is good reason to beware the rise of zombie brands.

Read on and you will learn:

- What makes a brand a zombie brand
- Why and how brands become zombie brands
- Why we should all be afraid of zombie brands
- Why buyers (and all stakeholders for that matter) should steer clear of them
- How to recognize, resuscitate, and rejuvenate them
- What happens if you don't

You will also learn to recognize the behaviors that lead to becoming a zombie brand, so you can either get busy eradicating your contact with them or, if you are associated with the company, get to work bringing your brand back from the brink.

But consider yourself warned:

Deny the existence of zombie brands and you will be sentencing yourself to shuffling through life as either an uneducated

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consumer or worse a business leader in name only.

Of course, at this stage of this book, an open mind is all that can be asked.

Just know that by the end you will believe and maybe even keep a go-bag in your closet, just in case.

Next up, zombies in 'da house.



CHAPTER TWO

ZOMBIES IN 'DA HOUSE

If there's one go-to staple in zombie movies it's that there are always too many zombies, which makes for a very bleak outlook for the humans involved.

The same is true for zombie brands.

There are far too many zombie brands out there. And that makes for a very bleak outlook for the stakeholders involved.

Unless, of course, the stakeholders are educated, because in a zombie infested world, those who survive are the ones who are best at recognizing zombies and avoiding them.

The same holds true in a zombie brand infested world.

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So it behooves any business leader, employee, potential buyer, existing customer, business partner, or investor in a zombie brand to become an expert at recognizing zombie brands and avoiding them at all costs.

But beware. After recognizing your first zombie brand, you'll suddenly start seeing them everywhere.

So much so, you may even wish you had never read this chapter.

In fact, you may want to reconsider reading this book at this point, because the information you receive in this chapter alone will permanently alter your perspective on the brands you deal with each day. And that will mean the days when you were blissfully innocent and didn't get the heebie jeebies every time you happened upon generic web messaging, received an unsolicited email, or read a banal ad somewhere... will be gone. Forever.

On the other hand, if you want to count yourself among the survivors of the zombie brand apocalypse, you're not only advised to read on, but to pay close attention.

Feel free to pause here to make a life-altering decision.



ZOMBIES IN 'PA HOUSE

(Were this a multi-media presentation, intermission music would play here while you decide.)

If you're still reading this, you've made a smart choice. Let's dive in.

So what exactly is a zombie brand? And how do you recognize one?

Let's start with a simple definition:

A zombie brand is any brand that lacks the marketing will and/or expertise needed to distinguish itself from its competition.

But there's much more to the zombie brand metaphor than that.

Since zombie brands can't distinguish themselves from their competition, they also tend to look, sound, and act just like other brands in their industry.

A great way to tell is to compare websites between a handful of brands in the same industry. If you get a sense of déjà vu when encountering a brand, odds are good it may be a zombie brand.

But you need not just go with your gut in identifying a zombie brand. There are specific characteristics to look for that can help you identify the lurkers in any industry.

In fact, Zombie brands share a surprising number of characteristics with actual zombies.

(That's right, actual zombies. Rethinking that go-bag yet?)

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So, when you think zombie brands, think zombies, and you'll know what to look for.

The following pages offer a list of 20 characteristics typically reserved for describing zombies, but that can now also be used to identify zombie brands. Included with each characteristic is a description of the deleterious effects they have on both the business and its would-be customers along with an illustration of how they might be recognized in the wild.

They are listed in reverse order of their overall importance. But suffice it to say they're all important as they're all limiting factors affecting a zombie brand's overall business success.

ZOMBIE BRAND CHARACTERISTICS

20. Lousy Communication Skills

Zombies lack language. Zombie brands lack a language of their own. Instead they parrot the things other brands in their industry say. They borrow phrasing. And they regurgitate industry shorthand that has been passed down through the years like bad habits, thinking it speeds communication when it does just the opposite. In the end, it only communicates a lack of ideas.

ZOMBIES IN 'PA HOUSE



19. Erratic Behavior

Zombies behave erratically. Zombie brands are erratic in their approach to marketing. Seeing marketing as a nice-to-have versus a necessity, zombie brands are notoriously inconsistent in their investment in marketing, meaning marketing at zombie brands is often sporadic at best. Here today. Nowhere to be found tomorrow. And that creates a credibility gap with the market and prospects alike.

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Where's the marketing department today?

We only bring them in when our sales pipeline starts to dry up. That way we don't spend money on marketing unless it's really necessary. Pretty smart, huh?



18. Herd Mentality

Zombies engage in herd mentality. Zombie brands promote messaging that says “We do what everyone else does.” They follow the same playbook for content creation, social media, and advertising, to name a few. And they all swarm en masse to trade shows regardless of the cost or ROI. Not a great recipe for standing out among your competition.

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17. Nuance-free

Zombies are nuance-free. Zombie brands shouldn't be, but inexplicably are too. Some can't even articulate what they do, while others can't find a single way to differentiate themselves from their competition. Without nuance, zombie brands are indistinguishable and destined to be misunderstood by the very people they need to understand them.

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16. Short Attention Span

Zombies have short attention spans. Zombie brands act like focus is a four-letter word, especially when it comes to building their brands. As a result, they favor marketing tactics that prioritize short-term results over long-term strategies or relationships. They're big on calls to action, but lean on the messaging that matters. And as a result, they inexplicably prioritize clicks over conversations.

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