

Ep #124: Doing Harm Through Marketing

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With Your Host

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Welcome to Joyful Marketing! I'm Simone Seol, and I teach you how to get your life coaching practice fully booked without having to pay for ads, buy Instagram followers, or complicated sales funnels. It's not rocket science and you can do it too. Listen on to find out how.

Hey everybody. Now, today's episode, I'm inviting you to put on your most sophisticated, nuanced, intelligent, grownup thinking cap and do some pretty complex thinking with me. I'm going to talk about harm in marketing and how to think about it.

I think this is so important because every life coach I know, including myself has such a kind heart. We are good, compassionate people. I mean, the whole reason that we do what we do is so that we can help people suffer less and just help them more, right?

So when we, the good life coaches, those of us with good hearts, when we entertain the idea of possibly doing other people harm with our businesses, with our marketing, that's really tough. And I see this over and over again in my clients, as well as - I remember from my own life that where we encounter scenarios where other people are telling us that we are doing them harm, or something we're doing can be harmful.

And it often is really enough to shut us down and to mire us in a pit of shame and just feeling like we are wrong, our businesses are wrong, and it's really hard to know how to process that, how to come back from that. And I think that's a very - it's not only morally, ethically important, but I also think it's very important in terms of the pragmatic aspects of your business.

Because if you don't know how to think about harm in a way that is constructive, that moves you forward, then oftentimes you are just going to shut down. You're going to stop working on your business and all the positive, wonderful, beautiful things that your business could have created in the world, all the people you could have helped, you just end up not creating, you just end up not helping.

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And so this is very important. So here, I want to tell you some basic ways you can recognize where worrying about harm comes into play when you are marketing. So I think if you've been marketing even for a little bit as a life coach, I think you would be able to relate to these stories.

So there are times when you tell a story, which we do a lot of that in marketing. We tell stories, we reveal some things about ourselves or about the world around us. And somebody can think it's harmful. That's a thing that happens.

So for example, you might - so this is something that I see quite a bit in certain areas of the world where somebody might tell a story about a very strict, religious upbringing that they had, and a lot of their self-coaching journey was about distancing them from that religious background.

And in that kind of delicate situation, any time you choose to tell a story about your own journey or you say something that is true for you, members of that religious community might think that that is harmful. That's something that could happen, that's something that I've seen happen.

So that's one thing that can happen. And another is you express a viewpoint and somebody thinks that your viewpoint is harmful. So it's not just your story, but for example, let's say you have a belief that a person can be healthy at any size.

So I know lots of body love, self-love coaches who will say that you don't need to be a certain size to be happy, to love yourself, to have an amazing life. And there are other people who believe that that viewpoint in itself is harmful because it encourages what they think are unhealthy habits that ultimately don't serve the individual.

Now, you can flip it the other way and say that people who advocate being a certain size or being in a certain range of weight, I know that those people also get accusations from people who say, hey, that view is harmful and what you should be promoting is health and happiness at every size.

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So here are two camps of viewpoints where each one thinks the other could be causing harm. That's when a viewpoint is considered to produce harm. And the third way that harm in marketing could happen is that you make offers, which is what we do in business. None of us who are in business doesn't make offers. We all have an offer that we sell for money.

People pay us money; we deliver on the offer. That's what happens. And someone thinks that the offer that we make in itself is harmful. That the act of us engaging in business itself is harmful. This also happens quite a bit. I would not say that it's a rare thing.

A lot of us life coaches get the accusation that helping people is something that should be done for free. And if we are taking money, especially if we're taking lots of money for helping people, then we are being exploitative, we are being fraudulent, it's unethical.

And so the very act of having a business offer could be construed as harmful. I mean, this happens quite a bit when other people perceive that you cost too much, your offer costs too much. And they will make arguments like well, not everybody can afford that, therefore, you making the offer, you putting that out in the world is hurting people who want that but can't afford it and you're creating a kind of divide between haves and have-nots.

So that's an instance where your offer itself is existentially, just by the fact of its existence, could be considered harmful. So these are ways, and hopefully you are nodding along with some of these and you recognize when these kinds of things happen in your own business.

Like oh yeah, I was afraid to say this, or I said that one thing and somebody else said that was harmful and I - so I think you must have familiarity with these. Our fear of doing harm is what keeps us from showing up courageously.

And I really want to resolve that by the end of this episode. I want to present to you some ideas. So the first idea that I want to present to you is

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that we can question our default assumption, or at least the default assumption that I had for the longest time that we should not do harm, that we should never do harm, that doing harm is bad.

I think unconsciously, even though I'm not a physician, I kind of absorbed the Hippocratic Oath that all the doctors take when they become doctors that say, first, do no harm. They all have to swear that, make a vow to not do harm before they go and administer medicine and healing people. It's such a noble idea, right?

I think it's a beautiful idea to not do harm. And it's also not realistic. The idea is that doing harm is bad. Categorically bad, always bad, and we should do everything that we can possible to prevent harm. And when we know that harm has occurred, we need to change course as fast as possible to stop the harm, minimize the harm, harm is bad.

So this can be problematic because we exist in the material world with complex power dynamics built into it where at some point, at any point of your existence, you are likely causing harm or you already caused harm to another being to merely exist.

So first of all, this example just came to me because of where I am in life right now. But for you to be born into the world, you caused your mother harm. In the most basic physical sense. You tore out of your mother's body and your mother had to experience lots of discomfort and pain to give birth to you.

So it's like, boom, from the beginning of our existence, there was harm done so that we could be born, and nobody would say, "To prevent harm to mothers, nobody should have babies." That's not - I don't think anybody would say that unless, I don't know, if you do believe that, that's weird.

And at another very simple level, if you just had a chicken sandwich for lunch, you have more power than a chicken in this world because we are the apex predators as human beings, and a chicken had to die so that you could be fed. And so you did harm to the chicken.

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And even if you're saying I'm a vegan, I don't consume animal products, you maybe had some beans. And maybe those beans just wanted to be left in the plant, they didn't want to be eaten by you. You harmed those beans by having to eat them because you have power over plants.

Now, at a more slightly complex human society level, this is another example where it might be a little bit clearer. If you exist in this society as a wealthy white man, you benefit from a power structure that privileges people like you and deprives people who do not share your skin color, or gender, or financial status of the same opportunities, even if you're the kindest, nicest person in the world, even if that is not your intention.

Just by the fact of being a wealthy white man, you benefit from and contribute to a paradigm, a social system that privileges you over other people, gives you at the cost of others having less. I'm not white, I'm Asian, and I'm not a man, I'm a woman. But I have been educated in what would consider elite institutions, I have educational privilege, I am wealthy, I am able-bodied, I am heterosexual.

And therefore, I benefit from and contribute to social paradigms that make it easier for someone like me, that gives somebody like me privileges and deprives other people. It's easier for me to get what I want, it's harder for somebody who does not share my educational background, my financial status, somebody who's not able-bodied, et cetera, et cetera, who's not heterosexual. Makes it harder for them to get what they want compared to for me, even if that's not my intention.

When I first came to grips with this reality, that just by the fact of being who I am, lots of things that I had no control over, I didn't choose to be heterosexual, I didn't choose to be born into a well to do family, I didn't choose to - I guess I kind of chose to go to elite institutions.

But also, I was in the position to be able to. All of this is just unearned privilege. When I first started really thinking about this and how I participate

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in paradigms and structures that harm those who were not born with what I was born with, it was devastating.

I felt shame, I felt amorphous guilt and regret, I just felt like my whole existence was wrong. And if I was not changing things in a way where I'm no longer benefiting from a system that oppresses some other people and some beings, then that meant I was doing everything wrong.

And that was a really hard thing to think about and to feel. There was so much shame. And I was in that until I realized one really important thing, which is that it's not just me. It's every single one of us exists in this complex, multi-layered web of systems and structures where at any given point, one of us is benefiting some and harming others, strengthening some and weakening others, consuming some and being consumed by others.

There's basically no way to avoid doing any kind of harm unless you don't exist in the world. Now, that is not to say that I am okay with participating in oppressive systems or causing others harm. Of course I'm not okay with it. But I did come to the realization that okay, so maybe the point, the goal is not to never do harm because that's literally impossible.

Just like me existing, I just consume fossil fuel, I just consume more carbon - what do you call it? I create carbon pollution when I order things online. The daily facts of my life cause so much harm to the planet. So unless I move to, I don't know, move somewhere and have a completely indigenous way of life, which I do not want to do, not doing any kind of harm whatsoever is not possible.

So maybe the point, the goal should be to do my best, try to be as aware as I can about where I might be unconsciously participating in harm or where I might be causing it as a result of my actions, my decisions, or my mere being, and to know that it's enough if I'm always trying my best to create more good, to create more positive, to be helping and mending more than I am harming.

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There's always going to be kind of a math, a balance of math. I'm harming some, I'm doing good otherwise, and it's okay. It's acceptable. It's enough for me to try to be as aware as possible and to try to do as much good as possible, acknowledging that there might still be harm.

And here's the most important part of my learning was to be able to love myself even when I do harm. At first this idea totally broke my brain. And this idea was offered to me for the first time that it's possible for me to love myself, even when I do others harm, which I hate the idea of.

The person who presented this idea to me was my colleague and my now coach I suppose. I am participating in her advanced certification in feminist coaching program. That is Kara Loewentheil, who was recently on my podcast as well.

So she asked me, "Can you love yourself even if you're doing harm?" What? I'd never considered that before. I just assumed that if you do harm, you're unworthy. Not allowed to love myself if I'm harming others. And I realized, huh, maybe I can love myself.

Even if I do harm, maybe sometimes on purpose because human beings, you know how we are. We're not morally perfect all the time. Even if I do harm to others on purpose or accidentally, can I still give myself grace? Can I still love myself? Can I still believe myself to be worthy and believe my business to be worthy of existing and doing the things that it wants in the world?

And the answer that I'm working towards is yes. Yes, I can love myself and I can feel worthy unconditionally, even I'm doing harm. And I am inviting you towards the same answer. So let me sum it up.

The idea is to not to try to create a business and do your marketing in a way where you never do anyone harm, no one's feelings are ever hurt, no one ever accuses you of doing harm, but our aim is to create a business in which you accept that some people might always see you as doing harm, and you get to decide how you react.

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You get to decide what your relationship with yourself looks like. You get to decide to entertain and to consider what other people are telling you, decide where you agree and where you don't agree, and decide how you get to change and evolve, or stand behind your existing stances.

Let me give you an example, another example to make this make sense in terms of how to be imperfect in terms of - that we do some harm sometimes to some people and still have our own back. I recently heard it said, I saw it on social media, some meme that was brilliant.

It was a quote about being a parent, about parenting well. And it said - and I'm paraphrasing, but it said something like don't have it as your goal to not do anything harmful ever to your child or to hurt your child ever or to have any negative influence on them in any way, whatsoever. If that's your standard for good parenting, you are going to be very stressed and you're most likely not going to be successful.

We say all our parents fuck us up a little bit, we're going to fuck up our own kids a little bit. That's just a fact of life. But what the meme said is that's not the goal of good parenting is for you to be perfect and never do anything harmful to your kid, but the goal of being a good parent, what it means to be a good parent is to be one who is not a model of perfection but one who loves the child and models to the child what it means to be an imperfect humans who loves themselves and can have grace for oneself and who can keep growing and learning from that place of self-friendship.

And I completely agree and I hope you do too. As a parent, our job is not to be perfect but to model self-love in our imperfection and I think it's exactly the same as coaches, I think it's exactly the same way that we get to think about ourselves and our impact as we market.

We are never perfect. We are never morally perfect. But the best we can do, truly the best thing for us is to model what it's like to have self-respect, self-love, self-honoring in the face of our imperfection and to be willing to use that to allow ourselves to grow and evolve.

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Now, I want to walk you through some concrete ways. I actually thought of three ways that people might think that you do harm in your marketing and three different ways that you can react to that, you can process that. Because I don't want you to be perfect, but I always do want you to feel empowered, to feel like you have agency over how you show up and what you stand for. And somebody else is not dictating the terms of that.

I want you to feel courageous and powerful instead of always worried and paranoid that you're going to get it wrong and end up harming somebody or something. Oh, by the way, before I talk about that, one last really important theoretical point that I want to convey to you is that harm is in the eyes of the beholder.

So harm is not objective. I told you already the example about if you're a life coach who coaches people who are leaving a certain religion, you might think that you are helping them and somebody who belongs to that religious community and thinks that nobody should leave thinks that you're not helping, you're harming.

That's just one totally random example that I thought of among many, many examples that I could give. But think about the fact that we have different political parties. The entire reason that we have different political parties when presumably everyone in the country wants the country to do well and wants more of the good things for everybody is because people disagree, when it comes to specific policies, people disagree about what constitutes harm and what constitutes benefit.

Everybody differs on their assessment of benefit and risk and harm. And therefore, we have this diversity of opinions. And that is a good thing. But I want you to just consider this idea. I'm not saying that harm is entirely subjective and that it's always like, whatever goes, depending on what you think. I'm not saying that.

This is a conversation where I'm really inviting you to put on your most nuanced, grownup, intelligent thinking cap. So that's why I want you to

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consider at the same time as knowing that harm is something that we do want to avoid, but at the same time, there's always going to be a difference in how people construe harm based on their values, based on what they believe in, and nobody's perspective can be exactly the same as yours.

Okay, so given that harm is in the eyes of the beholder, the first way that people might perceive that you do harm when you're marketing your life coaching business is because they fundamentally misunderstand your ideas or intentions.

So there's a category of things where you say something, you do something, and people accuse you of doing harm because they misunderstand. So I've had this come up with some examples that I see around myself where a coach who would talk about something like infidelity, how to heal through infidelity and there could be reactions like if you're talking about infidelity and healing through it, it legitimizes infidelity, makes it okay.

Just the fact that you're talking about it makes it sound like you're giving people license like it's okay, you can cheat and then you can heal through it. I know from knowing people that that is not at all what the coach intended. And nonetheless, that's the perception.

The coach did not say infidelity is wonderful, everybody go do it. It said if it happened, this is the way to heal. Now, this is a case of a fundamental misunderstanding of intentions and that's one category. This kind of thing will inevitably happen where people just plainly misunderstand your ideas, they misunderstand your intentions, and they are just completely mistaken.

And here's what to do when that happens. Let it go. As long as you have a voice, as long as you're speaking out about something and you expose your ideas to people, it'll always be the case that somebody out there is going to misunderstand.

When I talk about creating revenue, when I talk about making a lot of money as a coach, there's somebody that inevitably thinks that money or

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your profit is the barometer for the success of your coaching business. So if you're not making tons of money, if you're not a millionaire, then your business is not good enough.

That is not in any way, anything close to what I ever mean. But people misunderstand. Simple, plain, that's not what I meant at all, you have it wrong. When that happens, know that that will always be the case, there's always going to be somebody who misunderstands and it's their prerogative. Let it go.

That is the solution. You let it go. You give them permission to think whatever they want. You can't control other people's thoughts. You give them permission to misunderstand, you let it go.

Now, that's the first type of people perceiving that you're doing harm. The second type of people perceiving that you're doing harm is when they understand your ideas just fine, they understand, they didn't misunderstand you. But they have a different value system.

So for example, some people think that me talking about money a lot, me talking about how much money I make and how much money my clients make and really inspiring people to go create more monetary wealth from their coaching businesses, some people think that that is - they understand my intentions fine and their value system is such that anybody who encourages more money and more monetary success is perpetuating an exploitative and harmful and oppressive capitalism paradigm.

They think that because of that, any form of business coaching that helps people make more money is therefore contributing to the problem, and therefore it's not ethical, it's creating harm. Now, believe it or not, I partially agree with them.

I do partially agree that by making lots of money myself and helping my clients to have more business success and to help them make more money, we are definitely contributing to a paradigm in which rich people,

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people who have more money have more opportunities at the cost of people who have less.

And we are all contributing to capitalism with aspects of it that can be exploitative. I'm not against capitalism wholesale, but there are parts of it that are exploitative. And by me being an evangelist of money and wealth, which I totally am, I am contributing to all those negative things as well.

I agree with that. Now, at the same time, even if I agree with that, on the whole, yes, I acknowledge that there's harm being done here potentially, and on the whole, I really believe in what I am doing because what I help people to create, what I created for myself, the empowerment of an individual that allows us to take our ideas that help people gain control over their brains, gain control over their nervous systems in order to give people the power to create the results they want in their lives.

To help people create the self-love, the self-friendship, the self-honoring to mine the power within to be able to help other people and to create money from that. To me, that is sacred. That is sacred and it is the most important, worthy thing that I can do with my time on Earth.

And I also happen to believe that whatever ills capitalism has and our present economic system has, so much of it can and should be healed by more money flowing in the hands of women, more money flowing into the hands of the good guys. And I am a good guy and I think all my fellow life coaches, every single person, every single life coach I meet, we are the good guys.

We are the ones who want - I want money to flow through. It was the great quote by the CEO of the company Ellevest that said, "Nothing bad ever happens when women have more money." And I think that so much of the harm that comes with economic systems and with how money works in capitalism is so because women were not involved.

And I think the more work I do to get more money in the hands of women, that is such a good thing for the world. And I believe that extremely,

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extremely strongly. Because that's so important to me, I believe that the balance of benefit versus harm I do in the world by doing my work far skews in the direction of benefit.

When somebody thinks that you are doing harm because they have a different value system, I understand what those people are saying. And I partially agree, but I also partially don't because I have a different value system of valuing different aspects of capitalism and wealth creation.

When I hear those accusations, what it does is it allows me to kind of reconfirm what I believe and why I believe in it. At the same time, while I accept that some people are allowed to have those thoughts and especially if I share them partially too, and I just use it always as a way to keep my mind open enough to let my value system evolve.

The third type of people accusing you of causing harm is when they both understand you and share your value system and they think that you're doing something that goes against your own value system. So somebody might say - actually, this has happened to me when people have accused me of not being in integrity or intentionally misleading people.

You might encounter other instances where people - maybe it's clients or it's random people who say that I understand your value system, in fact, you're preaching your value system, and I think you are doing it wrong, I think you're going against your value system by doing some things, and then that's how you're doing harm.

Now, this is where you get to apply this loving self-respecting curiosity. Very important. You get to be curious but from a place of having love and grace for yourself. That self-love and self-respect is what allows you to honestly examine if you agree with them, where you agree with them.

And if you do agree with any part of what they said, how you would want to learn and self-correct. Or if you're thinking about this, if you're contemplating this with love for yourself and also maybe even love for the other person, you can completely disagree with them and like I said, this

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happened a few times where somebody said you have no integrity, you're lying.

And I said - and I really thought about if there might be truth to what they're saying and I just didn't see it the same way at all. And I said I can see what you are thinking and I completely disagree. And I was able to love myself in that accusation and I was also able to love them because they're allowed to have their own reactions to my choices.

Like they can think that I'm lying. I just don't agree. They can think that I shouldn't talk about certain things because it goes against my values. And I get to not agree if I've really thought about whether I agree.

So if somebody accuses you of doing harm, here's what I encourage you to do. Ask yourself if you do what they're asking you to do, would you be silencing yourself? Would you be betraying your own truth by doing what they say? By acquiescing to their demands.

Is the only way, according to them, for you and your viewpoints to be okay, is that for you to agree with them and to shut up? Is your agreement with them and you changing your opinion or voice or whatever to suit what they're saying, are they making that a precondition for their acceptance of you?

If you contemplate these questions and the answer seems to be yes, if I agree with them, then I would be silencing myself, I'd be betraying my own truth. If I agree with them that this is harmful, then I would be hiding an aspect of myself.

Then that's a time when you get to acknowledge, okay, somebody was harmed by what I said, or at least they perceived that they were harmed and I am allowing for that because if I didn't speak my truth, if I didn't come out and say this then I would be harming myself. I would be harming my own truth.

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And so if I'm weighing my truth against their feelings, sometimes my truth has to come first. And that doesn't mean I have to be comfortable about it, but that's a decision that you get to make for your own integrity. If anybody demands that you change your opinion or that you not speak about something in order for them to accept you, that's a red flag.

That's not constructive debate. That's silencing. And you will recognize when it happens because exactly, their goal will not be to help you live in accordance with your own truest values. Their goals will be either agree with me or shut up. Either do what I think is best or sit down. That is not constructive, that is not loving, that is not respectful, that is just silencing.

And the best way, unfortunately, to silence a woman is to tell her that she's doing harm to somebody else by speaking her voice. Sometimes we can apply that self-lovingly curiosity and determine for ourselves, oh yeah, according to my own values, I agree with that and I choose to grow because I want my decisions to reflect my evolving values as a person.

Or you can say I see what you're saying, I respect your freedom to think or say whatever, and I allow for that harm to be there because the alternative is the harm to my integrity and that is not something that I'm willing to allow. So that was a lot of I think very, very delicate, complex ideas. I hope you stayed with me through all of it.

If I could just give you the CliffNotes version of it, do people still say that? I feel like CliffNotes don't really exist anymore. It's been so long since I was in school. But anyway, the short, very short version of it is don't have it as a goal to never do harm.

If you do do harm, it is not a sign that you're doing something wrong or you should be ashamed. If you're doing harm, it's likely a sign that you're taking up a lot of space, that you're speaking your mind in a really visible and courageous way, which to me is a non-negotiable precondition for having an amazing life coaching business.

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And keep your mind open to how your own value system and perspectives might evolve. So yes, harm is in the eyes of the beholder, but you are the beholder too. You are also one who is subjectively assessing what is harm that you are willing to tolerate and what is harm that you do not want to tolerate because of your value system.

The point is that you get to decide. Somebody else doesn't get to decide hey, you're doing this kind of harm, that's not okay. You decide I'm doing that kind of harm and it's worth it, I'm doing that kind of harm and although I don't like it, although it's not comfortable, I choose to let that be okay, or you get to choose to decide because of my value system, because of what I choose for the kind of person I want to be, I want to change course here.

And you make that decision from a place of loving yourself, from knowing that you and your business are unconditionally worthy. You are worthy of your dreams; you are worthy of helping people and having the impact that you wish to have. That is never under discussion.

Know that and you'll be making lots of decisions in the direction of wisdom and power and not from fear. So happy marketing, my friends. May your integrity light the way.

Hey, if you want a shot of fresh inspiration and actionable tips to improve your marketing every single week in your inbox, you'd better get on my email list. Sign up to receive my free e-book called *20 Unsolicited Copy Tips*. It's been known to get people to come out of the woodwork and ask to work with you. So get on that. Link in the show notes, and I'll see you in your inbox next time.