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"I am not an SME, you patronising ***!"

*This article is not my authorship. It was produced by Robert Craven who is a keynote speaker and author of the best-selling business books 'Kick-Start Your Business' and 'Customer Is King'. As managing director of **The Directors' Centre**, the consultancy for growing businesses, he works with ambitious directors to break through constraints on business growth. I reproduce it here with full acknowledgment to Robert as I found it very interesting. It is based on his UK experience but the salient points apply just as much here in Australia.*

Big businesses and governments are totally, hopelessly clueless about small businesses, says Robert Craven.

Governments and big blue chip corporates think they're talking and marketing to the smaller or owner-managed businesses but they're not. They're not talking to these business people. They don't know how to talk to owner-managed businesses and they don't even realise that small businesses have a separate language and a separate way of being from the world that they live in.

There are four million small businesses in the UK and that's just the bosses, accounting for 99.8% of the UK business names and employing 12 million people.

All my qualitative research shows that owners of the so-called "small and medium-sized" businesses feel ignored and sold to in an insulting manner.

Small businesses are not the same as big businesses and they do not make purchasing decisions in the same way. Small businesses are small by choice. Meanwhile, corporates assume that a small business is just a little, big business. Wrong. Frogs are not the same as small crocodiles.

They do not have the same mindset.

Most advertisements focusing on the small business market (banks, IT, software, HR services) are not trying to communicate with small businesses – they are not creating (or even attempting to create) a relationship, or demonstrating values important to their target customers. Most ads aimed at the small business are relatively ineffective because the ad agency fails to understand the needs and wants of their target.

76% per cent of people think that big businesses lie in their adverts; 78% are more likely to buy on the recommendation of others; and still the corporates think that the route to market is about advertising spend.

Governments and marketers who want to talk or sell to small businesses need to recognise that:

- Small businesses need to be treated differently at different stages of their life cycle
- One of the best times to communicate is in a life stage transition (start-up, growing, consolidating, merging, selling)
- Being patronising, smug or insincere will not get you sales
- Trying to get people to aspire to unrealistic role models is futile
- Small businesses will pay more and spend more with a brand that acknowledges their lifestyle and treats them well.

So, here's my list of thought bubbles I would like to send to the big corporate who claims to have had a Damascus moment and now wants to work with the small business community:

1. I am not an "SME". I am a small, or owner-managed, or independent, or growing, or self-employed, or new, or young, or boutique business. When I go to a party I do not say "Hi, I am an SME." And as for the "smee" word, what is that all about? I never ever call myself a "smee"
2. I am not part of a homogenous mass of some four million similar sales prospects
3. I am not an immature/undeveloped big business
4. I am not a second-class citizen who you see as a market opportunity only after you have exhausted the blue chip big ticket spenders, as a way to maximise your investment
5. I want you to sell to me with an entirely fresh approach, not merely a scaled-down version of the methods used with big corporates
6. I do not want to be patronised
7. All marketers are liars; your salesmen are worse
8. I know you don't really care (in words or in actions). If people talked to you the way that corporates spoke to small business people they would punch you on the nose
9. I am not another target towards your year-end sales goals
10. I have a less formal, faster buying cycle than a corporate so create faster systems to match how I buy and not the other way around. I am not interested in your processes; they are for your benefit only

11. I want my supplier to understand me, business, my business, me
12. I want swift action
13. I want to know what I am paying for and how and when I am paying
14. I do not want to be bamboozled with science: keep it simple stupid
15. I am the customer; remember who I am
16. I don't want my time wasted
17. I want you to make it easy for me to order and to buy from you; win my trust 'cos I don't have to buy from you today or ever
18. I beg you to make sure your service delights me; show me how you can help, show me the benefits
19. I ask that you customise your products and service for me
20. I would be happiest if you could be more of a trusted adviser and not a numbers jockey

A quick summary:

- Small and big businesses are very different
- Big businesses are totally, hopelessly clueless about small businesses
- Not enough “stuff” is designed for small businesses or communicated in a way that appeals to them
- Most stuff for small businesses is, to be frank, pretty patronising