



ESSAY

Humor

Higher Education Faces New Challenges

by Eamon Hickey

Amass a Harvard Graduate's Vocabulary in Just 15 Minutes A Day! \$29.95 — Airline in-flight catalog advertisement

Harvard University Inter-Office Memorandum

To: Office of the President
From: Office of the Provost
RE: New competitors

Dear Larry,

Per your request, following are the preliminary results of my inquiry into competition from airline in-flight catalogs and our possible responses to it:

First, your suspicions were well-founded. We do charge "a helluva lot more than thirty bucks" for the vocabulary of a Harvard graduate here at the actual Harvard. In fact, it turns out to be approximately \$91,000 more, and the majority opinion over at the Business School is that a \$91,000 price difference could definitely hurt our vocabulary market share. An informal poll I conducted this morning among customers and staff at The Gnarly Bagel tends to confirm that opinion, but I suspect that the fact that your memo to me was entitled "A Shitload of Trouble" means that you had already guessed we had a problem. Still, if we're going down, we might as well go down fighting.

One thinks first of legal action—perhaps a copyright infringement suit—but it turns out that this is not an option. Harvard, despite having a \$19 billion endowment at its disposal, doesn't own a single word in its vocabulary—not even a little one like 'cat'. I was both surprised and (I don't mind saying) disappointed by this, but it's water under the bridge at this point.

So legal action is out, but we certainly can attack them with counter-advertising. It's hardly conceivable, for instance, that this airline outfit's \$29.95 "Harvard graduate" vocabulary has room for all the words contained in our \$91,000 product. My guess is that many of the longer words are missing—words like 'inauspicious' and 'septuagenarian', for example. When you take those likely omissions into account that \$91,000 gap doesn't look so wide anymore. Moreover, not only does a Harvard graduate possess words like these, he or she also learns how to combine them in a single sentence, such as: "A massive coronary marked an inauspicious beginning to the septuagenarian Mr. Frobischer's day." (Note the rather unusual adjectival use of 'septuagenarian' in the previous sentence. You can't get that for \$29.95!) We should probably also mention that a broad liberal education is bundled with our version of the Harvard vocabulary. When I asked Gnarly Bagel customers to estimate the value of this their responses ranged from \$917.40 to "a broad what, now?"

Some of my informants felt that, rather than negatively attacking our competition, we should launch a positive campaign to promote our own brand. The Business School, as you know, has long believed that nothing sells like sex. Their initial advertising ideas run more or less like this: An ample-bosomed blonde in a leather bustier is staring straight into the television camera. She licks her lips and purrs seductively, "I long for a man who can spell onomatopoeia". A voice-over description of the genuine Harvard graduate vocabulary product follows, and then the screen fades to our tag line: "Syllables. Chicks dig 'em." (An alternate tag line was suggested: "Ladies love a man with a big diction." Your call on that one.) The one weakness to the campaign I just described is that it doesn't appeal to women, fully half of our potential customer base. Perhaps we can work up an idea involving

Brad Pitt conjugating transitive verbs in his underpants or something similar.

Mindy, the cashier at The Gnarly Bagel, made the provocative suggestion that we unbundle our vocabulary and sell it as a separate product ourselves—i.e. without subjecting consumers to the inconvenience of an education. We'll still have to charge more than \$29.95 (our overhead being what it is), but we should be able to get an unbundled vocabulary onto store shelves at substantially less than \$91,000. And we'll be offering the original, not some cheap knock-off (perhaps made by third-world slave labor?). I suggest that we give our version a list price of \$149, with the idea that we'll do our real volume at a "sale" price of \$99 during the heavy holiday retail season. What could be a better Christmas gift than a good vocabulary! We could even offer smaller packages with price points aimed at the impulse buyer. The Business School tells me that, say, just the 'P' words, nicely packaged at \$9.95, might well trigger a feeding frenzy.

This logically leads one to the idea of unbundling our entire product line. Consider this: "The Quiet Air of Confidence of a Harvard Man. Only \$199!" And the cross-promotional possibilities are virtually limitless: "That Certain Ivy League Je ne Sais Quoi (A \$39 Value!)—Yours Free with Vocabulary Purchase."

So it seems that all hope may not be lost. (Though I thought it prudent to check with my cousin Mel; he can offer both of us work at his wrecking yard in Newark, if it comes to that.) I'll keep you informed of further developments.

Best,
Steven

P.s. We've definitely got those bastards beat when it comes to legroom.

Eamon Hickey is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn, NY. He has written for *Fortune*, *Wired*, *Ziff-Davis Smart Business* and other publications.

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