GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Math vs. Magic

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Recently, fellow editor Bill Calkins shared a bit of advice he picked up at an association board meeting. The advice was, if you want to combat AI, be "aggressively human."*

Liking the sound of "aggressively human," I dug into what it might mean and how it might work.

We all know that artificial intelligence (AI) is evolving at breakneck speed and touching every part of our lives. Even our hamburgers. Case in point: At my local Wendy's drive-thru, the voice coming out of the speaker is not that of a local high school senior, but instead is some sort of AI chatbot. Weird! But she … er, it … took our orders and we drove on around to pay. Said the person with me, "AI is already taking the good jobs, now they're going after the s***y ones, too?" (Oh, the humans got our order wrong.)

I get that there are plenty of reasons a business like Wendy's might automate simple and repetitive tasks using computers—lowering costs, increasing speed, reducing errors. But what if you're a business trying to compete against Wendy's? Or you just lost your job to the AI waitron? How do we compete against something that has all the world's information at its digital fingertips, that can analyze data at the speed of light, that's seemingly all-knowing and all-powerful?

We do it by exploiting the unique human qualities that AI can't replicate—our creativity, our intuition and our ability to form authentic connects with each other. And not just exploiting those traits, but going all in with them—in other words, by being "aggressively human."

My first thought went to writing. It's been my profession for more than 30 years. I think I'm pretty good at it, and I read a lot of AI chatbot writing and can spot their style a mile off. It's smooth—too smooth. Too polished. And it uses words humans don't use—like "verdant" to mean green (you see verdant, I guarantee a chatbot is responsible). AI can write, no doubt about it, and is useful for providing necessary information, like for a website or brochure or legal brief. But good human writers have a tone, a rhythm, a personality that paints a picture and makes the reader smile. And a good human writer will do the unexpected—like a sudden switch to a description of the author's new smoker, a Workhorse Pits model 1969, the output of which you have to taste to believe. Succulent ribs and brisket and chicken to die for!

But I digressed … on purpose.

Same goes for art. A few days ago, I asked Copilot to draw a picture of the Greek goddess Wendy on a camel to illustrate to my staff how Wednesday got the name “hump day. ” Copilot did a fine job quickly, but the result will never hang in a gallery. I don’t think any truly creative person is afraid of AI taking their job.

Intuition is another powerful human trait AI can’t touch. “Gut instinct” is a unique combination of learned experience, judgment, context, understanding of human behavior and the marketplace, willingness to take risks … I’ve personally witnessed a greenhouse operation almost go out of business at the hands of a new CEO who leaned too heavily on spreadsheets and not enough on instinct because, well, he had none. If you’ve got a track record of good business decisions, lean into that! Trust your gut. It’ll take you far.

Another way to be aggressively human: build authentic connections. Good salespeople laugh at the idea of a chatbot getting its foot in the door with a tough customer. Sure, a chatbot can outline a terrific proposal. But closing the deal with the customer? That’s a purely human talent that might also include talking fishing, kid’s soccer or the best place to stay when in Ireland.

Sadly, a recent survey revealed that a third of teens regularly using AI say they’ve used it for friendship, emotional support and even romantic interaction. This doesn’t bode well for the future of honest human interaction. But if you have the ability to read and understand complex human emotions and meet their needs accordingly, you’ll always have a competitive advantage.

As I was researching this piece, I came across a quote that I thought summed up the topic nicely, so I’ll close with this:
“As AI makes the ‘math’ of marketing and content creation easy for everyone, the power moves back to the ‘magic’ of a unique, human-centric message.”

Deliver magic and you’ll always be in demand. **GT**

**It’s also the title of a book by former NFL player Steve Wright.*