

Flying with Eagles:

An Interview with Seth Godin

Seth Godin will deliver the opening keynote address at the 2004 SMPS National Conference, "Build Business" on August 14 in New York City. He is a bestselling author, entrepreneur and agent of change. He was recently chosen as one of "21 Speakers for the Next Century" by *Successful Meetings* magazine.

Seth was founder and CEO of Yoyodyne, the industry's leading interactive direct marketing company, which Yahoo! acquired in late 1998. He holds an MBA from Stanford, and was called "the Ultimate Entrepreneur for the Information Age" by *Business Week*. He is a regular contributing editor for *Fast Company* magazine.

Godin is author of six books that have been bestsellers around the world and changed the way people think about marketing, change and work. His books include *Permission Marketing*, *Unleashing the IdeaVirus*, *The Big Red Fez*, *Survival is Not Enough*, and *Purple Cow*.. His latest book is *Free Prize Inside: The Next Big Marketing Idea*.

On April 1 (no fooling!), SMPS past president and Fellow, Craig Park, sat down with Godin to talk about his views on marketing for the built environment.

Craig Park: What's your take on marketing in the building industry?

Seth Godin: Here's the problem. No one cares about you. The problem is that the people who work in your firm care desperately about the craft that they are engaged. They wish that everyone could see the world through the eyes that they see it. If all the potential clients you have in the business to business or business to consumer world knew what you know, then you'd have absolutely no trouble growing to be as big as you want or to do the work that you want to have the clients that you want. The way the popular industries forty years ago, thirty years ago, twenty years ago, faced this challenge was by interrupting people. They interrupted their TV show, they interrupted their radio show, and now they interrupt their day by sending them junk mail.

CP: How does this affect a professional service firm?

SG: This same interruption mantra worked to sell ball bearings to Ford Motor Company because you just sent a salesman to interrupt the buyer's day, in the same way it also worked to sell Crest toothpaste to a family of four in Buffalo, New York.

CP: To a certain extent is that that's the way we go about our business, interrupting a real estate developer or the head of facilities at a university.

SG: That's right. For a long time the code of ethics, especially for architects but also for builders was, we are a profession the same way doctors and lawyers are a profession — we don't interrupt people.

CP: That changed in the mid-70's, about the time that SMPS was established.

SG: Unfortunately, your industry missed the glory days of the TV industrial complex and weren't able to ride a giant wave of growth that was based on repeatedly interrupting, taking the profits of those interruptions and doing it some more. As a result, there are essentially no name brand architects with the exception of two or three from the old days, like Frank Lloyd Wright and Skidmore Owings and Merrill, the way that there are brand names in almost every other field.

CP: Sounds like a branding issue.

SG: It's good news if you don't have a brand name because you're not competing against people who do. But it is also bad news because you are now acutely aware of how hard it is to spread your idea if people don't know who you are.

It is important that we agree on the problem because the solutions are fairly scary, and if you don't buy into the magnitude of the problem, you're probably going to be unwilling to invoke the solution.

CP: Conservative has been the historic pattern in our industry.

SG: In a world where everything is the same in terms of good enough, and where we don't have enough time to do all the research we want for anything we buy, what we do is we pick the close one and the cheap one, right. And close and cheap doesn't do you any good. As a marketing professional, if all you can deliver is close and cheap, they shouldn't pay your salary.

CP: How do we define our value if it is more than just close and cheap?

SG: You have to create a new dynamic that says the following: 1) the only way people are going to find out about you is from their friends and colleagues and people they trust. That word-of-mouth used to be important, now it's essential. That's how people decide about almost everything. And a sales force and advertising and sponsorships don't matter. What matters now is: Are you doing something remarkable? And remarkable, as I'm going to talk about in my keynote speech, is the act of doing something worth commenting on. And if something is remarkable I call it a "Purple Cow."

CP: Are there "Purple Cows" in the building industry?

SG: We know is that Frank Gehry has no trouble getting new work. People travel 2,000 miles to Bilbao not because it's a good building — by my untrained eye, it's not a good building — it's a remarkable building. By being willing to go to the edges, Gehry became remarkable, and by being remarkable, he never has to look for work again as long as he lives.

- CP:** Can we all aspire to that same level of success?
- SG:** There's this huge pressure on the people in your industry to do what they think is safe. To make sure, not only does the building meet code but the way the building is marketed meets a similar code of ethics. To make sure that not only is the architectural design approved by the client, but the architectural design is also approved by everybody who walks by it. And as a result, we end up with this real desire to play it safe, which means be boring, which means be invisible.
- CP:** So how do we become remarkable?
- SG:** Here's the question that I have to ask the builder — and remember the builder is both a process and a thing — what's the free prize? I'm not just building shelter from the rain. I could get that by buying a used house or a used office building. I'm buying the way the process makes me feel and I'm buying a building that when it's done, people talk about it.
- CP:** And word of mouth is the new “brand.”
- SG:** And if people talk about it when it's done, then new business will appear.
- CP:** Can we change our approach?
- SG:** There's the giant challenge. The challenge is do you have the skill to persuade your boss to have the guts to do something that feels risky? If you don't, then the competition will kill you because the competition sooner or later is going to wake up to the fact that doing remarkable stuff is the single best way to (a) make a profit, and (b) get new business.
- CP:** Is branding in professional services different?
- SG:** It actually gets back to what a brand is all about. If you can build that asset, and give the permission to talk to people who like your brand, then you'll grow forever. The challenge is how does the builder or the architect reward the client for sneezing, for spreading the idea of that design to their friends? And again, all of these steps seem like they take time and money, but they're way cheaper than not having business at all.
- CP:** Are there other insights you'd like to share?
- SG:** I spent a third of the new book talking about the fact that brainstorming doesn't work, and brainstorming is a bad idea, that the vast majority of companies are filled with people who can't do it, not because they weren't born that way, but because they weren't trained in it. I think the mistake that people make if they think that if they just go into some field of flowers with four friends and try to come up with a bunch of ideas, they'll figure it out. And I think that that is not a reliable, scalable way to grow. So I talk about something called “edgecraft,” which is the idea that you can reliably go to the edges and find those remarkable things.
- CP:** So where do you get your inspiration?
- SG:** I am very lucky that all day long, 365 days a year, I'm doing something different than that, which is, I'm sort of trying to quiet my mind and let things come in from

places you would never expect. I wrote *Purple Cow* because a dear friend of mine died in a helicopter crash and I wanted to dedicate a book to him, and I couldn't dedicate a book unless I wrote one. So I thought about Lionel and his wife and the whole book sort of spilled out in a two-week period of time. But that doesn't mean you should try this at home.

CP: Excellent. Thank you very much for this interview.

SG: It's my pleasure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Craig Park, FSMPS is *Director of Business Development* for Fields Devereaux Architects & Engineers, a 170-person design practice based in Los Angeles. He has been active in the building industry for 30 years, and has held positions in design, project management, marketing and operations. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Architecture from Cal Poly SLO. Craig is an Associate member of the American Institute of Architects, and is a Fellow and past-president of the Society for Marketing Professional Services. Craig can be reached craig@craigpark.com.