

What I Saw As a Brand Problem

David Fowler

I stepped out of a cab across the street from the office in New York and promptly tripped over a fire hydrant. In a flash, I was flat on my hands and knees, blood oozing through my white pants. Pain seared through both wrists as I wiggled them to be sure they weren't broken. I scrambled to my feet and shot a glance in every direction. Hopefully, nobody saw me.

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We were shooting a commercial on a soundstage in LA. These things are a big deal, with maybe fifty people around setting lights, moving backdrops, positioning cameras. Sam Waterston was the talent we'd hired.

"Where's Sam?" I said to the producer. "We don't have all day."

"I'm right here," he said. He was standing at my elbow.

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I was making a pitch at Microsoft headquarters in Redmond. A half dozen of us were in a small conference room waiting for the client. I turned suddenly. Crack! I reached for my face, which I'd just smacked on the low-hanging TV set on the wall.

“I’m good, all good,” I said. I made the presentation with a swelling red knot on my forehead.

I could go on. And on.

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There’s no cure for retinitis pigmentosa, an inherited disease that diminishes peripheral vision over time, leaving only a small amount of central vision, like looking through a peephole. A normal field of vision, using both eyes, is about 180 degrees; I have less than ten degrees, easily qualifying for the legally blind club. I can see straight ahead. I can see the screen on this computer but not my hands on the keyboard, unless I look down. Then, I can’t see the screen.

For years, I was unable to consider myself someone with a disability. Of necessity, I should have been the guy walking down the street carrying a white cane. I chose to take the risk of getting run over rather than adding a modifier to my identity.

I wasn’t ashamed. I was afraid.

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On the creative side of the advertising business, you make ads and commercials, but if you’re smart, you also carve out a brand for yourself, a reason to be in the meeting. Over the years, I crafted a role as a creative director who could peer into thorny client situations and extract revelatory insights. Manufacturing behemoths reeling from disaster. Financial giants beset by scandal. Drug makers with blockbusters going off patent. I wasn’t a kooky creative type. I could wear a tie, stand up in a boardroom, and sell the vision. Yet, I was trapped in irony: A seer who couldn’t see shit. I had a brand problem. So I devised a bag of tricks that helped me hide for decades.

Rule 1: Memorize steps going in so you won’t stumble coming out.

Rule 2: If you drop a pen and can’t see it, wait. Someone will pick it up and hand it to you.

Rule 3: In an unfamiliar room, stand back and locate coffee tables, stools, and small dogs so you don’t walk into them.

Rule 4: Never cross against the light. Never forget to look in the other direction for that biker riding the wrong way.

Rule 5: In a handshake, extend your hand first, so the other person will reach for you. Otherwise, you might leave them hanging because you can't look at their face and hands at the same time.

Rule 6: Carry a handkerchief to mop up the water glass you'll knock over.

Rule 7: Sit near the head of the conference table so you can see faces down the length. If you sit in the middle, you can only see a couple of people across from you.

Rule 8: In the airport, draft behind a slow-moving old person, but not so close as to appear a stalker.

Rule 9: Don't go to the holiday party. Too dark, too drunk, too dangerous.

Rule 10: Walk only with white wine.

I violated Rules 9 and 10 once at a holiday party in London held in a nineteenth century mansion. I was sauntering down the creaky hallway with a schooner of red wine. I took a false step and sloshed. In the bathroom mirror, my white tux shirt looked as if I'd been shotgunned. I slunk to the coat check, then out the door without detection.

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I once asked a friend at another agency for advice. I hoped he would keep my secret.

"So, Jay," I said. "What do you think would happen if I walked into your office with a cane one day?"

He looked out the window at the canyon of glass buildings, sucked on his teeth, then leaned forward.

"I don't think I'd do that," he said.

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I recall only one person at work who was clearly disabled, a young woman in a wheelchair. Our office was a renovated factory with a daunting set of twenty steps up to the lobby. One morning, I watched her wait for the handicap lift to the left of the stairs, then pop out into the lobby area

and push her way to the main elevators. She was on full display, every day. I had the unfair advantage of being able to hide.

Riding the next elevator up, I wondered what the people beside me might be shouldering unseen.

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After a show one Saturday, my wife and I were walking in the West Village. As charming as it is, we don't go there often because the narrow sidewalks are bumpy and lined with dark stairwells and gaping cellar doors. I was gripping her arm, navigating at a crawl. (If you were behind us, and a New Yorker, you would've screamed.) On this day, my wife's unspoken calculations of all the death points made the stroll a bit less fun than usual. I could feel her eyes and mind working like radar.

For years, she has been my fearless leader, inconspicuously guiding me through Waldorf galas, dark theaters, Midtown hustle, and nosebleed seating at sporting events. But after our walk and my fire hydrant drubbing, she offered her opinion.

"It might be time for a cane," she said, gently.

"I'm doing okay," I replied.

"I'm afraid I might miss something," she said. She meant she might not see the cement mixer running a red light. Or the open manhole. Or that wayward biker. One miss on her part would be something she'd carry forever. I never considered the stress of that. It hit me like a piano from above. This blind thing was not all about me.

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After twenty years, I walked out the door of the agency. I was done. Few inside the building were wiser about my disability, and very few in the industry had a clue. Even my assistant didn't know. Now, with nothing to lose, I embarked on what, in the ad business, is called an "awareness campaign." I picked a small group of friends to inform.

I chose a signal cane, reflective white with a red band. The signal cane doesn't tell you where to go like the long tapping canes. It tells the world

that you can't see. You hold it out in front of you to serve notice. The point is to be unhidden.

"What do you think?" I asked my wife, leaning on my blind man cane.

"You got this," she said.

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I was waiting to meet my friend Danny for lunch at Café Luxembourg. I was early, standing by the hostess desk, holding my cane. Danny strode in and walked right by, like he didn't even recognize me. He turned around, caught my eyes, and looked down at my cane.

"What the hell is this?" he said.

"I've been legally blind the whole time. I've just been faking it."

"Are you kidding me? I've known you for twenty years."

"Yeah. The whole time," I said.

Danny was one of the best music producers in the advertising business, scoring hundreds of commercials. You've heard his jingles. He knows music; he lives by his ears. He angled his head to the right and pointed to a bright red hearing aid. He turned left and pointed to his left ear. Another hearing aid, a green one. They weren't flesh-colored to be hidden; they were unmissable, like fashion statements.

"Are you kidding me?" I said.

"I got tired of saying 'huh?' all the time," he said.