



*Mark Di Somma* Heretic



“ Welcome to the end of the era of reason. After years of straight-forward efficiency gaining and cost cutting, it's time for the hard stuff that will sort the leaders from the administrators – business models whose difference and attraction are built on creativity, empathy and instinct. ”

– Mark Di Somma



## *Philosophy* :: RAISE HELL *and Make Money...*

### *Belief rocks!*

Every person in the world has the need for, and the right to, purpose in their lives. Faith underpins who we are and what we perceive. It codes how we behave and what we say, the stance we make on things and the understandings we draw from the world and happenings around us.

There's no questioning the concept of belief, only the framework within which belief takes place. Paradigms lock in our view of the business world, but when they based on ideas that inhibit growth or make us more like everyone else than we should be in business, then they are a negative, even a destructive, influence.

Time doesn't make a stupid or a flawed idea more credible – it just makes it more entrenched.

Breaking with these orthodoxies demands a split with the old ways of doing things. That will only happen when new perspectives prompt us to re-view and reassess old problems within new paradigms.

### *Meet a man on a mission*

Mark Di Somma wants to make business more creative and courageous – by speaking out for ideas that break moulds and herald opportunities.

Mark has an Honours degree in History and 20 years experience as a writer, strategist and thinker. He has played a central role in forging ambitious brand strategies, communications and branded culture change programmes for diverse organisations.

### *Sessions with Mark Di Somma are cheeky, provocative, free-ranging and informal. They're great for:*

- :: conference organisers looking to get their event off to a great start or to add that real boost to a close that will leave everybody buzzing
- :: senior management and staff, looking for a different take on a recurring problem or unresolved issue
- :: marketing, sales, brand and people managers looking for insights, ideas and feedback to invigorate business initiatives or create new opportunities
- :: innovators looking to stimulate discussion and examine new initiatives in a supportive environment

Mark's style is refreshing, fun and punchy, and audiences love his energy, passion and lateral approach to a wide range of topics. Crunching rhetoric, reinforced by flowing logic and a wonderfully creative approach, is delivered in that distinctive "take no prisoners" voice.

Mark's philosophy – "if you're not scared, your customers are bored" – advocates unequivocally for businesses, organisations and corporates to adopt intelligent approaches that turn customers on and get people inside organisations pumped to compete.

If you're ready for a presentation or workshop brimming with imagination, ideas and lateral opportunity; if you're prepared to be entertained, inspired and outraged; if you're brave enough to see no scared cow left standing in the bid to find your organisation a truly competitive advantage platform – then take a deep breath and hire the heretic.

### *Get:*

- ⌘ a very different perspective on the business issues we all face, why they're happening and where the new solutions might lie
- ⌘ a new approach to opportunity creation
- ⌘ tools and checklists that will have you too thinking like a heretic and reaping the rewards

To find out more, contact Mark Di Somma at [mark@markdisomma.com](mailto:mark@markdisomma.com) or talk with Sherryl Hewlett at SPEAKER LINK on +64 9 533 1586 or at [sherryl@speakerlink.co.nz](mailto:sherryl@speakerlink.co.nz)



## *Interview* :: **MARK DI SOMMA** *on heresy, history and wobbling the business world...*

*Q: Do you think heretic is a particularly provocative title?*

**MDS:** Perhaps. One of its advantages I would have thought. Why have a title that is just like everyone else's? This may surprise you, but I didn't actually adopt the term to provoke indignation, but rather to incite thought. Heresy is about taking an old word loaded with associations and redefining it – which is what I believe we need to do more in business. Take ideas that we're familiar with, concepts we think we know, thoughts that are loaded with conventions – and look for ways to redefine them. It's what Tom Peters calls remarkabilizing.

*Q: In this markedly secular age, can anyone be a heretic?*

**MDS:** Heresy has nothing to do with religion. The dictionary talks of a heretic being a "holder of unorthodox opinions". So heresy requires a different world view from the dominant viewpoint... Religion is not the issue, because in the secular business world, orthodoxy is alive and well.

*Q: How so?*

**MDS:** So many aspects of business today demand convention – especially operationally. Best practice is a conformity. World class is a level playing field – a slightly elevated field, but flat and unremarkable for all that. Because it's all about being as good as others. Most businesses do all they can to be like everyone else, then complain bitterly that customers treat them the same as their competitors. Heresy is about saying "I don't believe that. More is possible". It's about creating difference, not achieving sameness.

*Q: You don't think that organisations need to be operationally excellent?*

**MDS:** It goes without saying – and that's the point. Operational excellence is unremarkable. It's mandatory, not exceptional. To stand out from others, you need to build from there, not build to there.

*Q: You've said previously that paradigms are made to be broken. Explain.*

MDS: No I haven't actually. Stephen Covey's said it – and I've quoted him! I've quoted him because I agree with his observation that paradigms define the world for us, but they also limit it. Dorothy Parker observed that you can't teach an old dogma new tricks – and that's very much the sentiment of that thought. If you want to excel, you need to be prepared to adopt a different world view. Copernicus got into huge problems with the establishment for turning the universe inside-out, but imagine where we'd have got to if we hadn't – if science was still governed by the thought that the earth was at the centre of everything. Why was there so much resistance to his solar-centric view? Because it was not in the interests of the establishment to admit a different take on the universe. Similarly, it's often not in the interests of the already-busy to admit a different take on the business world. They don't believe in disruption, only in striving for incremental improvement. To affect significant improvement, you need to be prepared to change the paradigm, because it's only by reframing the context that you can hope to cut across what's universally accepted. I call it giving the world a wobble.

*Q: So how do you break a paradigm?*

MDS: Focus on the problem, not the framework. So many people want to solve the problem within the framework. They haven't stepped back far enough perhaps to understand that the framework may be the biggest obstacle. What's the real issue? And where are the most unlikely places to draw telling parallels that might just answer the problem? Inspiration's critical. You need to fully understand the business issues and opportunities. But the framework-smashing starts when you blend those insights with take-outs from other sources. It's about having a different perspective, and anthropology, history, military strategy, voyages of discovery, sculpture, the history of art, these are all places to harvest thinking. You can't apply them directly of course. But you can apply the principles.

*Q: You advocate strongly for a more educated business community and yet you see your own lack of formal business education as a massive advantage. Surely that doesn't add up?*

MDS: It adds up completely if you go back to my last point. A purely business-oriented education is little more than vocational training in my view. So many business courses teach you how to do. You learn how to do marketing and management and finance and HR – and you learn what everyone else is learning, and the status quo is reinforced. And when you take those ideas out into the marketplace, they are the same ideas as everyone else is applying. Back to my point at the start. But when you take that business learning and combine it with teachings from classics or theology, philosophy, the sciences, history or languages – and you are encouraged to think laterally about those subjects and to apply what you have learnt from them to business issues, then you develop a different perspective. For my own part, I studied history and French literature. What did I learn about marketing from the French Dadaists. Nothing that I could use directly. How did Henry VIII's ecclesiastical reforms influence my view of branding? They didn't – at least not that anyone can see. What I got from those studies was something far more indirect and important – the drive to inquire, the demand to question, and the discipline to cross-reference, refer and draw implications. And that is the

strength of not having studied just business. My viewpoint is wider. My catchment for ideas is open. I'd like to think I have a wider library of references from which to draw. I enjoy talking to people about these things and introducing the take-outs to business situations and arguments. In my company [the Audacity Group], we've taken that concept even further by looking for ways to introduce people to teams that are from completely different backgrounds and have totally different interests, so that they can bring all their influences to bear on the problem, not the paradigm.

*Q: Give me an example of a viewpoint that may surprise me.*

MDS: Designers have the potential to be the next era of management consultants.

*Q: That's absurd.*

MDS: Why?

*Q: They're completely different skills.*

MDS: No – they are completely different skills now. Because right now when I say “design”, you're probably thinking drawing or some variation on it, whereas I'm talking about conceptualists who are capable of designing answers that laterally attack business problems. The opportunity for the design industry is to step up to the strategy plate and design new ways of arriving at answers. Design is like heresy. It requires re-definition, and if it's to happen, there will need to be interest and an emphasis on creative business solving. These are commodity times. And the one thing that is future-proofed against commoditisation is the creative spirit. It is inherently iterative. That's why designers, with their ability to shed old skin and invent new clothes, need to drive the directions of businesses that otherwise face the very real perils of sameness.

*Q: Isn't there a danger that you will be seen as just being contrary for the sake of it?*

MDS: Possibly. Except there's a lot I agree with. I have no problem with capitalism. I believe passionately in fair trade. I have no qualms about commerce and the need for competitive markets. My beef is with actions and mindsets that are prompted by lack of imagination. If that's being contrary, then it only reinforces my point about the prevalence of lack of imagination.

*Q: So what's your goal?*

MDS: To make creativity in business legitimate... I mean, it's talked about – a lot – but I'm far from convinced that the power of a creative approach to problem solving is understood. Lateral is so much more uncomfortable for most people than literal. Weird, non-business, artistic people do creativity – not serious people in serious corporations. Creativity's still a freak show – great for entertainment, fun to watch, trendy to talk about, but not the way business is done, not really. And creative and artistically inclined people themselves reinforce those images in many ways, because far too few of them can talk business to business with senior decision makers. They haven't got their heads around the business matters, so why should business people take them seriously? They're as out of place and as uncomfortable in the business arena as business people are trying to think on their terms.

*Q: Should innovation always attract controversy?*

**MDS:** I don't believe that controversy should ever be the sole goal of business innovation, even though at times it seems to be an inevitable by-product. I say that because if one sets out simply to be controversial, then the focus is not on solving the problem, it's on outraging the receiver. What seems to happen often, however, is that innovative answers are built on undermining current assumptions – and it is that undermining that makes people uncomfortable. Like I said earlier, it wobbles their world. Breakthroughs come with the idea, but revolutions require what Malcolm Gladwell calls so eloquently the tipping point – enough people who are prepared to step over the threshold and change the overall bias. At that point, acceptance becomes a matter of momentum. Controversy may have garnered the initial attention and gained the headlines, but the idea, the concept itself must carry weight beyond that if it's too succeed and become established. Innovation fuelled only by controversy makes for a great fad, but it lacks the credibility to achieve longevity... Shock may rock but it doesn't lock!

*Q: Do you have faith in anything?*

**MDS:** A great deal actually... I believe for instance that the things one believes in should stand up to scrutiny. I believe in inquiry. One should be able to ask questions about anything – privacy permitting – because people have the right to hear the answer. They may agree with it, or not. That's not the issue. The point is they have the right to hear it and to draw their own conclusions. In brainstorming sessions people say there's no such thing as a bad answer. Equally, in my view, there's no such thing as an unacceptable question – no question that is too naive, too simplistic, too probing – because the alternative to the right to ask is blind acceptance. And that's something I have no faith in at all.

*Q: Why should we believe you?*

**MDS:** I'm not asking you to just believe me. Anyone can believe – for a time. Believing me is like a cheap take away meal. Fine at the time – but 10 minutes later you can't remember what or where the substance was. I want to help people question assumptions and find new and different ways to achieve resonance with your customers and stakeholders. I'll do my best to tie the problems you're facing to issues that people have faced in a completely different context and draw some parallels that will guide you towards very different answers. Hopefully that will motivate you to look at things in ways that work for you. It's all about stimulus...

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