

Wrath

Acting on intense emotion without reason or thought for consequences

I have to admit that Wrath is the sin in this book that gets me a little worked up.

There will be no smashed crockery, but I've spent enough of my career watching organizations make consequential decisions about marketing based on surprisingly little evidence that I understand the impulse.

One of those experiences has stayed with me. I worked with a health system that had spent years recovering from serious reputational problems. A new CEO came in and helped turn the organization around. He improved performance, attracted talent, rebuilt relationships in the community, and understood that reputation and brand were part of that work. We helped the organization develop a new name, positioning, identity, and launch campaign as part of that larger transformation.

Eventually, that CEO retired. His successor came from a clinical background and brought a very different view of marketing. He didn't see the same value in the function or in the investments his predecessor had made, and the marketing operation changed very quickly. Two intelligent people can look at the same marketing investment and assign radically different value to it because they begin with different assumptions about what marketing contributes.

That's the version of Wrath I'm interested in here, the kind where unchecked emotion drives decision making. It could be rage, but conviction, skepticism, frustration, and even our old friend pride can also get in the way of making evidence-based choices.

However, I reserve the right to imagine smashing the occasional piece of crockery... in an appropriate setting, of course.

A prudent team starts with the objective and works backward.

The cost-center problem

If marketing is understood primarily as a cost, cutting it has an obvious budgetary benefit. The consequence of the cuts can be much harder to see.

A finance team can identify a $500,000 reduction immediately. The patients who don't schedule six months later are hypothetical. The market share that drifts away takes time to appear. A weakening brand may first surface as lower response rates or higher acquisition costs, and nobody necessarily traces those changes back to a budget decision made two planning cycles earlier.

Meanwhile, the investments themselves have constituencies. A board member likes the sponsorship. Leadership remembers the campaign. The organization has attended the same conference for years. The media budget looks enormous because its entire cost sits there in one very visible line. If nobody has established what those dollars are expected to produce, all of those considerations can carry as much weight as performance.

This is one reason proving marketing's value has become such a persistent concern for CMOs. The CMO Survey found that 64% of marketing leaders identify demonstrating the impact of marketing actions on financial outcomes as their biggest challenge. Marketing leaders increasingly sit in growth conversations while still having to defend whether marketing itself creates value.

Prudence gives us a better way into that conversation.

Start with the return you need

We define Prudence as thoughtful, measured decision-making grounded in long-term impact. For marketing, I think that starts with first understanding how your organization makes budgeting decisions. Is everything based on last year's budget with percent increases or decreases all around, or is the budget crafted in a more targeted way? From there, you move on to a simple budgeting principle. Begin with the growth objectives, not the dollar figures.

Healthcare marketers regularly ask what percentage of net patient revenue an organization should spend on marketing. Benchmarks can tell you whether your spending looks wildly out of step with peers and provide a starting point for conversations with finance. They can't tell you what your budget should be.

The right investment depends on what the organization expects marketing to accomplish. Entering a new market requires something different from maintaining awareness where the organization is already well known. Growing a profitable service line with available capacity creates a different opportunity from generating more demand for a service with a three-month wait.

A prudent team starts with the objective and works backward. What growth does the organization need? Where does it need it? What capacity exists? What is that growth worth? What role can marketing reasonably play in producing it?

Healthcare marketers have become extraordinarily good at finding people and getting them to respond. The harder question is whether we're finding the people who help the organization achieve the outcome it actually needs. A full appointment book can look like marketing success while creating an access problem. A highly efficient campaign can optimize beautifully toward the wrong target.

Prudence begins by knowing what you're trying to produce.

Then prove what you can

Once marketing has connected its strategy to an organizational objective, it needs to follow the work downstream. The goal is to connect marketing activity as closely as possible to the financial and operational outcomes the organization values.

Our discipline has improved dramatically here. We can increasingly follow the path from media and response through appointments and patient volume, and in more sophisticated organizations, into revenue and contribution margin. That's considerably better than bringing leadership a report full of impressions and hoping everyone was impressed.

Marketing, finance, strategy, operations, and analytics need to share enough information to make that connection. Marketing needs to know what happened after the lead became an appointment. Finance needs confidence in the economic story. Operations needs to tell us whether we're creating demand the system can actually serve.

This is also where I get slightly nervous about our enthusiasm for ROI. Marketers understandably want a number that proves value. ROI sounds beautifully conclusive, and performance marketing can give us the intoxicating feeling that every dollar has produced an answer. Healthcare marketing isn't always that tidy.

The easiest thing to measure isn't always the most valuable

Brand is the obvious example.

Imagine two hospitals launching identical hip replacement acquisition campaigns with identical media budgets, creative quality, and targeting. One has spent decades building awareness, trust, familiarity, and preference. The other is largely unknown. Would you expect those campaigns to perform the same way?

The first organization enters the campaign with something already stored in people's minds. When someone sees the ad, searches for care, or encounters the brand again, previous experience and familiarity are already doing work. Performance marketing builds on that foundation.

We've been exploring this relationship directly at Unlock. Our *Tipping Point* work found a correlation between composite brand strength, general awareness and preference, and performance-marketing cost per lead (CPL). As brand strength increased, CPL decreased. The relationship wasn't linear. At a certain preference threshold, CPL began falling much more sharply.

One example looks at a market with 15% brand preference and CPL above $650. The recommended mix puts half the investment into brand building and half into performance until preference strengthens. At 58% preference and CPL below $300, another market can lean much more heavily into performance because the brand has already created favorable economics for acquisition.

Different marketing investments produce evidence at different speeds.

This is why cutting brand can be deceptively attractive. The immediate performance report may not collapse because the organization continues harvesting demand against brand

strength built over years. Eventually, the reservoir gets lower, preference weakens, response becomes harder, and acquisition costs rise. The performance team may look less efficient even though the underlying problem began when the organization stopped investing in the conditions that made performance efficient.

Different marketing investments produce evidence at different speeds. Paid search can produce appointments this month, while reputation and brand work accumulate over longer periods and influence future campaigns without presenting a convenient receipt for each effect. We should measure both rigorously without letting the investment with the shortest path to attribution automatically win.

Ask what job the investment is supposed to do, how you expect that effect to appear, and over what period you should judge it. Some investments harvest existing demand. Some create future demand. Some make acquisition more efficient or protect preference. Once you understand the role, you can decide what evidence belongs with it.

When the cut comes anyway

Sometimes the financial situation leaves little room for debate, and the organization needs to cut expenses. Even when leadership understands that a reduction may slow growth, the tradeoff may still be necessary. Marketing still needs to make the best decision available, and this is where some of our earlier sins can sneak back into the room.

Pride can make it surprisingly difficult to let go of work we're proud of. Perhaps the strategy was smart, the creative was excellent, the launch got attention, and everyone involved did genuinely good work. We may feel much more attached to it than to the performance campaign producing more value against the objective.

Greed can make us reluctant to choose at all. If every initiative has a constituency and every line has a rationale, the temptation is to shave a little everywhere rather than decide what deserves protection.

Prudence asks us to make the choice anyway. Use the objectives and evidence you've built to decide what to protect, reduce, or eliminate. Model the consequences where you can. If you reduce media, pause a campaign, leave a market, or pull back on brand investment, document what you expect to happen and decide which measures you'll watch afterward. The analysis may have no effect on the size of the cut but may become extremely useful six months later.

If volume falls, acquisition costs rise, market share slips, or a service line misses its target, you have a record of the assumptions you made when the investment changed. You can test what happened against what you expected rather than relying on everyone's memory of a difficult budget meeting.

It also changes marketing's posture inside the organization. You're explaining what the organization asked marketing to accomplish, what you invested to accomplish it, what happened, and what you expect a change in investment to produce. That's a much stronger place from which to have an uncomfortable conversation.

Keep this in your pocket

Choose three meaningful investments in your current marketing budget and map each one across four questions.

What organizational objective does it support?

What job does marketing expect it to do?

What evidence tells you whether it is doing that job?

What do you expect to happen if the investment disappears?

Include at least one investment with a short, measurable path to performance and one whose value accumulates over a longer period. Remember, even when it seems tricky, there are ways of measuring brand effectiveness and value.

If you can answer those questions clearly, you're beginning to manage marketing as an investment portfolio rather than a collection of expenses.

The next temptation

Wrath lets emotion, assumption, or personal conviction rush ahead of evidence. Prudence gives us a way to understand what we're investing in, why we're investing in it, and what consequences follow when we change course.

Our next sin begins when we know what needs doing and fail to do it.

Gregory called it **Sloth**.