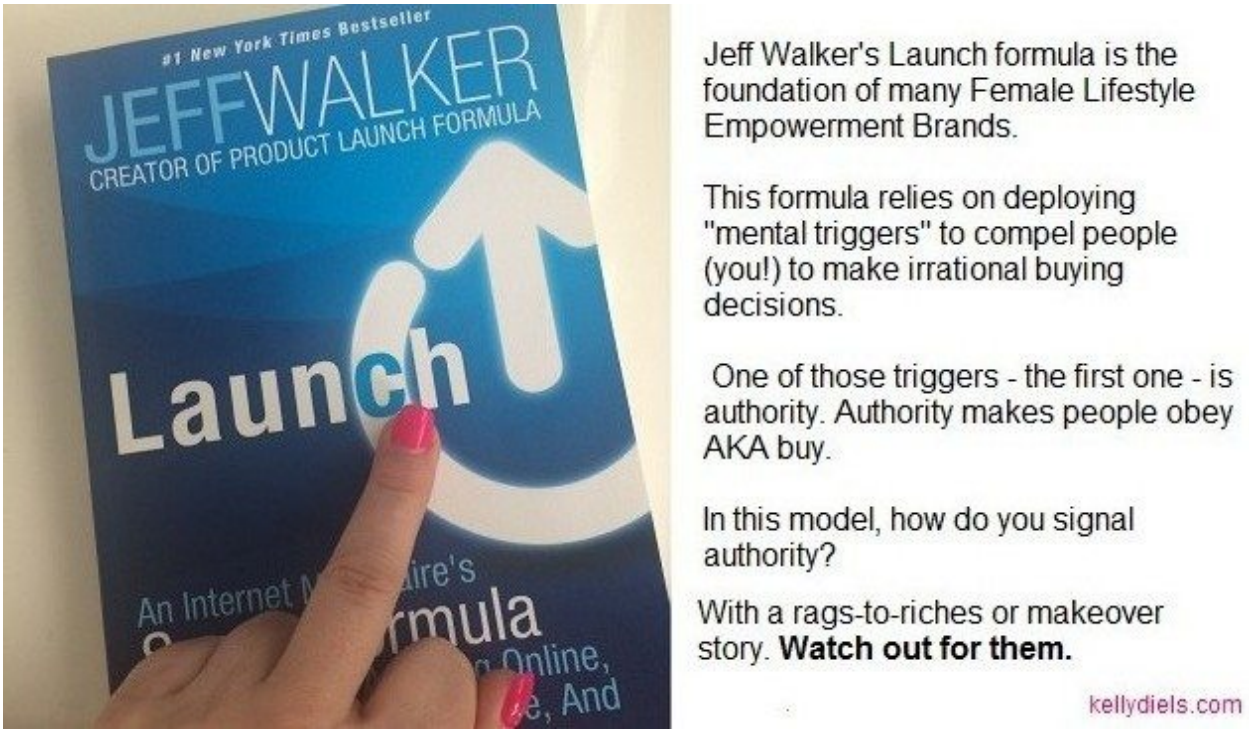
On the ‘Mental Triggers’ of Online Marketing, The Female Lifestyle Empowerment Brand, Assessing Who Deserves Your Money, and Why We Should Be Skeptical of Makeover Stories

May 18, 2016 By Kelly Diels



Jeff Walker’s launch formula – taught in his best-selling book, *Launch* and his course, *Product Launch Formula* – has had a profound impact on online marketing. Take a gander at his book blurbs or google the big names + Jeff Walker and you’ll quickly find that most online business models are premised on a version of his sales process. He’ll tell you that, himself:

“I’ve coached or helped all kinds of experts such as Tony Robbins, Brendon Burchard, Dan Kennedy, Bill Glazer, Rich Schefren, Frank Kern, Dean Graziosi, Yanik Silver, Greg Clement and dozens more “gurus”…”

Walker wasn’t the first to launch products, but what he quickly noticed was that very few people were getting the kinds of results he consistently produced. He was doing something differently. He understood that humans communicate in stories and structured his launch communications to construct a story and build to a conclusion. Each email, each video was a scene in a play.

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The other thing he grasped – he calls it "The Final Piece of the Puzzle" and this is arguably the heart of his book – is that people make emotional and *mentally programmed* decisions. Presenting facts and benefits is logical but it doesn't sell products. Instead, "there are a number of mental triggers that influence those decisions and behaviors. These triggers are always working just below our consciousness, and they exert enormous influence over how we act."

What Walker recommends, then, is activating these mental triggers to compel people to buy.

The first three triggers he outlines are scarcity, authority, and community.

"For instance, if we perceive something s being scarce, we will naturally give it more value.

Or if we consider someone as an authority figure, we are almost automatically more influenced by that person.

Or if we consider ourselves part of a community, we will overwhelmingly act in accordance with how we think the people in that community are supposed to act." (27-28)

Walker's launch formula teaches entrepreneurs how to activate these triggers (and several others) in order to trigger buying behaviour: "…your launch sequence gives you the ultimate opportunity to activate those mental triggers that will influence your prospects and clients."

So let's talk about only one of Walker's recommended triggers (I'll come back to the others in future posts).

Authority.

Basically, Jeff Walker teaches entrepreneurs how to use their authority to trigger obedience. If you want people to follow your instructions and buy, they need to believe you have authority. That you a*re* an authority. As he explains,

People tend to follow others in positions of authority. Think about doctors in their white coats. For most of us, as soon as we see that white coat walk into the examination room, a certain part of us becomes deferential. We listen to what the doctor has to say and take any advice seriously. We probably feel at least a little intimidated to disagree with anything the person in that white coat says.

This isn't unusual. We often look for others to help guide our decision. Like so many other mental triggers the authority trigger helps us shortcut the decision-making process…

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If you want to be more influential in your business and marketing, it pays to be seen as an authority. And the good news is that it can be shockingly easy to create authority."(61)

Basically, to garner the benefits that accrue to authorities (in this case, sales and profit) all you have to do is signal authority – like with the white coat. Or a flashlight and a pose:

"When I was a teenager in high school, I learned a very important lesson about authority. Three of my friend and I were driving home after a school football game – just like few hundred other people – and got stuck in a traffic jam in the parking lot. There were so many cars trying to get out the exit that no one was moving at all. One of my friends, who understood a lot more about authority than I did, found a flashlight rolling around on the floor of the car and immediately knew what to do. He jumped out of the car, turned on the flashlight, and started directing traffic *Actually, he didn't really direct traffic; he mostly just walked in front of our car and waved us forward through the congestion. Seeing the flashlight's beam, other drivers made way for our personal "traffic director" and we drove right out of the parking lot.* The only authority he had to direct traffic came from the flashlight. But people saw that flashlight, and they assumed he was in a position of authority. And I learned a big lesson that night: It doesn't take very much to create authority." (61; italics mine)

Authority, in Walker's understanding, is getting people to do what you want them to do, and doing things that primarily benefit you. His friend did not create a way out of the parking lot that benefited all the drivers following his orders. He got other drivers to follow instructions so that the car he was traveling in could advance faster than the others. His authority signals advantaged him at the expense of the people who cooperated and complied. There was no mutual gain there. There was exploitation.

That's the authority underlying Jeff Walker's launch formula, and it in turn underlies many, many, *many* of the business models of our most respected Female Lifestyle Empowerment Brands. They're selling you products, courses, services by signalling this kind of hierarchical and empty authority.

I am not saying their offerings and work lack substance or value.

I am also not saying that anyone associated with Walker or who uses Walker's Launch formula is a predator or unethical. (I often tell people, for example, that the sequence and structure is useful but that if you use it you must jettison or at least very carefully evaluate how you're using the mental triggers intended to disarm and disadvantage buyers.)

What I am saying is this: **when they adopt Walker's Launch formula *wholesale and without alteration*, they are both cosigning and leveraging this exploitative model of authority** as a sales trigger to get you to buy from them. The authority is manufactured and inauthentic; contains lopsided benefits that accrue to the "authority"; and reinforces an authoritarian dynamic

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most of them claim to be challenging with their world-changing empowerment practices – and yet somehow this technique didn't appear to activate moral alarm bells in their consciences. Instead, they're using it. They're lauding it. It works and that's the extent of the conversation they're willing to have about authority and compulsion – except to celebrate it and endorse it.

Who endorses the subconscious manipulation and the manufacturing and leveraging of privilege recommended by Jeff Walker's Launch formula, apparently without reservation?

Marie Forleo:

"What Jeff Walker teaches in LAUNCH is vital for modern marketing success. You don't need more tactics or tools; you need smart strategy, and that's exactly what this book delivers."

Lisa Sasevich:

- Calls Jeff Walker her 'bestie'
- From March 9 through 16, Jeff Walker sent 4 emails promoting her course
- Jeff Walker presented at her Sales Authenticity and Success Mastermind in 2014

Kris Carr

- Jeff Walker is "proud to call her a friend, and proud that she's a PLF Owner"
- Comments on his blog
- Promotes courses and joint-trainings with him to her audience

Gabrielle Bernstein

The blog post promoting her Spirit Junkies Master Class course does not mention any of the people below but does include these tags:

brendan bruchard, coaches training, derek halpern, gabby bernstein, gabrielle bernstein,how to negotiate, **jeff walker**, kris carr, marie forleo, meditation, negotiating, Negotiating is a spiritual practice…, **plf**, spirit junkie, spirit junkie masterclass, yoga

(boldface mine)

Editorial note: If I had to hazard a guess, which is what I'm doing, I'd say that the people tagged in Bernstein's post are likely affiliates who promoted the course and, in Walker's case, guided her in constructing her launch sequence for the course (I suspect "plf" stands for Walker's "Product Launch Formula").

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To be clear: I'm not criticizing Gabby Bernstein or any of these entrepreneurs for having affiliates, courses, online businesses or making money. Instead, I'm suggesting that Jeff Walker's launch strategy is part of their business models – and that, in itself, ***may or may not be a problem*** *depending on whether or not they choose to deploy the emotionally manipulative triggers that Walker teaches and recommends.*

Mastin Kipp:

"To my peers: Gabby Bernstein, Kris Carr, Marie Forleo, JJ Virgin, Simon Sinek, Michael Fishman, and Nick Ortner. You guys inspire me to up my game and let me know it's okay to shine.

Special shout out to Gabby Bernstein – you have become such a dear friend. I am grateful for having you in my life.

To Brendon Burchard – buddy, your work and mission are a game changer. Thank you for all that you offer the world.

To Jeff Walker – you have inspired a generation to LAUNCH, including me."

Editorial Note: Based on the sequence of those paragraphs in the acknowledgement to his book, it seems to me that Kipp is implying that he and his peers (or most of them) rely on Walker's launch formula to promote their books and products.

Which isn't necessarily a problem. Maybe. Unless.

Here's the thing: I think you probably can use Walker's formula IF you strip it of the mental triggers.

The launch sequence infrastructure, composed of blog posts, emails and videos, culminating in a sales page isn't inherently "evil design".

It's only when you layer uncritically examined + disadvantaging and disempowering (to the consumer) mental triggers and social privilege- *otherwise known as 'persuasion' but the kind of persuasion designed to disadvantage one party* – on top of Walker's launch sequence infrastructure that you have now built a business model and sale funnel that is deeply questionable.

These tactics –mental triggers, social triggers — are the same thing as monetizing privilege.

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And Female Lifestyle Empowerment Brands are deploying them in the name of empowerment.

(That's not empowerment. That's empowermyth.)

Which brings me to my questions:

1. Are Mastin Kipp and his peers, many of whom I would categorize as *Female Lifestyle Empowerment Brands*, critically evaluating the impact of the mental triggers championed in Walker's Launch formula?
2. Are they carefully selecting which ones they do or do not choose based on that potentially harmful impact?
3. Are they assessing whether the use of these triggers is consistent with their empowerment missions or assessing whether they actually undermine the conditions they're trying to create (empowerment, good decisions, agency, choice, excellence)?

I believe that if you claim to be a leader devoted to fostering personal agency, collective empowerment and conscious personal and social change, you ought to eschew using techniques that trigger oppressive mental programming and that reinforce authoritarian social dynamics.

If you adopt Jeff Walker's launch formula wholesale and without alteration, then you are deliberately choosing to manufacture and signal the appearance of authority/privilege in order to create a hierarchical relationship that disproportionately advantages you *and* you are consciously choosing to construct an authoritarian sales funnel that triggers obedience and irrational buying decisions from the people you otherwise claim to serve and empower.

So how can we assess whether people — especially the Female Lifestyle Empowerment Brands that are so significant in our lives –are leveraging these triggers and replicating in their business models this kind of authority and authoritarian process?

1. **You assess where the benefit flows.** If an online process is designed to disadvantage the consumer, this is "evil design" and just plain unethical.
    - An example: RyanAir automatically added travel insurance to every airfare purchase. This lever is built into their sales funnel and advantages them over their client. Just Fab and Fabletics make it super-easy to sign up online but impossible to unsubscribe unless you call and work your way through a phone-tree. This advantages them over their clients. When you're in a sales funnel, ask yourself who has the advantage. Ask yourself if you're making conscious, logical choices or whether you're reacting to engineered circumstances and deliberately emotionally triggering rhetoric.
2. **You assess the 'about' story of the "authority".** The way Walker advises people to manufacture authority – *especially* if they don't have any external signifiers of credibility,

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like extensive education, deep experience, decades of devotion to a practice or in-depth knowledge – is with a rags-to-riches or makeover story.

- The first installment of the launch sequence is literally the "I was just like you" story. *I was just like you*, our new wannabe authorities will tell us, *I was broke, struggling, fat, unfulfilled, lonely, and then I discovered X. I became a whole new person! I can teach you, too!* This kind of story *seems* empowering to both parties, because it waves at our lived experiences *which matter*, but it actually betrays a fundamental contempt for the client. The message from authority to follower is this: y*ou are broken. You are unacceptable. You need to be fixed. I was just like you and it was horrifying.* It's contempt, pure and simple, and that same client contempt gives entrepreneurs permission to construct authoritarian and psychologically manipulative sales funnels that disproportionately advantage sellers over buyers.
- So when you see leaders – especially established ones who's how-I-got-started story is far in the past – using makeover stories and rags-to-riches stories, lean in and ask yourself why they're using those rather than telling you about their deep expertise and the tangible benefits and outcomes of their work.
    - For example: you never hear Oprah telling her rags-to-riches story anymore. Why would she? She has so many more creases in her shoe leather by now. Now she talks about her cable network, her accomplishments, her knowledge. On the very last page of every O magazine she tells us what she knows for sure.
    - **To embody your true and substantial *earned* authority –** *leadership, knowledge, devotion, training, lived experience* **– tell us what you know and do,** not how you used to be just like us (while implying we're disgusting). Instead of telling makeover stories, document the full scope of your lineage and excellence. This is especially important for women and marginalized peoples because mainstream cultural narratives presume our incompetence. Resisting that assumption is how we push back and claim the space we're often systematically denied.

In other words: check your About page and the About pages of the people to whom you give your attention and money. Check the stories you tell in your sale funnels and the stories "authorities" are telling you when you're buying from them.

When we know better, we do better.

Jeff Walker's launch formula is nearly ubiquitous in online marketing, and when it is adopted without alteration, it's a business model premised on constructing the appearance of authority (rather than substantive leadership) to automatically and unconsciously trigger obedience in the form of sales. This has a personal and social cost for consumers. It can disadvantage us, materially, and habituate us in obeying authority even when it is only loosely signaled. That's a social problem because it reinforces the disempowering and authoritarian dynamics that fuel oppression and constrain our lives.

And no, we're not having it. Not any more.

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Because we are the culture makers.

About the author



I'm Kelly Diels. I'm a writer and a feminist educator and I working with women leaders on their power and culture-making. I'm currently writing a book called We Are The Culture Makers -- and if you'd like to get advance looks at the chapters and research, please subscribe to receive my Sunday Love Letter(and thank you). PS I love Instagram. Join me there?