

Predatory Marketing Practices

What they are! How they work! Why they harm us all. And, why they are- thankfully enough- obsolete.

by Bud Stratford

Introduction

Ever since I wrote that series of essays on "The IASC Blank Blunder", I've pretty much become The Point Guy for everyone with an axe to grind against the skateboard industry. Any time any company does anything at all that even *whiffs* of being slightly unethical or dubious... out come about six zillion whistleblowers, all running up to me, asking me to write an essay about this or that. Which does get a wee bit tiring, I'll admit. It definitely keeps me very, very busy these days. But, on the other hand, it sort of makes my job a lot easier, too. At least, there's always someone telling me who to look at, and what to look for. Which saves me a lot of time investigating this sort of crap.

It also could serve as a great word of warning to The Industry, in general. The moral? Dudes. You're being watched- and, watched **hard**. I'm not sure I'd be trying to get away with too much, if I were you. So, there ya go. You've been warned.

Anyway. This week, I recieved a call, from one of my many, many "inside sources", about some very dubious and questionable business practices within one of our Great Skateboard Empires. Now, the only suprising thing about all of this is that, I wasn't particularly suprising by this at all. Like, whoa- a skateboard company is employing dubious business practices? You're seriously joking, right? [*Yawn*]. You see where I'm going with this, guys? "So what? Like, what's the news, here, buddy...?"

Call me jaded- but, in this line of work I'm in, you realize mighty fast that, shit just sucks, sometimes. Indeed, sometimes, you're just overwhelmed by how much shit sucks, and how sucky that shit can get. But, I'll digress. I have an essay to finish, here. So, let's get to it, already.

This essay is going to be about a very common problem that is emerging in our industry, today. I'm deciding to call them what they truly are- and, that would be, "Predatory Marketing Practices". I'm sure that, somewhere, there's a college-level marketing book that calls them something far more elaborate and elegant. But, thankfully, I left those stupid books behind when I left college back in '92,

and I haven't looked back one day since.

Predatory Marketing Practices Defined

Predatory Marketing Practices (PMP's, from here on out), in my world, would mean any activity that is instigated- usually, by the larger manufacturers in this industry- to either tangibly harm, or eliminate entirely, their smaller competitors. There's a very good reason why it works for Big Companies, and against Smaller Companies. It's because the Big Companies generally have the resources to make them happen, and utilize them effectively, while the Smaller Companies usually don't.

Now, are PMP's illegal? Sometimes. But, not always. Indeed, some of them are seen by even the biggest pessimists in the universe (which would include me, if you didn't know that already) of being completely normal and acceptable. At their very worst, they might break such statutes as antitrust laws, for example. You might infer that Microsoft utilized a few PMP's against their competitors here and there, which led to the governmental crackdown we've all heard about. Other times, PMP's are quite legal- but, debatably unethical. Either way, their purposes are usually quite similar: To manipulate the marketplace to a company's advantage. Usually, to the disadvantage of distributors, retailers, and us- the consumers.

None of this is particularly new, nor is it surprising. Very generally speaking, most companies are formed to cultivate profits. Which is code for, "making money". An abundance of successes towards this base goal tends to bring with them, some measure of power and influence. Naturally, power and influence are also extremely desirable goals- and, can even be beneficial to a market, when utilized benevolently. For example, advancing goals that promote a greater good. Building more, and better skateparks. Promoting skateboarding to a larger audience. Mentorship programs that bring kids into the sphere of our industry. Giving the undeprivileged the gift of skateboards, and as a direct result, the gift of skateboarding. All solid examples of very good, and clearly noble causes. All the sorts of things that having money, power, and influence can advance.

Once a company realizes power and influence, however, they could just as easily choose to use these things for their own good- especially, to someone else's detriment. Examples might include consolidating power to oppress competition, or advancing self-serving agendas that bring real harm to the marketplace, and to the consumer. Maybe they decide to just use money, power, and influence to chase down even more money, power, and influence. Regardless of how they use it, the last thing companies like doing is **losing** money, power, and influence. So, they typically don't. Or, rather, they do everything they can to keep their money, power, and influence intact. And, it usually works- until, the marketplace strips it away from them. At the end of the day, the customer is always right. It's a universal truth. Well, what happens if the

customer decides that- even with all of your money, power, and influence- you still suck? Well, then, you just suck. And, no amount of money, power, or influence is gonna stop you from sucking, once the market starts thinking that it's true.

A Short History

This actually happened, of course, within skateboarding, in the late 1980's, and early 1990's. The '80s were a huge growth era within skateboarding. Empires were built- and, once built, efforts were clearly taken to cement the status quo, and keep the profits parkway nicely paved. Bethemoths like Powell-Peralta, Santa Cruz, Independent, Vision, and Tracker ruled the marketplace. They held a firm grasp on production and distribution, making it exceedingly difficult for upstarts to gain a toehold. Indeed, in this era, any company that wanted to become a player almost had to- by default- align themselves with one of "The Big 5". Sims and Schmitt Stix found homes at Vision; Skip Engblom's nascent Santa Monica Airlines, and John Lucero's Lucero Ltd. ultimately aligned with Santa Cruz; A-1 Meats, Lester Kasai's House of Kasai, and (to a lesser degree) Blockhead all aligned with Tracker (which also produced their own brand of decks, as well); and, Independent's financial returns allowed two of their founding fathers the means to plant the seeds for Thunder, Spitfire- and, some time later, Deluxe Distribution. Of course, other smaller, independent companies did exist- Zorlac and Airbourne spring to mind- but, none seemed to thrive quite as well as those planted squarely under The Big 5's umbrella. Now, am I saying that *all* of these companies were *bad*, merely for the heinous crime of being *big*? Oh, no way. Indeed, many of us still love, and embrace, some of these very same companies today. Others, are no longer with us. Here's why.

In 1988, and 1989, all hell broke loose, and the proverbial shit finally began to hit the fan. First, Steve Rocco was abruptly fired from the Sims/Brad Dorfman empire. With nothing to do, and no place to go, Steve went on (as we all know) to form SMA World Industries. Likewise, when Paul Schmitt of Schmitt Stix found his enthusiasm for existing under the same Brad Dorfman/Vision umbrella lacking, he too broke free, in order to set up PS Stix (the woodshop), New Deal (the brand), and Giant Distribution (the distribution arm). With these two defections, many more ensued, and The Big 5 immediately began losing power, influence- and, of course, money- as more and more people followed suit, and defected from The Big 5 en masse. Naturally, this isn't exactly what The Big 5 had in mind. However, it clearly shows that, even with a superabundance of money, power, and influence at hand... the reality still was that, noone really gave a toss *what* The Big 5 wanted. It just so happened that, *everyone else* ended up wanting *something* else. So, they went out, and got what they wanted. And, what they wanted wasn't what The Big 5 were sellin'. The Big 5 all suffered (to some greater or lesser degree), and The Small 500 came in to fill the void. They offered a whole slew of new choices, and everyone went on their happy ways once again.

Skateboarding- before, and since- has continually ebbed and flowed between periods of relative expansion and consolidation. It seems to just be the natural order of things- and, these ebbs and flows tend to follow periods of relative prosperity and/or despair. We can look at almost any industry player today, and see these naturally occurring variances within the sands of skateboarding's past. Tod Swank- just to name one single, rather random example- began his professional career at Sims (under Vision= consolidation), before defecting to the much smaller and "less corporate" Skull Skates (expansion). From there, he formed a new company called "The Foundation" under Rocco's tutelage (consolidation), before breaking away from Rocco's sphere of influence, and taking Foundation independent (expansion). Once he was free of the World Industries empire, he began building an empire anew, bringing in Ed Templeton's Toy Machine (previously aligned with Brad Dorfman's Vision= consolidation again), naming the umbrella enterprise "Tum Yeto", and ultimately spawning- and, spinning off- a plethora of brands, including Bandwagon, Poot!, Choes, Pig Wheels, Hollywood, Landspeed, Ruckus, Dekline... and Jamie Thomas' American Zero (today, "Zero")- who, true to the script, broke free of Tum Yeto, bringing the whole process full circle (expansion), and starting the entire process all over again.

The general order of things seems to dictate that, when consolidation is the rule of the day, PMP's tend to run more rampant. When expansion is in the air, PMP's lose their effectiveness- because, there are simply too many players to form a cohesive circle of influence. Well, today, it's 2007. The "gravy days" of Tony Hawk, Bam Margera, and the X-Games seem to be closing to a certain end. As, all things eventually do. Looking ahead, then... and most, if not all industry analysts would agree with this... we can see that the time is ripe for consolidation to rear it's head once more.

The immediate future, then, is going to be a time of declining markets, power and influence brokering, and chasing down whatever market share might remain for the taking. Money is going to be in short supply. And, checking the balance sheets of the industry players, we can see that, right now, some companies have it- and, some don't. Those that don't, will need to find some, in order to survive. Those that do, are surely going to use their massed money, power, and influence to make sure that **they** get to the pot **first**.

Predatory Marketing Practices, here we come.

The Players, and What They Want

In the 1980's, the players were as follows:

- **The Big Manufacturers.** These are the guys that already have the money, power, and influence. Their basic goals would be, in a perfect world, to produce

the lowest cost product as possible, and sell it for the most disgusting profits imaginable. These tend to be the guys that chase down market share, at their competitor's expense. These are the guys that we'll see either *using* PMP's to good effect (not likely)- or, *attempting* to use PMP's to good effect (most definitely). Why it's "not likely" to actually *work* this time around, is something that I'll explain in just a couple of minutes.

Ideally, from these guys' points of view, nothing would be better in life than to control 100% of the marketplace. I mean, if we make mad money on **only** controlling 50% of the marketplace- well then, 60%, even 70% would be even **better**- right?! Well, of course, controlling 100% of any given market creates a monopoly. Then, the Government launches investigations, bitch-slaps the Big Manufacturer, and breaks things back down into a competitive market. So, the trick is to control enough of the market that they're The Big Kahunas on the block, while staying just outside of the bitch-slapping zone. In any rate, their job is to try to limit choice- as much as possible- to one company, and one company only: Theirs.

- **The Small Manufacturers.** These are the little guys that just wanna stay afloat. Their basic goals are usually just to survive, and eak out an existence. In a perfect world, they might evolve into mid-sized brands- a few might even become The Big Manufacturers of tomorrow. These tend to be the guys that kick the shins of The Big Manufacturers whenever they can- using really creative ideas, a quick wit, and a little bit of foresight and vision, because they *have* to substitute *something* for the money that they just don't have. But, no matter what their strengths may be, they still aren't always entirely successful at doing hurting the Biggies to any real affect. Because, at the end of the day, money still rules all.

These are the guys that are usually pretty happy, if they're only allowed to keep existing on the little bit of market share that The Big Kahunas cede, to avoid their bitch slapping. Unfortunately, there's an awful lot of these guys- and, they sometimes eat up too much than their fair share. This is when The Big Kahunas go about weeding these guys out. In any rate, their job is to try to maintain choice, as much as possible, by existing in the marketplace, and competing with The Big Kahunas.

- **The Customers.** That's us. We have the money that The Manufacturers all want. Our basic goals, in a perfect world, are to buy the highest cost stuff, as cheaply as we can. We are the market share that everyone's chasing around at their own expense. Clearly: Our interests run completely contrary to The Big Manufacturers. We're the ones that want as many choices as we can find. We're the ones that free trade and competition benefit the most. Because, from free trade and competition, we also get more attention, more innovative products, and [usually] those lower prices.

- **The Skate Shops.** As you can clearly see, these guys are stuck right in the

middle of everyone. The Big Manufacturers want to monopolize The Skate Shops, demand higher prices, and stifle competition. But, The Smaller Companies and The Customers want the exact opposite. The Skate Shop's job is to make everyone happy... if, and when, they can. Basically, these are the guys getting The Big Squeeze between everyone else's competing interests. Which, frankly, must kinda suck.

So. Let's take a quick second to look at the more common PMP's, how they work, and why they benefit Big Manufacturers, shall we...?

The Predatory Marketing Practices Broken Down

Here's my short spotlight on the more common, and most damaging PMP's. Now, let me reiterate something, here: None of these are illegal. Not all of these are even unethical. Indeed, some of these are just normal, ho-hum ways of doing normal, ho-hum business. But, it's the combination of them- and, their overzealous use- that can create more than a few problems, for more than a few people. That is what I can see coming over the horizon. It's not because I'm a genius. It's just because, that's what people are calling me about these days. Here they are:

Exclusives

Exclusives are basically incentives, tossed toward skate shops, in order to win influence with them.

"Hey, Mr Skate Shop!", Big Manufacturer says. "We've been thinking, and we've decided that we're going to be extra swell to you, and your business, and give you an exclusive on our uber-popular and profitable product!"

Mr. Skate Shop says, "Killer!". Everyone, of course, likes getting preferential treatment. Especially when there's money to be made, right? Right.

"Of course, you'll have to do something for us. We scratched your back, right...?"

Uh-oh. That doesn't sound cool. "What?"

"Well, you see, it's like this. **If** we give you the exclusive on our uber-popular and profitable product, then, **we're** going to expect that **you** give **us** proper exposure in your store". Which is usually code for, "all of it".

Which, furthermore, is usually code for, "Please, rid your store of some of our competitor's products, okey-dokey?"

Now, this can't be an easy decision. On one hand, uber-popular and profitable stuff is always great for the bottom line. On the other hand, your customers might not take too kindly to a very limited selection in your store. Maybe, we outta think about this for a while? But, just don't wait too long. Because, next comes:

Exclusion

Which is, the opposite of Exclusives. Of course, Big Manufacturing doesn't have a name for this. I just made one up. Here's how this one works:

"Hey, Mr Skate Shop!", Big Manufacturer says. "We haven't heard from you on the exclusive deal we offered you! What's up?"

Well, it's not the easiest decision, y'know...

"Oh, bummer, dude! Here, we're gonna do you a huge favor, and make it hella easier. If you don't take our offer, we'll just offer it to the Skate Shop down the street! Then, **they'll** have the exclusive on our uber-popular and profitable product, and **you'll** get stuck with the Small Peanuts companies. How's that sound?!"

I dunno. Maybe, pretty shitty?

"Hey, man, you're looking at this all wrong, dude. We're only tryin' to help you out, bro...."

Yeah. I can tell. Thanks...

Pricing and Incentives

While it's obviously not illegal, nor particularly unethical to offer some sweet pricing and incentives to our skate shop buddies... sometimes, their actions sort of make you wish they were. Here's why:

"Hey, Mr Skate Shop!", Big Manufacturer says. Here we go, again. "We've got this hella sweet deal for you this week!"

This outta be good. What is it?

"Well, we have 12 new models from Mega Popular Pro coming out! *Aaaaaaaand!* We've *also* got 12 new models from Sorta Unknown, too! Wanna get some?! We've got some pretty sweet incentives on these...!"

Oh, rad. I'll take 12 of Mega Popular's models, 'cuz those will probably sell pretty good. How much are they this week...?

"Well, you see, that sorta *depends*..."

Oh. It does? On what, if I may ask...?

"Well, how about Sorta Unknown's models? You want some of those, right?! He's really comin' up, y'know!"

Who is this, again?

"Sorta Unknown! You know! That dude that had a Check Me Interview 15 years ago, then faded into obscurity? He's coming back up hard, bro! Our other Sorta Unknown just won the Southern Hemisphere Arid Desert Super Smallish Bro Bowl Bash, too. He's soooo gonna blow up, someday..."

Oh. Didn't know that.

"So, you want some of Sorta Unknown's models, right?!"

Not really, actually.

"Oh, bummer dude. Well, we can't offer you our *brand new* pricing incentives, then..."

So, again, the Big Manufacturers are asking the skate shop to make yet

another, pathetically difficult decision. Do I pay higher prices to get the stuff that will actually sell through? That means, weaker margins. Or, do I "go deeper" with this line, and get some better prices, but face the possibility that *Sorta Unknown* might not sell jack shit in my shop? That means, sitting on money wrapped up in dead stock. It's almost like you're damned if you do, damned if you don't...

The Buyout

This one is pretty recent. This one is pretty new. I'd never even heard of this one until recently. But, it's pretty ballsy, nonetheless. I'm calling it "The Buyout".

"Hey, Mr Skate Shop!", Big Manufacturer says. Oh, no. "Nice place you have here!"

Thanks.

"You know, we'd really loooove to get our product into your store!"

I betcha you would.

"Hey, we've got some really good incentives for ya! Wanna hear about 'em?!"

Wish me luck on this one, readers. I have a feeling I'm gonna need it.

"Well, you see- all this stuff you're selling here? It's old. It's washed up, brah! You're never gonna sell this garbage."

It seems to be selling just fine by me.

"Oh, no way! Our stuff could sell way better than this crud. Hey! Have we got a *deal* for you!"

Here goes that luck.

"What we'll do is, this. Ready?! We'll just *buy up* all of this stock, right? Then, we're gonna be hella tight, and happily replace it with more of our stuff! And, you can sell oodles of our stuff, instead!"

Terms

I'm not so happy about this buyout idea, because my customers really sorta like a wide selection and all. Turns out, this is a good time for Big Manufacturers to really toss their weight around with "terms".

"Terms" are basically, when a skate shop buys on credit. They can buy the stock today- but, they don't have to pay for it 30, 60, or 90 days later. Not a lot of skate shops are even offered terms, these days- although, it'd surely help them out a whole bunch. It's one of those really big perks that Big Manufacturers seem to save for when truly drastic, self-serving needs arise. Happily for Big Manufacturers, it's not a perk that Small Manufacturers can offer very often- if, at all. So, Big Manufacturers sort of have the "exclusive" on this one! How righteous, huh?! Yeah. Totally.

"Hey, Mr Skate Shop!", Big Manufacturer says.

I'm starting to get a little tired of this, to tell you the truth. *Now*, what the hell is it?!

"You didn't take us up on our 'buyout' offer. What's up?!"

Well, you see, my customers sorta like selection and all....

"Pffft, whatever dude! We offer the best selection around, bro!"

Yeah. A whole ton of one brand. Great selection, there, doofus....

"Hey, one brand's all you really need, broham! Especially since we're offering 180 day terms this week, with your buyout!"

Huh?! You're kidding, right? That's, like, 6 months. Most dudes won't even give me 30 days.

"Oh, no way, dude! That's totally bogus! Well, that just goes to show how cool we are! So, buy up all you want! We won't even send you a bill until you've sold all of our stuff, and made us... *cough*... uhh, we mean, made *yourself* a bunch of profits!"

I see. What if it doesn't sell?

"Oh, bro, no worries! It'll sell! We're huge! But, if you're really *worried*, it's totally OK. Even if it doesn't sell, you can go right on ahead, and pay the bill, anyway..."

Media Manipulation

Oh, I almost forgot. This sort of jive doesn't happen with just skate shops. It happens with the media, too.

You see, in your most recent skate magazine? Those 15 pages of ads for Big Manufacturer? Big Manufacturer paid Big Money to the magazine to run those ads. Like, a lot of Big Money. Heaps of it. The media, of course, can always use more money to cover contests, local scenes, travel about, and generally report on the state of things within skateboarding. Now, the media owes the Big Manufacturer for their kindness in financing such wonderful things. And, they owe them big.

"Hey, Mr. Magazine Editor!", Big Manufacturer says.

Yeah?

"Hey, how'd you like our 15 ads this month?! You really made a killing on those, eh? Cash money in your pocket, foo!"

Yeah, man. Thanks a million.

"Hey, man, no worries. I'm just calling to let you know that we expect 3 stories a month about our team, our products, and how cool we are, in your mag!"

Oh. Ummm, sorry? I'm the media, y'know? I sort of have to be fair and impartial and stuff. It's kinda my job and all.

"Pshaw! 'Fair and Impartial' is for wusses, bro! Besides, we did take out a lot of ad space! We gave you a lot of money for that, if you'll remember. The check cleared and stuff, right?!"

Yeah. It did. Thanks.

"Cool! See? The *least* you could do is tell everyone how bitchin' and cool we are..."

Well, okay. But, there's other cool people, too...

"Yeah, *sure* there are, bro! Great fellows, too. Whatever... but, hey! Did *they* take out 15 pages of ads this month?!"

Uhhh, no. They took out one page, actually...

"See, bro?! That's no sign of *commitment*, dude! You don't wanna *cover* those guys, do ya?! Hey, *we're* the cool guys, here! *We totally* support a fair and impartial media! The *least* you could do is support us back, y'know what we mean...?!"

"Oh, yeah: Couldya make our team guys out to be heroes, while you're at it....?" Sure, man. No problem...

Lawsuits

I'd almost have to kick myself, if I left this one out. Granted, it's not exactly a "marketing tool", per se. But, it can be a pretty damned useful tool that Big Manufacturers can use to intimidate Small Manufacturers. Maybe even, bankrupt them out of business. And, you and I both know that, the law isn't always a black and white issue of who happens to be wrong, and who happens to be right. Oftentimes, the law favors the Big Manufacturers that have the Big Money, to pay Big Lawyers, to find the laws that "just so happen" to serve their agendas. No, seriously. This kind of stuff really happens.

"Hello, there. Am I speaking to Mr. Small Company owner?"

Yes, you are! How may I help you today?

"This is Big Lawyer, here. Nice to meet you..."

Uh-oh. This is gonna suck.

"I'm just calling to give you a friendly heads-up that Big Manufacturer is suing you."

Oh, shit. What did I do?!

"Well, it's no big deal, really. It's just about your latest ad. You know the one? Where you called Big Manufacturer 'The Biggest Bunch Of Assholes In The World'?"

Yeah? So what?

"Well, Big Manufacturer owns the registered trademark to the phrase 'The Biggest Bunch Of Assholes In The World'. So, they really have no choice but to sue you for trademark infringement, defamation of character, slander, libel, and....."

Oh, they don't?

"Well, we can't just have all of our competitors referring to us as 'The Biggest Bunch Of Assholes In The World', now can we?"

I guess not.

"Of course, if you don't want to spend all of your money fighting over the details of it in court, you could always opt to spend all of your money settling this little matter out of court, instead..."

The history of skateboarding business is chock full of these sorts of things. It's all pretty commonplace, really. In fact, these things happen so much, and so often, that most of it just keeps on rolling along, with hardly a blip on anyone's radar. Really, noone seems to know that these things even happen, sometimes.

And, if they do know- apparently, they don't care enough to shine light on the situation. Maybe, everyone's just too damned afraid of Big Manufacturing to say much about it. Or, maybe, noone really gives a toss.

But, thankfully, all of that's beginning to change. Which brings us to "The Wild Card" in this huge mess.

The Wild Card

Sometime in the mid 1990's, Vice President Al Gore apparently "invented" this great thing called The Internet. I only remember it, because it was so widely covered in the mainstream media. And, the world- the skateboard industry, included- has never been the same since. Flippin' bumner for Big Manufacturing, that's fersure.

The Internet, above all else, is "The Great Leveler Of The Playing Field". The Internet doesn't stifle anyone; in fact, it gives everyone a voice. Even total kooks like me can write a stupid essay, get it published, and get widely read, thanks to the internet. It's also proven itself to be a hella convenient place to do your shopping, which has created it's very own set winners and losers. In the realm of the skateboard industry, we're beginning to see that, with the help of the internet, The Small Manufacturers and The Customers usually win, and The Big Manufacturers and The Skate Shops usually lose.

Now, remember up there, a few paragraphs ago? When I said that we're entering a period of consolidation? And, Big Manufacturers were more than likely to start using Predatory Marketing Practices, to their own advantage? But then, I stated that it probably wasn't gonna work this time around? Well, The Internet is why I said that. The Internet has forever changed the rules of engagement between the Manufacturers, The Shops, and The Customers. Indeed, the internet essentially makes PMP's all but obsolete. And, the reasons are pretty simple.

On the internet, there are no exclusives. Nor, is there any exclusion. The Internet is open, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks and 365 days a year, to anyone and everyone. Because of the intense competition that the internet fosters, pricing tends to stay low- with, or without the advantages of pricing incentives or favorable terms. Buyouts would be pretty hard to pull off on the internet, because there's no way in hell you're ever gonna buy out 50,000 online skate shops. And, even if you could, all that would happen is that another 100,000 online skate shops would pop up to take their places. In the same manner, there's just no controlling a damned thing that the online media has to say about you- mostly because, very few of them even have advertiser support. But, even the few that do have advertisers don't have 15 pages of ads to sell you, because there's no *paper* on the *internet* to *sell*, goofball. Because there's no paper to print, there's also far fewer expenses, which means that the web media

may *like* having your support- but, they sure as hell don't *need* it to stay in business. And, lastly: If it's being written on the internet, it's probably newsworthy. Or, it's just one guy's opinion. The lines of libel, slander, and defamation get awfully fuzzy in the world of the World Wide Web. On the internet, fully protected and unfettered free speech still seems to reign supreme, courtesy of our friend, the First Amendment. And, with a distinct lack of legal precedents to the contrary, it looks like this will be the case well into the foreseeable future.

Big Manufacturing and Skate Shops ask: "So, *What* are We to *Do*...?!"

Considering all of this in it's entirety, we can all see the obvious course of action to take. If you happen to be in the "winners" category, your best option is simply to don't worry, and be happy. Because, you're already a winner, broham. Feels good, don't it?! Sure does to me.

But, if you're in the "losers" bracket, your choices are very stark, and very limited. And, to a very large degree, your decisions have already been made for you. If you're a skate shop, you've basically been pushed into a position where anything that allows the internet a competitive advantage has to be adressed- and, probably adressed immediately. And, those advantages are obviously freedom of choice, a wide variety of available products, and competitive pricing. Of course, the internet has some very big flaws, as well. The internet doesn't do personalized service particularly well. Contributing and supporting local scenes is totally outside the internet's job description. It's awfully hard to even hold a conversation on the internet about skateboarding, because the last time I checked, neither my laptop, nor my PC, actually talk. You can't really invite your buddies to meet you at your internet service provider for a quick session. So, in order to succeed in this new Wild Card world of ours, you basically have to do everything the net can't do very well, while doing everything that it can.

Of course, what the internet does best is putting the Big Manufacturers in their place. The internet just doesn't fall for Predatory Marketing Practices. The internet is completely unaffected by Predatory Marketing Practices. In fact, the internet resists Predatory Marketing Practices. So, understanding that, I'd suggest that: So should you, Mr. Shop Owner.

Where would Big Manufacturers be, without a whole bunch of someones out their to buy, sell, advocate, and promote their products...? Where would their Big Companies be without some very real, and very big support from Us...? Or, let's look at it another way. If these "Big Manufacturers" that *claim* to be supporting you *really* supported you... then, wouldn't they be happily *offering* you those favorable exclusives, prices, and terms *without* attaching strings to every bleedin' "benevolent" thing that they do?! Is it *really* "benevolent support" if everything that they do to help you has it's price, and ends up hurting you, and your business, at the end of the day...?

As for the Big Manufacturers, themselves... well, at the end of the analysis, the only rational conclusion that I could ever come to is that, Big Manufacturing shouldn't even attempt to perpetuate these sorts of activities in the future. Because, they just can't. It's not going to work. It's not going to do themselves the least bit of good. And, it's only going to ultimately enable and empower their competitors, while ultimately turning the court of public opinion, and the market, against them.

It's just like I said in the second paragraph of my essay: Dudes. You're being watched- and, watched **hard**. So, there ya go.

You've been warned.