

## Strange Attractors<sup>®</sup>

By Kathy Ellis, The Business Lab Marketing Coach

Think of your business environment or industry as a system. Now imagine that you can draw a line around this system. You, your company, your clients, your competitors, are all found inside this border — it is your business space (in scientific terms, it would be called the state space). Behaviors within your business space tend to contract in certain areas. This contraction is called the attractor. Attractors have a way of pulling all those elements nearby right to them. Understanding attractors and being able to identify and create them in your business space can be a huge marketing advantage and will help improve your business.

We can view attractors at work real time by reviewing the US vs. Iraq situation. If you draw a line around America, you can easily see two distinct behaviors converging (there are more, but for this purpose we will keep it simple) — those in support of the US military action in Iraq and those opposed to it. If you had a solution to sell to one of these two groups, it would be fairly easy to define your attractor — your marketing message. To get to those supporting the action, you would evoke images of heroes, good vs. evil, Camelot, saviors, and purity. To get to those opposing the action, you would evoke images of Vietnam, Big Brother, darkness, evil, and smothering.

Another example of attractors can be seen in the department store/super store space. Here you could draw a circle around stores such as WalMart, Target, Foleys, and Nordstroms. When customers decide they want to buy a face cleanser, their buying behavior converges at certain areas: lowest price possible, moderate price but some image, mainstream image, and total image regardless of cost. Each of these stores has done an excellent job of creating the attractor to match the possible buying behavior.

So, how can you create your own strange attractor?

**Understanding what Strange Attractors are:** In marketing, strange attractors are inextricably associated with behavior. That's sort of a good news/bad news situation. Strange attractors are not something newly invented. They come from what is already out there — attractors are emergent. An attractor emerges because it has struck a chord; it has resonated with "something" out there in your business space: an emotion, a belief, a desire, a fear, an aspiration.

**To find an attractor, go to the edge:** Attractors are easy to spot in situations of adaptive challenge, so you can get a good sense of what is "out there" by going to the edge — finding the places of adaptive challenge. Unfortunately, going to the edge isn't as easy as just deciding to go. The edge is where there is a lot of action: choices are being made and activity and movement is happening. The edge is really less of a place and more of a feeling, but you can find that feeling in several different ways.

With your team, identify your business state. Draw a circle around this state and create the boundaries. Then, embark on an intense brainstorming session about this state. Invite everyone in your company to participate. You may also want to include others outside your company because getting a diverse group involved is a tremendous

benefit. (Note: if possible, include trusted suppliers and clients to participate in your brainstorming session.) Remind everyone that since this is brainstorming, all ideas are welcome and as such, criticism or negativity will only hinder your progress. See how "in touch" you can get with your business system. Ask and answer the following questions:

- Can you feel any tensions in the marketplace? If so, what are these tensions?
- What trends or developments has anyone seen, felt, or slightly noticed over the past several months? Ask for anything anyone has noticed — no matter how small or insignificant they may think it is.
- What are your instincts telling you about your business space? What are your clients feeling and experiencing?
- Create scenarios and have the group answer questions about the scenario, i.e., What will we be doing in this business state in the year 2015? What does it look, feel, and sound like? Imagine it is the year 2015, what is my initial reaction to \_\_\_ (list out the key words, technologies, and systems relevant to your industry today).

Take all the information and insight you learned at the brainstorming session and review it. See what your own instincts tell you about these insights and define the edge. Note where the tensions are, where the activity is, where the emotions run the highest. This is where the next behavior will most likely converge. This is where you will want to position your solution.

**Weave your attractor into your own story:** With your new understanding of the behavior convergence you feel will occur, sketch out the future for your own team as well as your marketing message. It doesn't need to be a tightly defined, exact plan. In fact, that will only stifle the emergent nature of the attractor. If you've honed in on the "something out there," the sketch will be sufficient to foster the growth of your attractor. Weave this sketch, this conversation, this feeling into all of your marketing messages and above all, reinforce it with your team.

*Tip from The Business Lab:* Because an attractor is closely tied with behaviors, you can think of them as a state of temporary permanence. This means that you will need to stay in tune with your business system at all times. It is a good idea to repeat the above exercises with your team (adding new and diverse members as often as possible) on a regular basis, refining as you go.

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**More Information?** If you would like to learn more about this important topic or would like to receive our FREE Service Ideas Booklet, please send an E-mail to [kathy@thebusinesslab.com](mailto:kathy@thebusinesslab.com), visit our Web site at [www.thebusinesslab.com](http://www.thebusinesslab.com), or fax a note on your letterhead to 281-374-0569.

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