Being Against Something - and Your Job Search

By *Harrison Barnes*

When I was in college, I decided to start an anti-drug and alcohol-abuse organization. I affiliated with a giant group called BACCHUS (Better Alcohol Consciousness Concerning the Health of University Students), and one year I got funding in the amount of nearly $200,000 from the University of Chicago to bring Bill Bennett (the former "Drug Czar") to speak to the students. In fact, I made such a presentation to the student counsel one year that they gave me over 35% of the student activities budget to bring in famous speakers and others, to help fight drugs and alcohol on campus.

The second I got all this funding, people started to come out of the woodwork. One faculty member of the school sought me out one day and told me that he used to be a heroin addict and wanted me to help with his organization. A psychologist with the school seemed very angry with me because I had gotten all this funding, while he himself had spent years trying to get funding from the school and had not succeeded. He called me into his office one day and told me I should not be using the money to bring in famous speakers and that instead I should do various other things with it.

One day I got a call from someone at the University of Chicago Hospital, who asked me to come over for a meeting. I got there and was met by two psychiatrists: "Let's talk about you personally and not this organization. Why would you want to start this organization? What are you hoping to achieve?" They looked at me very suspiciously. I got up and left the meeting because they were clearly not trying to help the organization.

A few days after this meeting, one of my teachers approached me and told me that the school was very unhappy that I was trying to raise awareness about drugs and alcohol problems because it would scare away potential students and their parents. She told me several higher-ups had asked her to persuade me to cool it, but that she had refused to participate in the *cover up.* By launching this organization, I attracted a lot of attention from the school and I was not sure if it was good or not.

I did not share it with the school, but the reason I was so interested in this pursuit was that I had seen so many kids I grew up with become complete burnouts, and literally destroy their lives by abusing drugs and alcohol. I also decided at some point that it was important that I stand for something. You need to stand for something in your life. The world will define you based on what you are against and what you stand for--more than anything else. My entire life I have always found something to stand for and be against.

I had hung out with the wrong crowd in high school for the most part. Almost all of my friends liked to spend their weekends drinking and smoking pot. In fact, when they all got fake IDs at the age of 16, many of them went to a bar for drinks during lunchtime every day.

By the time I was 17 years old or so, some of the kids in this group were routinely beating up their girlfriends. I could not believe one summer night when I went to visit one guy I knew. He slapped his girlfriend in front of me and screamed something like: "Shut up you stupid bitch! What did I tell you about talking back!?"

A few guys I knew turned into such stoners they had a difficult time speaking complete sentences. I went with a group of them to see a Grateful Dead show once and was horrified when one of the guys was so affected by whatever drug he was on--that he no longer could see his own hand. I actually left that particular concert, which was held at the University of Michigan, and I drove home, completely *weirded out* by the entire episode. What upset me the most was that there were many parents who appeared to have dropped acid, and they had brought their infants and toddlers to the show with them. This was not a fun, happy, or pleasant experience for me at all.

I should probably have hung out with the kids who liked to study, as I did, but they were boring as far as I was concerned. I could probably have also hung out with the athlete kids, but I found them uninteresting as well. The kids who used drugs and alcohol always had one crazy thing or another going on and it was way more entertaining than spending time with the other kids who studied or were into athletics. In addition, I had grown up in a single parent household with a mother who loved to party with her friends, smoking pot and drinking into all hours of the morning. So in a sense, I understood the drug and alcohol culture better and felt more comfortable with it.

I launched my antidrug and alcohol abuse organization at the student activities night, which the University of Chicago held the first week of school. I had ordered a terrifying video online of the dangers of drunk driving. I hooked up a VCR to a large television in the student commons where we had set up a recruiting table. The video was way over the top, depicting grotesque accident scenes and other terrifying scenarios. There was also an announcer who was very somber and said things like:

[pullquote]"The body was found without a head eleven feet from the car. Six weeks later a dog was found chewing what remained of the head in a playground, traumatizing hundreds of school children. It was just another example of the dangers of drinking and baring..."[/pullquote]

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A large crowd formed around the video and it was having an unintended effect of kids screaming things like "Oh man!! Look at that one!" and laughing instead of being freaked out and discouraged, as I had hoped they would be.

I had written a long brochure for the organization and had it printed and handed out that day to the entire student body. We also took part of our organization down to the annual BACCHUS conference at Quincy College in rural Illinois. We took an 8 hour drive out there and when we arrived we discovered that the BACCHUS organization had very distinct religious

overtones.

I will never forget when we pulled up to the college and we rolled down our window to a group of girls and asked them where the BACCHUS conference was. They made "Ls" with their fingers and shouted "Losers," then fell down to the ground laughing. When we got to the conference we discovered that it was going to be being held inside a nunnery. We were led into the nunnery to sleep and in the morning were awoken by church organs. During the meeting, the kids all talked about preventing alcohol and drug abuse, all with religious motivations and crusade-like overtones. It was not the crowd for me and not something I was very interested in being a part of.

What launching this organization taught me quite early on was that you are defined even more by what you are against than what you stand for. I was against people abusing drugs and alcohol and everyone knew it. When my fraternity brothers were smoking pot, they would often do it outside my room to be funny. A lot of the faculty of the school automatically knew who I was in the school just because of my organization. When you are against something, this is often what first gets people's attention.

When I applied to jobs after college, I got all jobs with conservative organizations. (The Justice Department was one.) I got into the law schools that were more conservative (Virginia), and my first summer job was with a conservative law firm. My first job out of law school was with a conservative Republican Federal Judge. I always did much better in interviews and jobs with conservative organizations. I am confident that a lot of the people who hired me were under the mistaken impression that I was a "bible thumper," since I had founded this anti-drug and alcohol organization, as my résumé clearly stated. Broadcasting the things we are against can often be very effective in getting us jobs for like-minded employers.

It is generally not the things that you stand *for* or support that make people take notice of you; instead it is what you are *against* that others notice the most. Ralph Nader, for example, became famous not simply because he believed in automotive safety. Rather he became famous because he attacked General Motors, which at the time was the largest car company in the world.

In the past few days, I have been very interested in two recent stories in particular, both about people who spoke out against something. The first story was about Carrie Prejean, who spoke out against gay marriage in response to a question during the 2009 Miss USA pageant. In response to a question by Perez Hilton, a pageant judge, about whether she believed same sex marriage should be legalized, Prejean responded:

Well I think it's great that Americans are able to choose one way or the other. We live in a land where you can choose same sex marriage or opposite marriage. You know what, in my country, in my family, I do believe that marriage should be between a man and a woman, no offense to anybody out there. But that's how I was raised and I believe that it should be between a man and a woman.

After she made this statement she was apparently heckled by various people after leaving the pageant. In addition, Hilton posted a video on his blog where he called the contestant a "dumb bitch" and stated that there had never been a worse answer in the history of the pageant. On ABC News Perez stated that Prejean lost the crown because of her answer and that "She gave an awful, awful answer that alienated so many people." He further stated, "There are various other ways she could have answered that question and still stayed true to herself without alienating millions of people."

What is so interesting to me is that Prejean was thrust into controversy simply due to what she was against and this became much more central to the story about her than anything else. Her personal feelings about gay marriage were what suddenly defined her, and she suddenly became the hot subject of media controversy.

The second story that caught my attention lately was the response of a New York Congressman, Rep. Peter King, to a representative introduced by a Texas Congresswoman, Re. Sheila Jackson Lee, to honor Michael Jackson after his death:

"Let's knock out the psychobabble," King said in the video, which was posted by his campaign. "He was a pervert, a child molester; he was a pedophile. And to be giving this much coverage to him, day in and day out, what does it say about us as a country? I just think we're too politically correct."

This statement as well has drawn a tremendous amount of criticism and publicity. It may also have serious negative repercussions on this person's career, just as the career of Prejean was negatively affected by her comments.

What does all of this have to do with your career? What my lessons with BACCHUS and watching events in the world have taught me is that people are most often defined by what they are against. When you take a stand against something, you will always attract much more attention for yourself than if you just stand on the sidelines.

I have always had strong feelings about how people who work for my companies should approach their jobs. This has alienated many people from me, but it has also allowed me to help many people with companies that locate and secure an incredible amount of jobs for people. I have strong feelings about the way that people should go about getting jobs and I am against many job boards and other types of employment services. I have views and methods that differ from how many people in the career business operate. While this has made me many enemies, it has also brought my companies and my clients much success. When you are against any cause, belief or way of doing things, you will always generate some enemies. However, at the same time when you really stand for something, you will also generate followers and people who are loyal. There is no better way to define yourself than by taking a stand against something rather than simply standing for something.

If you are against something, you will find that people who are of the same mindset will often come to your aid and support you as well. When you look at companies and various organizations, you will often find groups of like-minded people who are against this or that. There are real advantages to taking a stand against something and if you do it in the right place, it can be a tremendous help to you. You will find supporters and protectors. People will know who you are very quickly. There is also a risk involved in this, however; being against something can cost you your job if you are not cautious in your approach. Therefore it is possible, even advisable to come across as respectful of differing opinions from your own, while simultaneously taking a firm position in your convictions.

When you are marketing anything, it is generally more effective to be *against* rather than *for* something. If you are marketing yourself as against a particular practice, product or point of view, you will find that this will attract a certain audience.

When you are looking for a job, you are marketing yourself. Being against something and making this clear on your résumé is likely to make you stand out more than anything else you put in front of a prospective employer. It may just work in getting you the job you are after.

THE LESSON

You can better market yourself by taking a stand against something. Peoples' personal beliefs, including the things with which they do not agree, define who they are as people. Standing against something differentiates you from the crowd; when done in the correct manner, without disrespecting others' opinions, such a stance can help you land your dream job.