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Contact: Barbara Henricks

Cave Henricks Communications

(512) 301-8936 or barbara@cavehenricks.com

Kaila Nickel

(405) 285-7204 or kaila@cavehenricks.com

THE HIDDEN AGENDA: A Proven Way to Win Business and Create a Following

By Kevin Allen

“Kevin’s enjoyable and informative book reminds us all that to communicate well is to connect with people first.”

–**Rudy Giuliani**, former mayor of the City of New York

In an environment of fierce competition, where only the best companies are left standing and with starkly fewer employees, winning a new client or support for an idea has never been more difficult. But whether you are pitching your company, services, ideas, or simply trying to convince a friend to try a new restaurant, veteran adman Kevin Allen argues that success is contingent, almost exclusively, on your ability to tap into the unspoken emotional motivation of the person on the receiving end – their *Hidden Agenda*.

Allen has used his insight into the hidden wants, needs, and values of his clients throughout his brilliant career and notably won over MasterCard executives with his pitch for the globally famous “Priceless” campaign. In **THE HIDDEN AGENDA: A Proven Way to Win Business and Create a Following** (Bibliomotion; hardcover; April 17, 2012), Allen offers the blueprint to elucidating the not-so-obvious motivations and desires of a client.

Emphasizing receptivity over showmanship, listening over talking, and asking the right questions before making assumptions, he outlines how to tap into those motivations as well as our own natural empathy, and in effect, become as much *partner* as pitchman, capable of giving others what they need and creating a win-win exchange.

“At the end of the day,” says Allen, “behind *every* decision is an unspoken, visceral, emotional motivation. Tap that, and you win.”

Drawing from his own experience in pitching Nokia, Marriott, Johnson & Johnson and others, Allen highlights the key concepts that together form the “Allen Key” system:

- **Identify the *conceptual target*:** The conceptual target – a tool for identifying your audience in terms of its hidden agenda – is the crystallization of a community of individuals who share common human truths. It allows you to hone in on and speak to exactly what your audience cares about. In pitching the highly analytical, high-tech company Ericsson, Allen uncovered the company’s strong need to be appreciated for making a difference in the lives of people around the world, creating “Everyday Miracles,” as the campaign came to be called. By strategically drawing out in discussion *what your subject is really about*, the conceptual focus of an effective pitch becomes clear.
- **Tune into the *Hidden Agenda*:** Requiring emotional insight, human sensitivity and sharp listening skills, the search for the Hidden Agenda is, at its essence, a search for desire. At Johnson & Johnson, a century old company, Allen encountered resistance to younger people (such as himself) bringing new ideas and critiques to the table. Their conceptual target was clear: respect for the traditional ways of the company. From this, the Hidden Agenda of this company was teased out—a desire to proceed from not irreverent criticism, but respectful optimism. Allen developed what his team dubbed the “Possibility Agenda” ad campaign and won their business.
- **Take inventory of your *core* and connect it with your target:** Your core reflects the special abilities and assets you possess and how you add value for others. Uniformly proud of its superiority as an airline carrier while simultaneously hesitant to boast or appear aggressive in asserting this, the right approach for gaining Lufthansa as a client was hard to decipher. By knowing his own company’s core, its unique and defining attributes, Allen was able to connect with Lufthansa’s real essence—genuine excellence—and lead them to address concerns for truthfulness and modesty with a campaign featuring a slogan that simply stated, “*There’s no better way to fly.*”
- **Communicate your *credo*:** Your credo is your set of values; a belief system that drives your decisions and actions. What’s more, it’s what compels people to follow you. Clearly communicate that credo to forge a bond emphasizing your values and those of your audience. Marriott faced the challenge of defining itself in an overdeveloped hotel market with competitors like Hyatt and Westin wielding fancier architecture and up-market cachet. The key to staying in the game was connecting to its real values and presenting that effectively to the world. Allen discerned, through an investigation of the everyday interactions between Marriott employees and customers, a culture based on the honor and nobility of service, which became the basis of a highly effective pitch: “The Spirit to Serve.”

- **Discovering your target's real ambition:** Real ambition, as Allen defines it, is the human desire to grow and to add something to the world where nothing previously existed. South African Airways sought a new direction at a pivotal time in the country's history. Feeling the eyes of the world upon them, they were deeply concerned to do the right thing in all aspects of their business – not just for themselves, but for their nation and its reputation. A pitch connecting the real ambition of every individual in the room – hope for a peaceful and prosperous South Africa – to the aims and pride of South African Airways, moved all and won the day.

“We don't really persuade anybody to do anything,” says Allen. “Businesses hire you and people follow you not because they've had their arm is twisted, but because they see that you understand them.”

With rich narrative stories and compelling examples, Allen lays the groundwork for truly understanding your audience and moving them to action. But far more than a one-time victory, Allen outlines how to win their allegiance and create a following – for the long haul.

THE HIDDEN AGENDA
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www.thehiddenagendabook.com
Twitter: @kevin__allen

**About Kevin Allen,
author of THE HIDDEN AGENDA**

Kevin Allen is an expert in business development and in leading companies and individuals to achieve their ambitions. He spent two decades on the front lines of business development at the top of advertising giants McCann Worldgroup, Interpublic Group, and Lowe Worldwide and is recognized as one of the advertising industry's most accomplished growth professionals.

A veteran of the Interpublic Group and a "Mad Man" of agency McCann Erickson, Kevin worked with such brands as MasterCard, developing the globally famous "Priceless" campaign, Microsoft, Marriott, Smith Barney, Nestle, L'Oreal, Lufthansa and Johnson & Johnson. At McCann, he created what is arguably one of the industry's most envied new business programs, which named McCann Worldgroup the number one agency in new business and Global Agency of the Year, two years in a row.

As Lowe Worldwide Vice Chairman, Allen played a pivotal role in the turnaround that named the company *Ad Age's* "Turnaround Agency of the Year" in 2009. Over the course of his career, Kevin's unique approach has played a leading role in bringing hundreds of millions of dollars in new billings to his agencies.

Kevin's experience extends globally and across a wide range of sectors including commercial, government and not-for-profit fields. He was an early part of Rudy Giuliani's team that prepared the way for the successful Mayoral election and turnaround strategies for the City of New York.

Using THE HIDDEN AGENDA to win business and create a following

Kevin Allen, on the new necessity of gaining followers:

“We live in a new age. An age of community. A world democratized, where people, citizens, *opt in* and *choose to*,” writes Allen. “The most important news that anyone can hear in this new age is ‘so and so is following you.’ In this new world, you don’t persuade anyone to do anything. It’s not buy me, it’s *join* me.”

How do you inspire others to want to join you and embrace your message? The first step is drawing out your subject’s Hidden Agenda, listening and questioning to bring to light their:

- **Wants**, the hopes and ambitions of their most confident selves
- **Needs**, the security-seeking desires of their more cautious, fearful selves
- **Values**, those deeply held beliefs that will not be compromised

Next, Allen says, you have to **know who you are**. “Any ‘pitch’ for a person or an organization is only credible when it reflects an essential truth of your special and compelling assets,” he writes. **THE HIDDEN AGENDA** provides innovative thought exercises for digging in to find:

- Your **core** – Your essence; those special abilities that separate you from others. “Your core is how you add value and what the compelling impetus is for people to follow you.”
- Your **credo** – Your belief system; your sincere and abiding values.
- Your **real ambition** – Your own fiery desire to grow, to be more personally and professionally challenged and fulfilled, and to create something good where nothing existed before.

Finally, connections between their Hidden Agenda and your assets are found by linking:

Your **real ambition** → Their **wants**

You and your buyer’s shared vision of what the future will become.
You are followed because they see their ambitions are possible with you.

Your **credo** → Their **values**

A belief system you and your buyer both hold.
You are followed because you best understand them.

Your **core** → Their **needs**

You offer something special that solves what your buyers lack.

You are followed because they see you have the solution.

A pitch built upon these genuine points of seller-subject contact has the potential to create not just a quick “win,” but a true **following**.

An interview with Kevin Allen, author of THE HIDDEN AGENDA

Q: What exactly is the “Hidden Agenda,” and why is it important in business today?

A: We live in an era of “pure growth.” Gone are the balance sheet gymnastics, the acquisitions to grow, and the line extension. All this yields to what I call “shoe leather” growth. It’s getting out there, turning your sights on your customer, understanding who they are, what lies in their heart and connecting with them profoundly. The key to winning the business you want, or the following you wish to create, is the connection to the Hidden Agenda of your audience. The Hidden Agenda is the unspoken, visceral, emotional motivation at the heart of your audience. Behind every decision, be it to buy, to follow or to vote, lies the emotional desire of your audience. It is rarely in sight. You need to dig for it. When you do, and you connect with it, you win every time.

Q: How does someone go beyond the data and metrics to figure out these emotional needs of their clients or followers?

A: If you ask a functional question, you get a functional answer. The search for the Hidden Agenda is a search for desire. It is developing the emotional antennae and sensitivity to identify and unlock these deeply held emotional motives. The inquiry is much closer to psychoanalysis than data assembly. The techniques are human-driven. They are the search for basic human drives. So a CEO making a decision to award a \$100,000 million contract will look at the facts, but make no mistake, he or she will decide with their heart. Question is, what lies within? The process calls for getting very close to your audience, asking the right questions and sifting for the right material to yield the clue to what they hold close. It is, at the end of the day, an act of human empathy.

Q: At the core, you feel this emotional side of business holds the key to real growth. Can you explain how?

A: I came up in business surrounded by some sort of unwritten assumption that commerce was logic, facts and process. Yet, in the pursuit of all of the huge accounts I chased in one of the most hotly contested competitive environments, the global advertising field, I saw that the victor was the one who understood and connected to the emotional desire of their audience. I must say for many, it was more by accident than by intention. For me, I realized that if I developed a studied method to search for the Hidden Agenda and the means to connect with it, we would win much of what we pursued, and indeed we did. From my perspective, the currency of business is human emotion.

Q: You would argue, then, that there is really an emotional side of the economy? If decisions are made, business won, stocks sold, and the like, with some element of human feeling involved, does that mean there is no absolute predictor of outcome?

A: I believe what EQ is to management what the Hidden Agenda is to selling. We live in the demand economy much unlike the command and control of the bygone days of the supply economy era. In those days, power and economic force rested in the hands of a few. Today's demand economy is wholly owned and driven by the consumer. They cannot be told what to do, or what to choose. It's not buy me, it's *join* me. Success in this environment goes to those who make a profound and resonant connection to the emotional desire the audience holds closest... the Hidden Agenda. Strike at this and they'll follow you anywhere.

Q: You make the point that pitching your ideas and yourself is critical at every level of business. Can you explain how this is true?

A: For many, the pitch is an activity reserved for a few glib showmen in pursuit of a new account. I say no. Every moment of every business day, people are pitching. Maybe it's to a balky client, to a boss for that sign-off, to a new team to follow you. Business is a part of life, and involves not facts, but people. To compel an audience to follow, a buyer to buy or a voter to vote is to understand and unlock the desire within and connect to it. Pitching your ideas to these groups creates a special relationship, where they choose to follow you voluntarily. They are not having their arm twisted, or being tricked. They make you "float," because through making a profound connection to the desire they seek and seeing that you can deliver it, they make you "buoyant." The decision of the group to support you and what you sell is because you have made a profound connection to their hidden agenda.

Q: Where do most people go wrong when pitching their ideas?

A: I have pitched literally hundreds of accounts and won more than my fair share, but I did a bit of losing too. Invariably, whenever I came up short, it was because I got the Hidden Agenda wrong. I missed the signals and the clues. An incorrect reading of the Hidden Agenda is the reason a pitch is lost. The audience doesn't feel you understand them, and they have not made an emotional connection based on your ability to help them reach their desire. No matter how much fact you heap on the table, or slick the show, if that simple human connection isn't made, it's all over before you start.

The best and most important step then, is preparation. I mentioned earlier how each of us pitches every day. How many of us undertake a careful assessment of the emotional state of our audience, and dig to learn what lies inside? How many then take an assessment of what you are, what you seek and what you believe, and find a way to connect one of these things to the Hidden Agenda you have uncovered? Not many methinks. I do it for every encounter I have, and it pays big dividends.

Q: Once you have connected with the wants, needs, and desires of your client or follower, does the Hidden Agenda help you keep them? Can you deliver results better when you're in touch with someone on this level?

A: I learned very early that no business can sustain itself on a one-time purchase. In this regard, one must think not of transaction, but of relationship. While it may have been true that a brand or a company is a thing, it is actually a community of people, citizens if you will, bound by a common hidden agenda, a common desire. I call these individuals a conceptual target. Sustaining what you win is building a relationship with these folks on the foundations of your understanding of their emotional motivation, and being ever vigilant in understanding how it evolves. Human beings are not static; they're constantly evolving, so the sustenance of a relationship is based on your ability constantly monitor their desire state and be certain you are connecting with it.

The physical plants of any company or the physical output in products and services have economic value, but the on-going human bond with your buyer is the priceless oxygen of your business.

Q: You have a long history in advertising, and pop culture is focused on the field right now, with popular television shows like "Mad Men" and "The Pitch." Any thoughts on why the focus is here right now?

A: Well, for one thing, bad times breed nostalgia for a better time. The golden era (if one can call it that) of the American 50's and 60's fills this need well and has enormous appeal. Some believe, and I agree, that it is simply glamorous and great escapism. Frankly, I find it odd to yearn for a time of inequality and other wrongs of the era, but it does go to prove the power of fantasy. As a former adman from a golden era of the business, I think it is safe to say that the appeal is one of a constant fascination with seemingly powerful people coming up with ideas, slogans and jingles that sell an awful lot of soap powder to an awaiting public. America has always had this fascination, be it the *Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, or Darrin in *Bewitched*. There is a sort of inherent marvel as to how these folks conjure up the winning idea. For my part, having seen hundreds of these mad men and women at work, the brilliant ones are those who have the emotional intelligence to sense what is in the heart of their audience and figure ways to ignite it.

Q: What single message would you like readers to take away from your book?

A: To win what you want, and create the following you seek, is to uncover and connect to the Hidden Agenda, the unspoken, visceral, emotional motivation at the heart of your audience. Connect to this and you win.

**For the audio version of this interview, please visit:
<http://bibliomotion.com/authors/kevin-allen>**

Praise for THE HIDDEN AGENDA

“The Hidden Agenda makes the invaluable link between understanding your audience’s motivation, and creating success. It also reveals some of the secret tactics that Kevin has used to help change businesses around the world. It all begins with that simple, timeless practice of connecting with people on a much deeper level. Don’t miss the remarkable teachings of this unusual book and author.”

– **Dan Schawbel, Personal branding expert, bestselling author, and owner of Millennial Branding**

“Kevin’s enjoyable and informative book reminds us all that to communicate well is to connect with people first.”

– **Rudy Giuliani, former mayor of the City of New York**

“Kevin Allen is the ‘Picasso’ of the high art of the new business development, and he has finally shared his magical techniques with the rest of us. A must-read!”

– **Larry Weber, Chairman and CEO of W2 Group, author of *Everywhere: Comprehensive Digital Business Strategy for the Social Media Era***

“Kevin has a special ability to uplift and inspire those around him. His generous spirit is on every page.”

– **Steven Overman, Vice President and Global Head Marketing Creation, Nokia**

“Anyone who is trying to create the most persuasive selling presentation, the most inspiring vision, or discover the customer sweet spot must read (and re-read) Kevin Allen’s new book. While filled with concepts and insights, this is no academic treatise, but a valuable playbook from someone who has ‘been there, done that’ with amazing success many times.”

– **Joe Plummer, Professor of Marketing, Columbia Business School**

“Through the seemingly simple craft of storytelling that connects with human emotions, Kevin leads us one step at a time to a winning strategy. The stories will keep the lessons in your mind long after you have put down the book.”

– **Kamini Banga, author of *The 86% Solution***

“Kevin Allen draws upon more than 25 years of experience in the ad business—across categories and countries—to identify a winning formula not just for pitching an account, but for successfully pitching and selling ideas and inspiration. This compelling book is not just for someone who wants to succeed at business; it’s for anyone who wants to succeed at life.”

– **Howard Draft, Executive Chairman Draftfcb**

“The Hidden Agenda is an insight into the human agenda of the pitch room and how to turn it to your advantage.”

– **Jo Tatchell, author of *Diamond in the Desert* and *The Poet of Baghdad***

“Kevin Allen knows the art and science of marketing, brand building and human persuasion. He shares his unique strategy for winning accounts and building businesses in *The Hidden Agenda*. A must-read tale as only he can tell it.”

– **Jim R. Heekin III, Chairman and CEO, Grey Group**

“Kevin Allen has a powerful ability to turn insight into winning results. In *The Hidden Agenda*, he turns his approach into a discipline we can all use to drive results and win more consistently.”

– **Andy Janowski, COO Burberry, plc**

“In *The Hidden Agenda*, Kevin shares his hard-won wisdom and shows the power of connecting with your audience. He both inspires and provides the tools to do better today.”

– **Michael I. Roth, Chairman and CEO, The Interpublic Group**

“Kevin Allen is a one-of-a-kind person and unequivocally successful in his approach to business growth. Although I would far prefer to have Kevin around the office at all times, *The Hidden Agenda* is a perfect substitute and a great way to have access to his style, generosity, and wisdom.”

– **Björn Larsson Swedbank, Chief Marketing Officer, SVP**

“Kevin’s approach unlocks potential within individuals and organizations to realize growth and win business that perhaps in the past has either been a distant thought or considered unrealistic and unobtainable.”

– **Gary Yates, Operational Excellence, Civil Aerospace, Rolls-Royce plc**

“Kevin’s knowledge, experience and humanity were an Interpublic treasure. He is a brilliantly gifted Growth practitioner and a natural teacher. It is in his DNA to share. This proves it. *The Hidden Agenda* is a must read for anyone with Growth on their agenda.”

– **David Bell Chairman Emeritus The Interpublic Group**

“Nothing can be sold until you crack your prospect’s “hidden agenda.” Few know how to pitch and uncover what’s really going on more than Kevin Allen, adman and pitchman extraordinaire. Whatever you do in business, you’ve got to learn the art of the pitch. That’s why you need to read this book.”

– **Catherine Kaputa, brand strategist, speaker and author of *You Are a Brand!* and *Breakthrough Branding***

“Kevin not only speaks and writes eloquently and convincingly, he also puts himself at stake personally and emotionally about things that he believes in. Kevin once gave me an extraordinary business gift: a beautiful book of poems. With this book he shares an even more valuable gift with all of us: his insights and thoughtful advice. Read it.”

– **Tapio Hedman, Communications Director, Aalto University, Finland**