**Ashley Madison – Taking the Temperature of Americas Morality**

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There has been media buzz over the past few weeks over the <http://AshleyMasison.com> web site.

There are a couple of different ways you can interpret what is going on with this site.

On the one hand, CEO Noel Biderman is an entrepreneur – in addition to having a law degree and a background in economics. As any entrepreneur would do, he scanned the landscape of unmet needs in the marketplace looking for opportunities to start a business.

Mr Biderman discovered that one of the few survivors of the dot com bust in 2000 was dating sites. In addition, he found out that about 30 percent of members of dating sites were not single. So, putting this together, in 2001 Mr. Biderman created AshleyMadison.com – a dating site for married folks.

It took Biderman five years to grow the site to 1 million members. In 2004 AshleyMadison.com had 4.5 million members. At the time of this writing in May 2010 Ashley Madison has 6 million members.

The question is this.. Did Noel Biderman do anything wrong in starting a dating site for married people?

Biderman created a company in 2001 to fill, what he assessed to be, an unmet need. Businesses will either succeed or fail based on how well they can meet the needs of potential customers. If you can’t meet the customers needs (and do it in a unique competitive way) you will not have sales sufficient to stay in business. In this way, business are “self-validating”. Given that AshleyMadison now has 6 million members it seems to suggest that Mr. Biderman was correct in his assessment in 2001 – that there is such a need and that he has a successful service to meet that need.

So, bottom line, there is an appetite for a service such as AshleyMadison and Mr. Biderman was there, on the spot, to cater to this need. He did nothing wrong in what he did. He is simply a business owner with 6 million customers.

**Counterpoint**

On the other hand, you could say that what Mr. Biderman is doing is “immoral” and/or “unethical” by providing such as service. Is the implication that our American businesses – small and large – are somehow responsible for guarding and enforcing the morality and ethics of society? If you say, “Yes” then who defines what that morality and ethics is? And further, can this “guarding the morality of socity” exist alongside what we call a “free society” in America?

Who defines the ethics and morality of a society? What was once permitted is now taboo – slavery. What was once taboo is now permitted – inter-racial marriage. One generation has difficulty in understanding how a previous generation could have either permitted or denied certain institutions or acts.

As odd as you might find this, in the [Lincoln-Douglas debates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln%E2%80%93Douglas_debates_of_1858) (1858) both Douglas and Lincoln agreed that “All men are created equal” did not apply to slaves. Could a politician running for a seat in the Senate of the United Stats today say what Lincoln and Douglas said a mere 150 years ago regarding the equality of men? Hardly. Yet, only time makes the difference in what is morally acceptable and not acceptable.

Are we (society) dragged along by the ebb and flow of the randon events that defines what is, and what is not, moral and ethical behavior? In an old episide of [Dragnet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragnet_%28series%29) (from the 1960′s) a hippie tells Jack Webb that the laws have to change to keep up with the times. And in this case, the legalization of drugs. And further, that “someday we will be in charge” and you (Jack Webb) will have no choice. Are the morals and ethics at any time simply “what we say they are” and then we make legislation to match this? Are ethics and morals defined by the majority in society? Or, do ethics and morals define the society?

**What is AshleyMadison?**

AshleyMadison is a couple of things. First, Ashley Madison with 6 million members is a reflection of the movement of the societal values – for good or bad. Ashley Madison elicits and makes visible a portion of societal values that, perhaps, have not been clearly seen before. At least to the extent that the Ashley Madison marketing folks are able to create buzz with a potential Super Bowl commercial and segments about the site on most cable news shows.

Second, Ashley Madison provides an opportunity for ordinary people to make a choice. You are free to choose to use the site or not use the site. You have the choice to steal or not steal. You have the choice to lie or not lie. You have the choice to cheat on your taxes or not cheat on your taxes. You have the choice to cheat on your spouse or not cheat on your spouse. People make choices every year, every month, every day, every hour, every minute, and every second of the day.

What’s the great thing about AshleyMadison? It allows you to make a choice to reveal who you really are. Perhaps, helping you make a self-assessment that would not be possible without AshleyMadison as the catalyst.

**Resources**

Read an article – <http://frrl.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/ashleymadison_lawyersweekly.pdf>