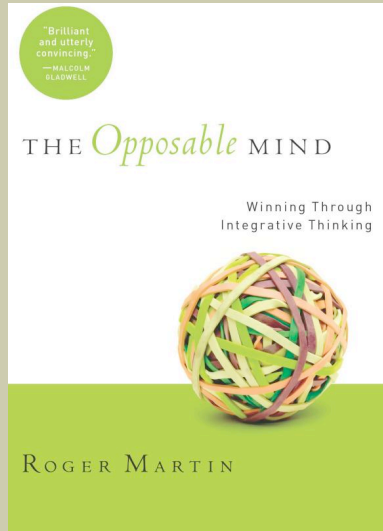


Opposable Mind: Winning Through Integrative Thinking

Roger L. Martin



Want to succeed in Fundraising? Start with your brain.

If you have ever sat in a conference room as the debate swings back and forth between options A and B, and thought, “surely we can do better than this” – be happy! Canadian academic Roger Martin, author of *The Opposable Mind*,¹ says, yes, you can. Just start with your brain.

While his subtitle declares: “How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking,” in the book itself he assures us that anyone with the will can learn this.

And as you read on it does indeed feel possible. Martin is that rare author who can express himself with clarity and directness, give truly illustrative examples (taking the time to point out the connections), present easily comprehensible models – in short he can teach. If that weren't enough to make it a terrific book, his hook is a neat metaphor, high on my list of favorite rhetorical devices.

The metaphor of course is “the opposable mind” which derives from the opposable thumb – that arrangement of our digits whereby thumb and fingers in opposition have accomplished feats of dexterity all the way from stone-age hand-axes to removing a champagne cork. The next time you do that note how the two parts of your hand work in concert but against each other. That is exactly what Martin is driving at in drawing attention to the way our minds can solve complex problems by holding the opposing or irreconcilable parts (option A and option B) in tension and, using the techniques he offers, harness their best features while formulating something wholly new.

“Using our opposable minds to move past unappetizing alternatives, we can find solutions that once appeared beyond our imaginations.”

Martin makes clear that it is one thing to have an opposable mind, it is quite another to use it. To exploit its full potential we have to learn and practice integrative thinking, which he defines thus:

“The ability to face constructively the tension of opposing ideas and, instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generate a creative resolution of the tension in the form of a new idea that contains elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to each.”

He gives some great examples of the type of problem solving that such minds are capable of, derived from his interviews with successful leaders. Isadore (Issy) Sharp of Four Seasons hotels for instance, who once operated two types of hotel, one small and home-like, and the other large and amenity-laden, but soul-less. Economically the amenity-laden super hotels had to be that size – or did they? Martin takes us through the analytical process that Sharp used that led him to challenge that and other assumptions in the hotel trade and see his way to innovations that could bring all the amenities to a smaller

¹ Harvard Business School Press, Boston 2007

² Rob McEwen, former CEO of Goldcorp, quoted in *The Opposable Mind* p. 128

³ A.G. Lafley, Chairman and CEO, Procter & Gamble, quoted in *The Opposable Mind*

"I was looking for the fundamental, underlying, unquestioned assumption that everybody in the industry grows up with. And if you find that assumption, and then question it, you can start seeing opportunities. If you can define the problem differently than everybody else in the industry, you can generate alternatives that others aren't thinking about."

establishment while at the same time giving hospitality a new name, one anyone lucky enough to stay at a Four Seasons will recognize instantly.

Martin discusses the steps a decision might take (a four-step sequential model) and then, using Sharp as his example, shows how an integrative thinker goes through those same steps. The result is more complex, and self-reinforcing, and the model that illustrates it is no longer tidy and simple but all over the map. Martin calls this "embracing the mess" – keeping in balance all the possibilities while you decide what is really salient, how these are linked, how you might respond, and what that response might look like. Yes, it is messy, confusing, contradictory – all of that. But the point about integrative thinking is that only in embracing the mess and allowing all the pieces to play on your thought process, can you arrive at truly creative solutions.

Having painted that broad picture with a few more encouraging examples analyzed, Martin gets into the nitty gritty of how you actually go about this. He takes us to classes he teaches in Toronto in which his students engage in the processes of this kind of problem solving.

Because even in the "mess" there are patterns that can be discerned; frameworks that our minds can use to order the chaos. Once we discard the models that have been imposed in the ordinary course of Western education, we can start to open our minds to alternate models of reality, gain confidence that we can find a better one and relax! Give ourselves time to see our way to the better picture that is out there.

That's our stance – where we are coming from. From there we pick up the tools we will need – how to reason; how to create our models; how to ask questions. Last, we gain experience from this process and the discipline to work back if a model is not satisfactory to see where the reasoning process went astray – to reverse engineer, find the error and try again. Each of these key points reinforce each other as we engage in the process over and over, gaining more experience which in turn enlarges the tools we have to use and improves our stance.

One example of this process successfully in action is that of a mining executive who took the bold step of putting his geological data on the internet to see what others could offer on the best places to drill for gold – a kind of open source mining operation:

"I was looking for the fundamental, underlying, unquestioned assumption that everybody in the industry grows up with. And if you find that assumption, and then question it, you can start seeing opportunities. If you can define the problem differently than everybody else in the industry, you can generate alternatives that others aren't thinking about."²

² Rob McEwen, former CEO of Goldcorp, quoted in *The Opposable Mind* p. 128

“We weren’t going to win if it was an ‘or.’ Everybody can do ‘or.’ That’s the way the world works. You trade things off but you’re not going to be the best in your industry. You are not going to win if you are in a trade-off game.”

Breaking free of ingrained ways of thinking is central to Martin's process, and he relates how one group of students worked their way through an exercise to emerge with a new solution to the problem of how to manage a training system on a global scale – centralized or localized? Each approach had its proponents and the class had to examine the data on each objectively and thoroughly to learn their true strengths and weaknesses. In the process they realized that neither model was satisfactory – choosing either would be a poor trade-off. So they set themselves to discover one that would really work and came up with a system that used core standards that could be universal upon which local methods could be overlaid. The solution, once found, seemed painfully obvious, but Martin points out it would not have been sought if the cherished old models had not been challenged and discarded.

Unacceptability of trade-offs is a key message of the book.

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There is indeed a better way, and after reading Martin's book and putting yourself through the exercises he gives his students – in effect becoming an integrative thinker – you won't be satisfied till you find it.

Interestingly, this is remarkably like Tim Brown's "design thinking" whereby idea solutions are achieved by creating and discarding multiple physical prototypes as the field is narrowed to a best solution. Martin does the same with mental prototypes—

“We teach them how to seek insights that don't fit neatly into the existing models. Then we ask them to proceed from those insights to visualize new models. We also teach them how to prototype and refine their mental models, gathering additional data with each iteration.”⁴

Integrative thinking is really design thinking by another name, but Martin's great contribution is that he shows us precisely how to get there, with the encouraging message that you don't have to hire design thinkers – you can become one.

Does it apply to fundraisers? Of course! Take any choice you have to make among alternate strategies – say you want to make direct mail less expensive and build repeat gifts. Two possible models (and there are more but these are two illustrative extremes) are to purchase lists and spam donors often; or to whittle the list down to a number who can be personally called/visited and followed up with better donor care. For the first model I am indebted to Mal

³ A.G. Lafley, Chairman and CEO, Procter & Gamble, quoted in *The Opposable Mind* p. 25

⁴ p. 148

“We teach them how to seek insights that don't fit neatly into the existing models. Then we ask them to proceed from those insights to visualize new models. We also teach them how to prototype and refine their mental models, gathering additional data with each iteration.”

Warwick's blog.⁵ His summary is brutal (and he does not favor this!) but take it as one extreme—

- We have mailed and mailed and mailed and mailed some more, ignoring donors' complaints about mailing too much.
- We have insisted on upgraded gifts in every mailing, abusing the principle that “if you don't ask, you don't get”—despite the fact that no more than about one-third of direct mail donors ever upgrade their contributions.
- We have tossed aside those pleading marginal notes from donors, asking us to stop sending that newsletter that never gets read.
- We have cut costs on caging, cashiering, and list maintenance, contenting ourselves with “95% accuracy” in the belief that those donors whose names and addresses are mangled don't really make much of a financial difference in the larger scheme of things.
- We have taught donors to expect free goodies in the mail in exchange for their “gifts.”

Another approach is captured by old-school fundraisers like Peter Drucker in discussion with Dudley Hafner of the American Heart Association. Hafner's view—

“... Technology has given us the means to go out and probably do a pretty good job of raising money through the computer, through mail drops or tele-marketing that leave out the volunteer. But that would be a tragic mistake because in the process you've lost the constituency, you've lost the volunteer base, you've lost the course of strength and growth in the organization...”⁶

To adopt Roger Martin's approach you deconstruct these two; obtain all the facts that tell for and against both – very likely you find that neither is ideal. You are facing a trade-off. Now you engage in the mental modeling processes that Martin describes. Wade in. Embrace the mess. Be confident that the model you want but cannot yet see will emerge. Give yourself time to analyze and reflect. What integrative, creative solution is out there?

No, I don't have the answer to that one yet. I'm giving myself time.

⁵ “A New Direction for Tomorrow's Direct Mail Fundraising” www.malwarwick.com 2004

⁶ Peter Drucker Managing the Nonprofit Organization HarperCollins 1990, “Building the Donor Constituency” interview with Dudley Hafner, p 97.