

# How Companies Learn Your Secrets

By CHARLES DUHIGG FEB. 16, 2012



Antonio Bolfo/Reportage for

going to 4-H, Pole was doing algebra and writing computer programs. “The stereotype of a math nerd is true,” he told me when I spoke with him last year. “I kind of like going out and evangelizing analytics.”

As the marketers explained to Pole — and as Pole later explained to me, back when we were still speaking and before Target told him to stop — **new parents are a retailer’s holy grail**. Most shoppers don’t buy everything they need at one store. Instead, they buy groceries at the grocery store and toys at the toy store, and they visit Target only when they need certain items they associate with Target — cleaning supplies, say, or new socks or a six-month supply of toilet paper. But Target sells everything from milk to stuffed animals to lawn furniture to electronics, so one of the company’s primary



Antonio Bolfo/Reportage for The New York Times

Andrew Pole had just started working as a statistician for Target in 2002, when two colleagues from the marketing department stopped by his desk to ask an odd question: “If we wanted to figure out if a customer is pregnant, even if she didn’t want us to know, can you do that? ”

# The Incredible Story Of How Target Exposed A Teen Girl's Pregnancy

Gus Lubin Feb. 16, 2012, 10:27 AM



**Target** broke through to a new level of customer tracking with the help of statistical genius Andrew Pole, according to a [New York Times Magazine cover story](#) by Charles Duhigg.

Pole identified 25 products that when purchased together indicate a woman is likely pregnant. The value of this information was that Target could send coupons to the pregnant woman at an expensive and habit-forming period of her life.



# Your Work Has Moral Implications. Own It.

*Pragmatic Ethics  
for Software Development Professionals*

Bill Horvath  
*Principal Consultant, Improving*

- What is your least favorite programming language?

# Disclaimers

- I'm not a lawyer.
- This isn't legal advice.
- Anyone who says otherwise is itchin' for a fight.

# Ground Rules

- No names
- No ongoing cases
- Be kind

# Things To Learn

- What to do when faced with a moral crisis
- Things you can do to be ready
- Malpractice - What is it? Why should we care?



# Why do the right thing?

- Religion
- Conscience
- No Long-Nose Syndrome

# Ethical Codes

- Don't deal with power imbalance
- Good with what *not* to do, not so good with what you might be able *to* do
- Not really used anyway

# What Usually Happens

- Fantasy
- Reality

# What can we do?

- Employment at will
- Unionization is hard
- *Own the work*

# Owning the Work

- We have to be Accountable

- Why?

- Professionalism
- Independence
- Decision-making authority
- Better customer experience
- Avoiding moral crises

# Preconditions for Accountability

- Honesty
- Integrity
- Psychological safety
- Empowerment

# Ruh Roh

- Culture thing
- Takes a long time

# Create a Defensible Position

- Work in a team
- Create psychological safety in the team
- Demand accountability for the team
- Build savings
- Join professional organizations
- Consider unionizing



# What about *now*?

- Talk to the higher-ups
  - *Get the team on board*
- Scope change is your friend
- Ask interesting questions
- Fight a delaying action

# Brass Tacks

- Do everything *but* that thing
- Blow the whistle
- Look for a new job
- Walk out

# Malpractice

- James Spruell and Mustafa Kamal (2002), *Defective Software and the Issues of Malpractice, Negligence, Fraud, and Misrepresentation*, IACIS
- Daniel Tobey (2018), *Software Malpractice in the Age of AI: A Guide for the Wary Tech Company*, AAAI

# Thank you!

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