

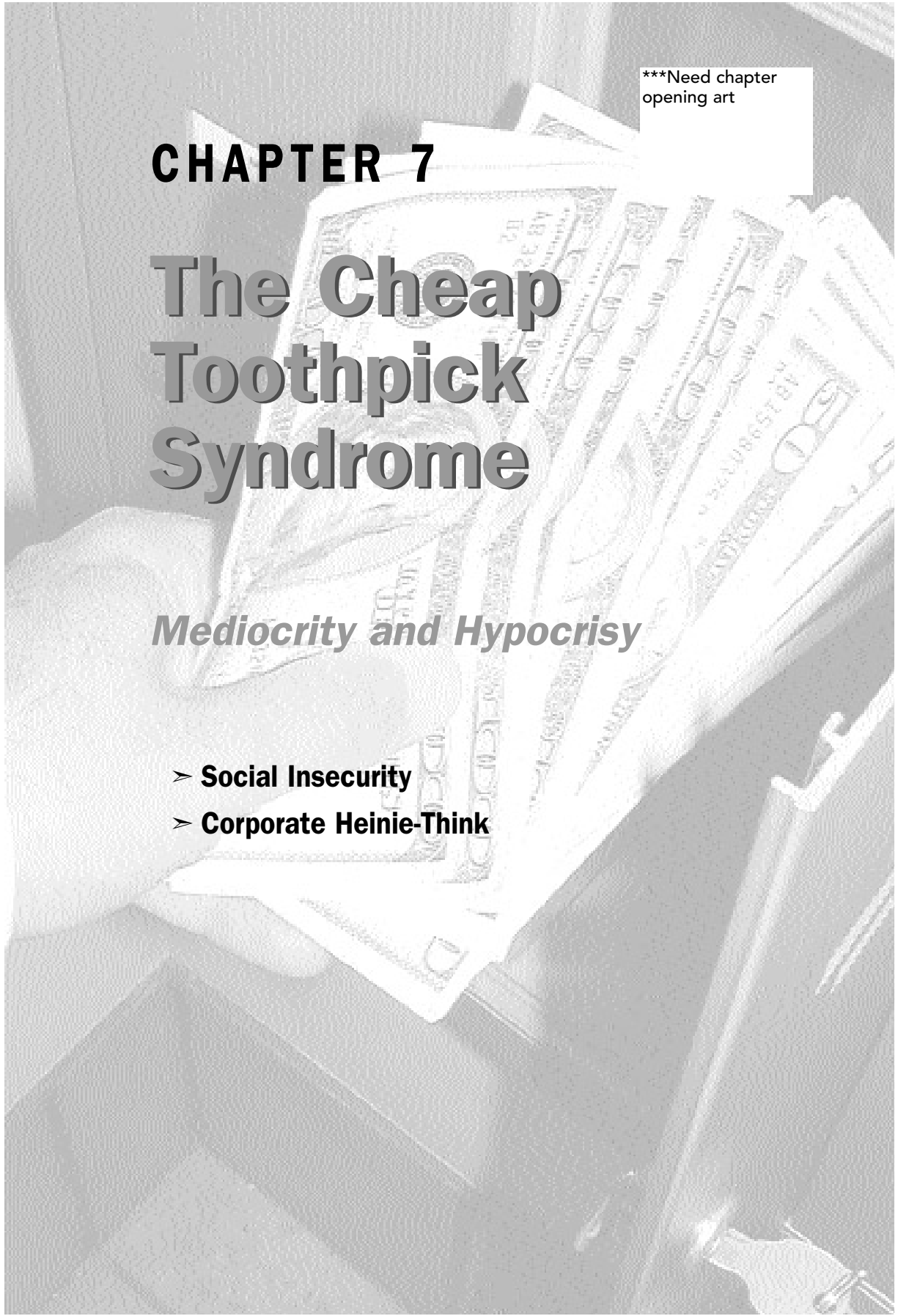
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CHAPTER 7

The Cheap Toothpick Syndrome

Mediocrity and Hypocrisy

- **Social Insecurity**
- **Corporate Heinie-Think**



*We're drowning in a sea of mediocrity
and hypocrisy is the water!*

Last month I had the pleasure of dining at one of New York's finest five-star restaurants. I must remark that the meal and service were superb. I wish I could say the same about the toothpicks! Although it's considered uncouth in some circles, I like to pick my teeth after a good meal. I haven't exited a restaurant in the past 20 years without pinching a handful of toothpicks on my way out the door. I've got quite a collection, and I consider myself a toothpick connoisseur. It just so happens that this pricy establishment, which charged my party more than \$90 a head, had the cheapest toothpicks I've ever come across! The wood was soft, the points were blunt, and they were wrapped in sticky cellophane. To make matters worse, they splintered the minute you stuck one in your mouth!

This got me wondering. Why would one of Manhattan's premier restaurants offer such crappy toothpicks in light of the fact that many inexpensive establishments offer toothpicks of superior quality? Toothpicks wrapped in starched white paper with sharp pointy ends and square middles, made of durable lumber—the toothpick equivalent of a Louisville Slugger! I did some research, which wasn't as easy as I imagined. The toothpick industry is very tightly knit and very tight-lipped. Finally, a sales rep from Danville Paper & Supply in Danville, Illinois, broke the code of silence.

Apparently it all boils down to economics. As you can see from Danville's Web site, the round-tip, square-middle wood Forster toothpick costs \$1.39 per box, whereas the round economy hotel model sells for only \$0.52 a box—a whopping 269 percent less. The reason this pricy restaurant offered its patrons such cheap toothpicks is because the person responsible for buying



Figure 7.1 *Toothpick comparison photo*

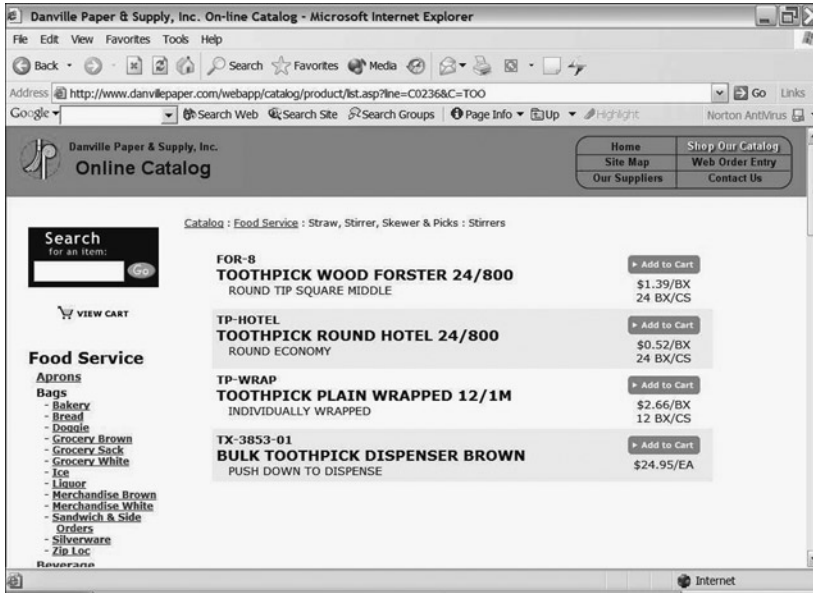


Figure 7.2 Danville Supply online toothpick catalog

the restaurant supplies economized on the toothpicks to save his establishment a few measly bucks! I wondered how much this clown could save every year by doing that, so I did the math.

500 toothpicks per night × 365 days a year = 182,500 toothpicks a year

182,500 toothpicks ÷ 800 toothpicks per box = 228 boxes of toothpicks a year

Wood Forster toothpicks

228 boxes × \$1.39 = \$316.92 a year

Economy Hotel toothpicks

228 boxes × \$.52 = \$118.56 a year

\$316.92 (Wood Forster) – \$118.56 (Economy Hotel) = \$198.36 yearly savings

The bottom line is, to save a couple hundred bucks—one-tenth of a penny per toothpick—this world-famous restaurant offers its patrons inferior toothpicks. This book examines the mentality of mediocrity, which I call the “cheap-toothpick syndrome,” in upcoming chapters. Mediocrity has permeated every segment of our society and is at the root of America’s problems.

Take the 2000 presidential election. What percent of the voting-age population cast a ballot? Here are the statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau.

<i>Voting-Age Population</i>	<i>Registered Voters</i>	<i>Actual Turnout</i>	<i>Percent of Voting-Age Population</i>	<i>Percent of Registered Voters</i>
209,128,094	159,725,715	105,411,587	50.41%	66.00%

One out of every two Americans eligible to vote didn't! Fewer than seven out of every ten Americans who bothered to register also didn't vote. What's their excuse? People who don't vote invariably cite two reasons.

- > Their vote is meaningless because it won't affect the outcome.
- > The mediocrity of the candidates compelled them to sit out this election.

Gore and Lieberman actually won the popular vote, so considering the actual outcome, the first argument doesn't hold water.

<i>Presidential Ticket</i>	<i>Popular Vote</i>	<i>Percent of Popular Vote</i>	<i>Electoral Votes</i>	<i>Percent of Electoral Votes</i>
Bush/Cheney (R)	50,459,624	47.87%	271	50.4%
Gore/Lieberman	51,003,238	48.38%	266	49.4%
Other	3,874,040	4%	—	—

Even the votes accumulated by third-party candidates such as Nader and Buchanan would have swung the election either way if a fraction had been cast for Bush or Gore. The second argument is even more specious. I believe the hypocrisy of those Americans who didn't vote, not the mediocrity of the candidates, is most responsible for the quality of our leaders (or lack thereof). Their excuse for not pulling the lever on Election Day is just another example of the cheap-toothpick syndrome—the mentality of hypocrisy and mediocrity!

Social Insecurity

One of the most egregious examples of mediocrity I know of has to do with your Social Security number. Like me, I bet you have your number memorized because the first thing you're taught when you're a little kid is not to carry your Social Security number in your wallet. Well, I have bad news. The odds are that your Social Security number is in your wallet right now! Take

your wallet out and see. If you have health insurance—which I hope you do—your Social Security number is probably printed on your health insurance card. It is, isn't it? And you didn't know it. Do you imagine for a second that insurance companies are unaware that this outmoded identification protocol, which dates back nearly 70 years, is a security risk to millions of customers? Cheap toothpicks come in many forms!



Figure 7.3 Blue Cross card (with cheap toothpick)

Corporate Heinie-Think

Sheep walk in a row by sniffing each other's heinies. The insurance industry is guilty of "heinie-think," and they aren't alone. Unfortunately, mediocrity is the norm in corporate America. We're drowning in a sea of mediocrity, and hypocrisy is the water! Without hypocrisy, mediocrity would not be an option because the flip side of hypocrisy is integrity, and the opposite of mediocrity is excellence.

You'll meet several people throughout this book on a mission to confront mediocrity and hypocrisy. Why don't you join them?

What should you do the next time you get offered a cheap toothpick? Complain to the maitre d'!

