A SUMMARY OF DIFFERENT
Introduction

Why you need to think differently

It’s one of the worst cliches in business: you need to be different and stand out from the crowd. However, when you understand how the world’s best brands are able to take a point of difference and turn it into a competitive advantage, you can turn a cliche into profits. Youngme Moon has identified the problems with the “herd mentality”, and suggests three distinct ways you can apply this thinking to your business.
We, as human beings, love to create boxes to fit things in. In business, this usually takes the form of a two by two matrix. In almost every single category of business, a market leader defines itself by one or two qualities, and then the rest of the market follows suit.

Take, for example, the SUV category. Twenty years ago, Jeep was well known for the ruggedness of its vehicles. If that’s what you wanted, there were very little options for you except for Jeep. If you wanted reliability, you were much more likely to choose a Nissan or a Toyota. What’s happened in those twenty years? Ruggedness and reliability became the characteristics that defined the category, and eventually all of the vehicles started looking the same - an equal mix of rugged and reliable. Then other qualities started creeping into the mix, like fuel efficiency and safety. Different qualities, same result.

This is something that happens in almost every category on the planet. It’s the amazing race to sameness. Of course, this is the same reaction we have to everything that is different in life. Marcus Buckingham wrote an entire book about our propensity to focus on weaknesses in HR reviews, forcing people to focus the bulk of their time and energy on the things where they add the least value.

It’s easy to see why we do this. It’s uncomfortable to look at somebody else who is seemingly having success with a quality or trait that is lacking in ourselves, or our company. If you are Volvo, it’s hard to look at your competition and see them outselling you based on sex appeal.

However, as Moon argues, this is not the path to success. The path to success is focussing on what makes you different.
Here is the 7 point path that almost every industry takes on the road to sameness.

First, a company adds a new feature to their product/service.

Second, customers are pleased with the addition, sending a signal to the marketplace.

Third, competitors scramble to match the new feature.

Fourth, the new feature becomes standard across the industry.

Fifth, customers come to expect that level of features across the entire industry.

Sixth, the expected value proposition has expanded, and the minimal level of requirements necessary to compete in the industry has gone up.

Seventh, go back to #1.

Usually, this cycle attracts new competition to the category, all of which follow the same 7 step process, so that brand loyalty in the category becomes harder and harder to create. Now, there are countless options that all look exactly the same, which is the surest recipe for a commodity marketplace. This is not where you want to be.

Most categories evolve this way until somebody comes along to disrupt the pattern. Let’s take a look at the three ways they do it.
Reversal
Doing the things your competitors aren’t

The first way to be different is to use the “reversal” concept. Back when you hadn’t yet heard of Google, the online portal landscape looked an awful lot like a dog’s breakfast. If you were competing with Yahoo!, the 800 pound gorilla at the time, you’d most likely be trying to fit more features on your homepage, not less. After all, that’s how things were done. Well, not at Google. They completely redesigned the search engine experience for billions around the world by having nothing on the home page but the search box. Now that was different.

Or consider the case of Jet Blue. In the 1990s, customers were used to the major airlines attempting to “one-up” each other in an attempt to win customers. There were in-flight meals, different flying options (first class, business class, etc) and other perks and benefits. Jet Blue came along and eliminated all of them. No more first class - you buy a seat and you get a seat, just like everybody else. No more free meals - if you want to eat, you pay. It seemed counter intuitive that taking away these features would make an airline more successful, but that’s exactly what happened.

The key to becoming a “reverse-positioned brand” is to withhold features that the rest of the industry considers necessary to compete. However, that’s only one side of the coin. These brands also indulge us with features that others don’t have, and that we aren’t expecting.

Take, for instance, IKEA. The stores are a hassle to get to, and good luck finding a parking spot close to the door. You have to put the furniture together yourself. You wander around a massive warehouse dressed up as a store and find what you need yourself. The entire experience reeks of deprivation. But then, unexpectedly, you get things you don’t expect from a furniture company. There’s clean and brightly lit care centre where you can drop your kids off while you shop. There’s a cafe that serves smoked salmon and swedish meatballs in case you need a bite to eat along the way. The “warehouse” itself is brightly lit and is enjoyable to walk through. These are things you don’t expect from a furniture company, but millions of people love them for it.
The second way to be different is to become a “breakaway” brand. As human beings, we are very good categorizing the things that we experience so that we can make sense of them. In fact, for the most part we see the world based on those categorizations. What breakaway brands do better than anybody else is leverage this fact by asking you to replace one mental model with another. As Moon says, “these are companies that say: I know you are inclined to think of this as a slice of swiss cheese, but what if you were to think of it as a flying carpet instead?”

For example, Kimberley-Clark created an entirely new marketplace by creating the “Pull-Up”. It’s a cross between underwear and a diaper. Of course, it’s still just a diaper put on a different way. But they completely remove the stigma of wearing diapers beyond age two, and parents are now routinely keeping the kids in these “Pull-Ups” beyond the age of four.

You were witnessing this tactic in action the first time you laid eyes on Homer Simpson. The Simpsons is everything that a child’s cartoon is not. And yet there it is, a cartoon and an adult sitcom all rolled into one.

Probably the most famous example in this category is that of Swatch - the Swiss watchmaker. The mental model that dominates this category is that of precision craftsmanship of expensive materials sold in high-end jewelry shops. Swatch completely turned this mental model on its head when they seemingly asked: I know you are inclined to think of this as an expensive piece of jewelry, but what if you thought of it as an everyday fashion accessory instead? They created pop-art designs for their watches, and were the first company to produce a line of products that changed on a seasonal basis. They were also the first watchmaker to sell their wares in standalone stores. These things were commonplace in the fashion industry, but unheard of in the timepiece industry. To top it off, they were priced at a level where their customers could actually buy multiple watches, so they could actually treat them as fashion accessories.

The greatest benefit of a breakaway brand is that when we are presented with it for the first time, we immediately “get it”. Even thought it’s different than anything we’ve ever seen before, there’s no need to re-educate the marketplace. That, is a beautiful thing.
Hostility

Challenge your customers

The third and final way to be different is to use hostility to your advantage. Moon explains what a hostile brand is by saying that “instead of laying down the welcome mat, they lay down a gauntlet”. This is about as different as it gets. It goes against everything you’ll ever learn in business, and every fiber in your body will tell you that this is just wrong. It isn’t marketing, it’s anti-marketing.

Mini is the perfect example of this. It took it’s biggest possible wart, and made it even bigger. All of its advertising seems to say “it’s even smaller than you think.” In one famous example of this type of branding executed flawlessly, Mini put one of it’s cars on top of an SUV and drove it around a busy downtown core for all to see. Where you were used to seeing a ski rack, you saw an entire car.

A famous fictional “brand” that fits into this category is the Soup Nazi from Seinfeld. Breaking every customer service rule ever invented, the Soup Nazi is rude, has a short fuse, and will even ban customers from ever coming back to his establishment for seemingly trivial offenses.

What’s interesting about these brands is that they don’t try and play down their faults, they embellish them. They set out to create friends, but they actively set out to create enemies as well.
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