Who's Driving the Market on Your Block?

Look in the Mirror.

By S. S. Saucerman
I consider myself a fairly confident person. As ability and intellect go, I seem to hold my own and people tell me I communicate well. Physically, I don’t think I’m grotesquely ugly . . . that is, if you measure according to the number of small children who run away screaming when they see me. I seldom back down in arguments when I know I’m right—except with my wife (I’m confident, not crazy). My demeanor is generally collected, my blood pressure (still) three digits, and my truck almost paid off. In all, confidence is good.

But I’d still never belong to any group that would have me as a member.

And I’m guessing your confidence level is about the same. And why wouldn’t it be? After all, you are good at what you do. You’ve acquired skills, paid your dues and built your contracting business to the level it is today, In most every respect, you’re a complete success. But here’s the problem: If you and I are so committed to and sure of our beliefs and abilities, why do we then bolt like flaming rabbits when we conjure up a truly unique—but as of yet untried — marketing approach for one of our products or services . . . and then immediately talk ourselves out of it because (and say it with me): “No one else is doing it”?

Our tainted rationalization goes something like this: “Well, if Beemoth Construction, Inc. down the street isn’t doing it, it couldn’t possibly be a good idea. Right? I mean they’re huge! They’ve got offices all over. They’ve got to have a marketing department the size of the Pentagon . . . with professional marketers, slick copy and consumer demographics. The extent of my marketing prowess is a charge account with the local classifieds. There must be something I don’t see.”

Sound familiar? If so, you have to stop and ask yourself why we (ordinarily assured people) think the way we do. Why are we so perfectly self-possessed in some business arenas and so fearful in others? How can we march arrogantly along throughout our business day performing every other aspect of our duties flawlessly only to immediately doubt our judgment when it comes to marketing creativity? After exhaustive research (Actually I didn’t do any research. I was just out late last night, and I’m really exhausted.), I think I’ve narrowed the answer down to two distinct possibilities:

1. We’re cautious, calculated businessmen who weigh and analyze any and all alternatives before making crucial, capital-depleting business decisions.

2. We’re a bunch of panty-waisted, second-guessing, yellow-bellied chickens.

On Soul Searching, Science and Sleep

OK, let’s examine our options. Using the widely accepted reasoning method known in inner scientific communities as SUTTERAM (Saucerman’s Universal Theorem That the Earth Revolves Around Me), we can quickly surmise that the businessperson described in #1 doesn’t exist . . . because I’ve never met anyone like that (isn’t science great?). By default then, that leaves us with explanation #2: that we’re all a bunch of cowards. Unfortunately, it’s true, at least when it comes to trusting our own inherent instincts, intellect and abilities.

Look around. Look at the local marketing trends for your industry. More often than not, what you’ll find is a natural, recurring, sheepish tendency to take marketing risks based solely on what the guy down the street is doing. We react instead of act, letting our competitor be the cause while we humbly remain content being their effect. When a marketing innovation does rear its ugly head, we instinctively retreat to our safe, familiar distance from which to view the change. We weigh our own chances for success using the same strategy; and—after considerable pain and anxiety—decide if the innovation is right for us.

Can you say, “Baa!”

What? Being a Coward Has a Downside?

Of course, the trouble with this method is that by the time we do generate enough courage to adopt the change, it’s too late. Our com-
petition is way out in front. The momentum—an integral part of any successful marketing ploy—has passed, and we missed riding the wave. Now, you don’t have to be a marketing Einstein to see this is no way to become the leader in your market. Remember, the majority of celebrated business leaders in our past didn’t get that way on sheer luck alone. At some point in time, they all took a chance on their own abilities. They risked failure.

They also likely discovered early on that risk and business are inextricably linked and that sometimes taking a chance is the only way to jump-start revenue and move a company out of stagnation. This isn’t just rhetoric. History is virtually littered with businessman success-stories who—being no more intelligent or insightful than you or I—simply took the right risk at the right time. Yes, there may have been some luck involved. Perhaps the market was ripe for just such a risk But they did try. After that, the market environment, some well-choreographed self-promotion, and perseverance (which we’ll discuss in a moment) did the rest.

Do some risks fail? Absolutely. Is any risk foolproof? No, otherwise it wouldn’t be a risk. But there are things you can do to make taking a risk not so risky. First and foremost is simple human persistence, not giving up. Yes, I know it sounds fundamental and doesn’t come as a surprise to many people, but as we all know, with many people, understanding something and actually acting on that understanding are often two entirely different things. So it bears repeating: Success in business (and life for that matter) has always been far more about perseverance than genius. Thomas Edison was bright, yes, but he was even more driven and resourceful. He stuck to his guns, kept the ideas coming and didn’t give up easily. Now, we only know about his successes. We never hear about the failures in between.

Other successful people got there via this same route, and they were no smarter and no more enlightened than you or I. We all have plans and schemes (if you have a brother-in-law, you know this to be a fact), and we all get the urge to strike out every now and then. Some of these endeavors fail (perhaps most of them fail), and some don’t. That’s a natural part of growth and an integral part of getting ahead. The trick is (and always has been) not to pull in your horns when you have a, shall we say, misadventure. Don’t panic and don’t self-reprimand. Collect yourself and whatever bodies are left, save what is savable and move confidently on to a new plan. You may even find that a mere tweaking of that recently failed endeavor is all that’s needed to send it over the top.

When Failing Isn’t Failing

Of course the downside to risk is failure, so I think it pays to discuss it in and of itself. People don’t like to fail. No surprise there. However, another strange yet recurring thing about life and business is that though you may not realize it at the time, the failed risk you just took may have not been such a failure after all. In fact, though it may not appear as such right now because you’re too busy cleaning up the mess, you may be closer to your goal than ever.

Here’s what I mean: If you take a look back in time, you’ll recognize many events that, though at the time were viewed as failures, proved later on to not only not be failures, but actually remarkably effective (however unwittingly) promotional vehicles. One classic example of this phenomena was with actress/singer/Miss America Vanessa Williams.
We all know the story and we also all know how, at the time, the Playboy scandal seemed determinedly destined to plunge Ms. Williams into eternal ostracism. But something unexpected happened. It turned out Ms. Williams was the only one not listening to her own bad press. She remained poised and confident. She persevered. She was sure of her talent and kept her head up. As time went on, the public forgot about the scandal (some didn’t care in the first place), the negativity faded, but the name-recognition remained. All the while, she quietly and steadfastly worked on her career. At a later point in time, talent and the recognition found a new equilibrium. Nowadays, if you ask anyone to name the most successful Miss America of all time, many will give her name.

Applications, Assumptions and Apples

But don’t go peeling off your clothes just yet. This is only an example of the concept (besides, you look silly and the receptionist might walk in). Let’s bring this back to something we can use. What type of marketing risks are we talking about? Well, of course I’m not for a moment advocating careless and reckless abandon. I’m assuming you own some common sense and have an average to above-average knowledge of your industry and specialty. Being courageous doesn’t mean you can skimp on other essentials. It simply adds to your arsenal. I’m talking about taking the talent you have and applying it to a well-educated, creative—yet abnormally (for you, anyway) aggressive—approach to promotion. This might be similar to the approach you didn’t take last year and are now kicking yourself for not pursuing.

It doesn’t necessarily have to be a radical departure from previous marketing paths, just different. It also doesn’t have to be in your face, loud and boisterous, or screamed from the rooftops—unless that works into your overall plan. Sometimes, a simple but well-crafted departure from center is enough to do the trick.

One of my favorite examples of this was the soft, subtle—yet compellingly attractive—marketing program launched by Apple® Computers years back where they featured in their ads a simple black and white photo of their computer with the lone, plain caption “Introducing Lisa” underneath. Subtle and simple, this ad caused the reader to stop mid-gloss. It wasn’t like all the other ads on the page. The readers immediate reaction was to pause, pause again, and then ask themselves, “Who (or what) is Lisa?”

Hooked.

But there was more. Once you finally did comprehend (or at least guess) what was going on in the ad, there was in addition something unexplainably classy and compelling about the connection between this photograph of a lifeless collection of circuitry, CPUs and plastic and the name of (what most imagined was) a living, lovely young girl.

This is called personification, and writers use it all the time. The viewer now attaches to the product—a product that was at the time mired in steep competition with other computer manufacturers—human characteristics and attributes. However skewed from rational, analytical thought, you now correlated the Apple product to something inherently and unexplainably pleasant. Though perhaps only a minor effect, it was large enough to gather your attention and make you want to know more. I hate the phrase because it sounds so “Dilbert®-esque”, but this was a textbook example of “thinking outside the box” and a marketing risk that paid big dividends for Apple.

But you don’t have to be Apple to take a marketing risk. Ideas can come from examining already strong business assets. What separates you from your competition? Take the (likely) small advantage and twist it. Are you small? Then you can still emphasize (the oft-trumpeted) small-town commitment, personal attention to quality, and the fact that you don’t have to come 50 miles to get to your customer’s door themes, but this time, do it with new, creative flare. Don’t just parade it out there, read the words and hope for the best. Consumers have seen it all before, and we’ve grown tired. Break away from the mundane and familiar, and grab their attention. Then deliver your message.

Yes, it might be a risk, but it could very well be the difference between driving your market and letting your market drive you. It’s about placing your company and yourself at the top—and being content that you belong there.

About the Author
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