

4imprint®
Blue Papers



Humor

Same But Not

Do you dare to be different? You'd better. In an ever-increasing global marketplace, differentiation is critical to long-term success. Delivering a quality product at a competitive price is simply the cost of doing business. Those companies that stand out from the crowd and provide something inherently different have the best chance of breaking out of the vicious faster/cheaper/better never-ending, profit-dwindling cycle of competition.

Yada, yada. You've heard it all before. Thousands of marketing consultants and management sages will tell you to find your niche and build on it. Easier said than done. Sure, it would be great to invent some new-fangled, must-have widget and glory in the niche that is patented exclusivity. And wouldn't you love to be the manufacturer that figured out that funky, neon-colored computers would sell better than boring, gray ones. But just because you don't deliver something new, doesn't mean you can't be different.

Differentiation can take several forms:

- unique product
- enhanced customer service
- targeted audience
- philanthropic return
- company culture

Providing a unique product or delivering crazy-good customer service are two of the clearest ways to differentiate yourself from the competition—provided you can figure out what that product or service innovation might be. Here's the rub. Once you figure it out, your competitors are sure to follow. What was once new becomes the norm and the competitive cycle begins again.

Another way to differentiate your product is to market it to a target audience. This may or may not involve actually changing the product. Rather it can simply be a shift in how you position your product in the marketplace—a packaging change or new advertising slogan. This tactic is most evident in the grocery store where the same food item may be sold under a brand-name label as well as a generic one.

Gap Inc. is another company that has grown by marketing to target audiences. The parent company for Gap®, Banana Republic®, and Old Navy®, Gap Inc. reached out to a more mature audience in 2005 when it launched the Forth

and Towne® brand. The line is aimed at women over the age of 35—buyers who represent a whopping 39 percent of the total women’s apparel market. Forth and Towne offers the same sophisticated, New England-inspired styles available through the other lines, packaged and marketed to follow the baby boomer population as it ages.

Now if charity is your thing, and we mean REALLY your thing, you can differentiate yourself on the idea of social responsibility. Ben and Jerry’s® and The Body Shop® are two of the best-known examples. Many customers were drawn to their products because they knew the companies were responsible manufacturers and fair wage employers who would provide a philanthropic return for their purchase.

These companies refer to themselves as value-led organizations. Making profit is not a sufficient reason to be in business. Providing jobs, returning money to the community, and impacting social issues are equally important. Think carefully before you decide to brand yourself based on social concern. You can’t really go halves here. Get caught in an act of perceived hypocrisy and you could be knee deep in a PR nightmare.

Still other companies differentiate themselves on corporate culture. Google™ is all about open-thinking, tech-savvy environments, and employees are encouraged to work according to their own schedules. Patagonia® is synonymous with outdoor adventure and eco-friendly attitudes. Slogans like “We Want Your Underwear” promote both their high performance under garment line as well as their Common Threads clothing recycling program. It’s companies like these that have often have best integrated the true concept of branding into company operations.

Take Nike® for instance. Tennis shoes are commodity products, yet Nike has built its brand on providing high-performance athletic gear. That’s not just a marketing message. It’s part of the company culture from research and development right on through the mailroom. How so? Nike has built a corporate culture of health and wellness. The North American corporate headquarters boasts an athletic center, two regulation size soccer fields, a 400-meter running track, and a two-mile jogging trail. Company policies encourage flexible scheduling and family time. And the complex is eco-friendly right down to the organic salmon in its cafeteria.

Differentiating your corporate culture can be the cornerstone of an effective brand. Companies that do it well encourage their employees to think like, be like, and work like a team.

Deciding to Be Different

Differentiation is nothing new in the marketing world. In fact, you may already know it by another name: unique selling proposition or USP. In deciding how to differentiate your company, you are looking for that niche that makes you stand out—that unique marketing message. Obviously, you could spend a great deal of time on strategic planning and organizational studies determining which benefit to hang your marketing strategy on (and some thoughtful, professional help is often a good idea). But, for those of you interested in a shorthand version, use these steps to help identify that which makes you distinct.

1. List all the reasons your company is great. All of them! Come on. Keep thinking.
2. Mark the items that are important to your customer. (Try the 'so what' and 'why' test: We've been in business 50 years. So what? So, we provide better service. Why does being in business 50 years make you provide better service? Because we have more connections and leverage and can get things done faster. Ah ha!)
3. Now mark any qualities that get you personally excited about the company and coming into work every day.
4. Which qualities make you different from the competition—even just a little?
5. Which items couldn't be easily duplicated or imitated?
6. Which benefits can be reasonably marketed? How easily can people understand your USP?

Something is probably standing out by now. Maybe it doesn't hit all the measurements, but you've likely identified a few qualities worth considering. One final question: Can you keep it up? Before you choose to differentiate, look to the future. Will it have meaning in the long-term? Will you be able to continually and consistently deliver?

Once you've determined your USP or decided exactly how you will be different, tell your customers. Then tell them again! Incorporate it into all your marketing messages from the company slogan to the sale presentations to packaging and invoices. Oh yes, and remember to follow through. You're better off with no marketing message at all than one that simply isn't true.

Humor as Differentiator

A shave that's real, no cuts to heal, a soothing, velvet after-feel, Burma-Shave. Long before Miller® Lite's man rules and the Geico® gecko, the founders of Burma-Shave understood the benefits of humor in advertising.

It wasn't just the innovative multiple-sign concept that helped make Burma-Shave the leading brand, it was the droll little sayings that made drivers take notice.

In a sea of boring sales literature, humor can help you stand out from the crowd. Whether it's a quirky image, a quick joke, or a funny commercial script, humor makes your advertising entertaining.

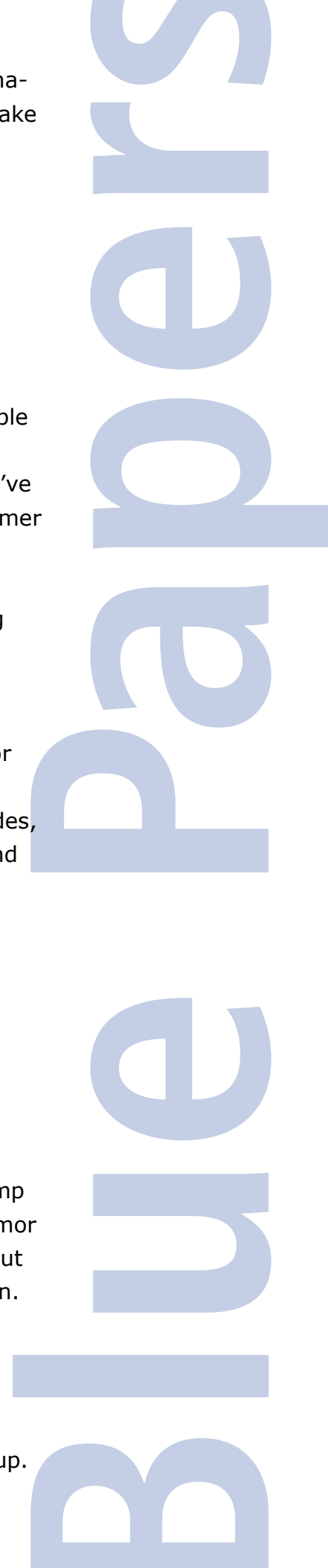
In the news media, the fusion of information and entertainment has been dubbed "infotainment." While it's something of a derogatory term in the purist news biz, infotainment is a marketer's dream. You want to tell people about your company, but you want to engage them as well. Anytime you can keep a customer reading or listening to your marketing message, you've made quite a coup. Humor is a way to build relationships with your customer by keeping them focused on your brand. (When appropriate, of course. Some business is just plain serious business like personal injury litigation, mergers and acquisitions, or wastewater treatment, for example. Nothing funny there.)

Academic research on the effectiveness of humor in advertising is overwhelming and relatively contradictory. Researchers have found humor has no effect on recall, little effect on recall, or a lot of effect on recall but none on purchasing. They've found it contributes to positive brand attitudes, but has a negative effect on credibility. Humor positively impacts sales and negatively impacts sales. And so on and so on.

What hasn't been given due attention from researchers (and perhaps we should be grateful) is the impact of humor as part of an overall company attitude. That is, what happens when humor just isn't part of the ad campaign, but it's part of all company marketing, year in and year out? What happens when funny isn't a marketing message, but a way of doing business?

The gals at River City Rubber Works (RCRW), a Wichita-based rubber stamp manufacturer, know that humor is one way to be different. At RCRW, humor is part of the culture. Not a joke-of-the-day kind of corporate mandate, but an honest, good-natured playfulness. These folks are just plain having fun. In fact, it's their company motto: A fun time was had by all!

The owners of RCRW made a conscious decision to share their sense of humor with customers. It's not just evident in their products, but in their marketing too. They take their humor seriously. (We're not making this up.



That's a quote from their brochure. You can even buy it on a t-shirt.) Fun and funny is what sets this business apart from the competition.

Take, for example, the company cry. Lots of comedians have a catch phrase. Jeff Foxworthy says, "You might be a redneck." Rodney Dangerfield complains, "I don't get no respect." And Tim Allen . . .well Tim Allen just grunts, but it's a trademark grunt. In the spirit of comedic tradition, the girls at RCRW have their own saying. It's "Hay!" Yes, as in "Hey!" but spelled with an "a." They think it's funnier that way. Something to do with the fact that their manufacturing facility is a barn. "Hay" is heavily promoted from the website and marketing materials to the occasional phone conversation. It even has it's own logo (figure 1).



(figure 1)



(figure 2)

Still think we're kidding? Page through the company catalog or click through the website.

From the get go, you'll find a photo of the owners laughing it up on the company home page (figure 2). Don't you like these gals already? There's a clickable mooing cow too, for interactive amusement.

Open the company catalog to see family photographs including the backyard ducks, Mary's first catfish, and a picture of their recently departed grandfather sitting in a rocking chair, captioned "Grandpa rocked."

Grandpa, along with other relatives and ancestors, is featured on company stamps too. There's Party Hat Grandpa, Little Lula Belle Irene, Mad Mom, and Derby Hat Man. The gals pair these nostalgic images with other stamps featuring great one-liners and sassy quips from the benign: "My husband needs glasses. He still doesn't see things my way," to the risqué: "The only reason I would exercise at this point in my life is to hear heavy breathing again."

Laughing yet? Here's more:

From the site search page:

"What are you looking for? Type in anything. Not the word anything."

From the contact us page:

"Your message goes straight to one of the owners! Right to the top! Yesirreebob!"

Brubers

From the return policy:

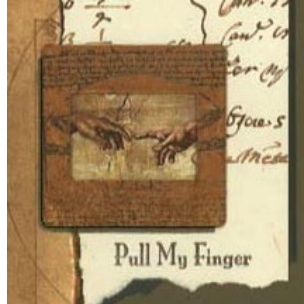
"All other returns require prior permission from us or a note from your doctor and a 500 word essay fully explaining your decision. Please include footnotes."

From the catalogue:

"Published yearly, but it feels like more often"

From the card gallery:

Pull My Finger



That's the kind of stuff that cracks up the gals at River City Rubber Works. Their customers think it's funny too. And that keeps them coming back for more.

Same Old, Same Old—With a Twist

Let's start with the harsh, but obvious. Rubber stamps are nothing new. Lots and lots of people sell them.

RCRW does take one step toward differentiation by offering clever sayings and reproductions of their goofy-looking relatives. It's amusing. It's different. But... it's probably available from other vendors. If not now, it could be soon. What really sets RCRW apart is the relationship they're building with their clientele. The family photos, the sassy sayings, the silly company policies—it's actually fun to be a RCRW customer. And who doesn't want to have fun?

Seeing the word "Hay" on an RCRW brochure doesn't say anything about how well the stamps are manufactured, how fast the service is, or whether the gals support some sort of cow relief fund. Who knows if it impacts product recall? But it doesn't take a researcher to tell us that a few Hays, some laughs, and mooing cow all create positive brand feelings.

Your corporate culture is one way to differentiate yourself when you offer the same commodity products as your competitors. Done properly, with authenticity and follow-through, the result is infectious. You'll begin attracting employees who share your ideology. Everyone becomes enthused and engaged, because they relate to the company atmosphere. That enthusiasm is sure to trickle down to your customers, giving your marketing messages honest resonance. Then, kemosabes, you have an honest to goodness brand. But wait, before you go... pull my finger.