



Swing, Batter, Batter, Swing!

9 business tips borrowed from Major League Baseball

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Summer is officially upon us, and the Boys of Summer are in action on fields of dreams across the country.

One of the greatest hitters in the history of the baseball, new Kansas City Royals batting coach George Brett, believes home runs are the product of a good swing. Take good swings and home runs will happen.

It's great to get on base but it's better to hit homers. Home Run Power – hitting balls harder, farther and more consistently – takes practice. And there is a science to being a successful slugger. Companies that want to knock the cover off the ball can learn plenty from legendary Major League Baseball players like Hank Aaron, Barry Bonds, Ty Cobb, and Hugh Duffy.

Most baseball games have nine innings (although I recently sweated through a 13-inning Padres versus the Giants stretch) so here are nine tips:

1. Focus on good hitting.

You get more home runs when you stop trying for them and focus on good hitting instead. Making progress in business is no different; aim for competence and get the basics right. Strive for everyday improvements and great execution. Adap.tv, a video advertising platform predicted to IPO in 2013, releases new code over 10 times a day to heighten continuous innovation. Akin to batting practice for the serious ball player. Goals without great execution are just dreams. According to research conducted by noted business author and advisor, Ram Charan, 70 percent of CEOs who fail do so not because of bad strategy, but because of bad execution. Practice executing with precision and you'll achieve results.

2. Time your force.

Rhythm and timing are important to a hitter. Your hands must be in rhythm with your feet. You need to be in sync with the pitcher to handle an inside pitch. Almost every time a hitter's swing is off-kilter, the reason is poor timing, not mechanics.

It takes approximately 0.4 seconds for the fastest pitches to reach the batter's box. In that short time, the batter needs to view the pitch, determine rotation, speed and angle of flight, and almost immediately make a swift decision to swing or to hold. Noting that the swing itself takes approximately 0.20 seconds and that the brain takes about 0.03 seconds to process the event, a skilled batter has about 0.17 seconds to act.

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In business, timing is critical to innovation. Information, consumer needs, technologies, and

markets are constantly changing. Predicting shifts can be enormously difficult. When it comes to truly disruptive innovation -- such as new medical devices, new drugs and medical therapies -- regulations and litigation can slow the pace of change to a crawl. San Diego's CareFusion was plagued by regulatory problems all last summer despite their commitment to patient safety and clinical excellence. Innovation in energy and transportation industries also moves slowly.

Regardless of your industry, you can actively manage the innovation process with a strategic roadmap and deployment timeline to ensure rigor, consistency, success metrics, and cross-functional participation. Execute change at the right time and you can milk the most value out of your products and services despite increasingly short product lifecycles.

3. Boost bat speed.

A big key for how to hit home runs is bat speed. Bat speed is how you get good distance. Bat speed is more important than the speed of the pitched ball. In today's tough business climate, you need to rapidly develop new value chains and quickly commercialize new products and services to take advantage of decreasing windows of opportunity. Companies that don't develop the ability to quickly adapt to change and continuously transform will become obsolete. Every year we see more and more companies, even decades-old stalwarts, fail because they were unable to transform their business models to meet changing consumer behaviors and demand. Best Buy, Circuit City, Borders Books, J.C. Penney, even innovative companies like Walmart and Apple feel the pressure.

4. Look for pitches in your power zone.

The longer you let the ball travel into the strike zone the better. The further the pitch is away, the deeper the ball travels and the less momentum you have to hit the ball far. The implication for business leaders? Focus on your core competencies. Use them as a foundation to discover and leverage hidden assets and new opportunities. While overspecialization can decrease adaptability and a rear-view mirror approach to business strategy can blind you to oncoming obsolescence such as that faced by Kodak with the onset of digital imaging, using and leveraging core competencies still provides the best chance for a company's continued growth. All you need is accurate and predictive intelligence to expose emergent industry trends and demand.

5. Relax your hands, but be a clutch hitter.

The more relaxed a batter's hands, the more likely they will whip through the zone. Athletes and business leaders who can't defeat stress when it strikes suffer low performance consequences. Beat stress before it beats you. If you're still compelled to "clutch," be a "clutch hitter" -- a term used to describe a baseball player who can deliver a big hit under pressure when the game is on the line.

6. Choose the right bat.

It's easier to get a hit if you have the right bat; you need the right fit tool to hit a home run.

Businesses are also more successful when they use “right fit” business intelligence tools – whether it’s the right computer system, the right marketing plan, or the right crowdsourcing technology. You can mine big data, predict industry and consumer demand shifts, shorten product/service development lifecycles, create differentiation in business models, and enable operational efficiencies with today’s market and business intelligence tools. Integrated technical and business architecture can help you plan for and manage change.

7. If you swing for the fences, expect strikeouts.

When you go for the long ball, you strike out. A lot. And that’s ok. While Barry Bonds and Hank Aaron are the top two MLB career home-run leaders, they’re both also in the top 100 all-time for striking out. In business, you can’t innovate without risk. A company that doesn’t allow for failure is a company that resists change. A big win will pay for multiple failures and then some. Think about it this way: failure is just another way to learn. At RE:INVENTION, we conduct Rapid and Narrative Prototyping Labs for our clients – a process whereby we generate new ideas using video and visual design mapping to capture collective intelligence and then develop a physical model or mockup of a solution. Few prototypes end up being the best or final solution. Rapid prototyping demonstrates the value of failure – it’s a necessary part of the learning process.

8. Strike out swinging, not looking.

Everyone strikes out in their career. It’s part of the game. Looking at a pitch right down the middle instead of swinging – now that’s embarrassing. Action is better than no action, in business and in the baseball stadium, even if the circumstances aren’t perfect. Turn intelligence into action before someone else beats you to it. Use predictive analytics and decision support tools to manage risk. Then take action on the ideas you have – hire that employee, launch that new product, expand into that new market. Swing, batter, batter, swing.

9. Learn to bunt.

If you can’t hit a homer, get to first base with a game-changing bunt (a gentle tap, rather than a hard swing). In Major League Baseball and in business, a bunt can win the game. Reformulating or revitalizing a product – as did Cadillac, Campbell Soup, and Arm & Hammer – can be easier than disruptive innovation and equally effective. In fact, in that recent Padres/Giants game, the Padres scored the go-ahead run in the 13th inning on a bunt hit by Andrew Cashner.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kirsten Osolind is President of RE:INVENTION, a marketing and consulting firm that helps Fortune 500 leaders and mid-size technology ventures create a culture of continuous transformation. RE:INVENTION’s team of change agents launch products, develop markets, diversify revenue streams, design predictive market intelligence tools, and boost business agility. Want to check your company’s innovation batting average? Take RE:INVENTION’s free innovation and inventiveness diagnostic test at www.reinventioninc.com.