



## Borrowing From The Big Boys

by Kirsten Osolind

Let me start off by saying I am not a Big Boy. In fact, I am a 5'5", 105-pound, blonde-hair, blue-eyed, rail-of-a woman. But I have my MBA from Duke, and I'm one of the rare few who has worked for the best of the Big Boys from Coke, to General Mills, to P&G, to Whole Foods Market (an up-and-coming Big Boy).

Big Boy Businesses know how to market for millions. And while there are plenty of areas where the Big Boys fall short – think ethics, speed to market, fostering 1:1 customer relationships and trust – there are also plenty of things the Big Boys do well that account for their fair share of growth and their mastery of marketing.

Small business owners can take a cue from the Big Boys by dedicating themselves to smart marketing. Here are 8 Big Boy principles that small businesses should consider as they strive for long-term business survival:

### 1: Big Boys Nail Brand Positioning First

Defining a positioning strategy is the most critical step in developing a brand. You have to know who you are before you can get to where you want to be. Coke, Betty Crocker, and Tide have fostered authentic, well-defined brand positioning.

Brand positioning characterizes the way a company wants its target audience to think about its brand. It lays claim to rational and emotional territory on a consumer's mental map of a specific category. It ensures that your brand is unique, defensible, credible, and motivating. The secret to a good brand positioning strategy is a clear message that talks about your strengths, and explains to customers why your product is the best in your category or industry.

A good brand positioning statement contains the following elements:

- A definition of your target audience
- Your value proposition and unique benefits (what you offer your target audience)
- Your point of difference versus the competition
- A strong reason to believe (why you can claim to be unique and different)

### 2: Big Boys Know Strategic Planning Is the Heart of Marketing

At companies like Coke, General Mills, and P&G, strategic planning is serious business. Brand teams spend weeks planning for strategic presentations to senior management. The brand team is provided with a template planning process model – and works late nights to evaluate sales and segment performance, predict sales growth, compile market trends and consumer insights, identify key learnings from the previous year's successes and failures, set firm marketing objectives for the coming year, estimate costs, and craft tactical programs and marketing initiatives to achieve those objectives.

They work and rework the numbers to prepare for questions about program impact on brand inventory or forecast hurdles. Throughout the course of the year, program plans are modified or cancelled based on brands tracking to objective. What does your strategic planning process look like?

The best marketing idea will fail if it doesn't take into account strategic planning. Strategic planning helps control marketing risks and serves as an illustrated guidebook for success.

### **3: Big Boys Believe in Market Research.**

Market research can be amazingly valuable. You can bet there was market research involved with Listerine BreathStrips, Fruit Rollups, and the Tablet PC. Market research doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. When most of us think of market research, we think of stacks of statistics, fancy focus groups, state-of-the-art studies, and expensive surveys.

In most cases, this is overkill. All market research needs to do is answer a few key questions – the simpler, the better.

#### **Here Are a Few Starter, Inexpensive Ideas for Small Businesses:**

- **Surveys:** Distribute a simple survey card at your place of business, in customer mailings. Ask your customers questions on your website or during a quick 2-3 question telephone survey when they call
- **Focus Groups:** Run your own for cheap! The secret to a good focus group is interactivity. Clearly define what you are trying to figure out and use fun, interactive techniques to get your questions answered.
- **Customer Advisory Committee:** Ask 6 interested customers to join you for lunch once a month. Ask them to share ideas about what products to buy, how to set up your business, why products sell or tank. They'll offer a "real-world" gauge on ideas.
- **Competitive & Trend Analysis:** Read your local newspaper and trade journals daily. You'll be surprised what you can learn about the competition through public relations puffery.

### **4: Big Boys Know Everything You Do Communicates – Be Consistent**

A person's perception of your company and brand is defined by the collective interactions they have with your company. From your product and service itself, to what they see, hear, and read about your company and brand. Your message must be consistent and compelling at any customer point of contact.

Take a look at any coupon, any print or t.v. ad, the packaging, or the website for Cheerios. Notice the similarities? Every message is marked by a vivid yellow color, a depiction of the "o" shape of the cereal, a single-minded tagline, uniform font type in headlines, a friendly conversational tone. Can you claim the same consistency for your business communications? Does your website reflect the same image as your business card, your marketing materials, your corporate communications?

Your image is also a reflection of your business – you are a walking advertisement from your appearance to your personality and words. Your image doesn't need to be upscale – it can be quirky, intellectual, cheeky, or conservative -- but it should reflect the mission and motives of your brand. Companies like Coke, General Mills, and P&G spend

millions on recruitment, selection, and training of “like-minded” employees to present a uniform brand image. If you are starting small, start with yourself. Be the “Very Model of a Modern Major General” for your brand.

### **5: Big Boys Scoff at Cheap Promotion – Unless it Grabs Good Press**

Every company wants to leave a lasting impression on their customers. But companies like Coke, General Mills, and P&G know that cheap gimmicks typically fall flat and fail to drive sales. A good promotion rises above the clutter. The charm of good promotions -- they require creativity and chutzpah, not a big budget. That explains the “seemingly unintentional” New Coke fiasco, Abercrombie & Fitch seasonal catalog controversies, and Microsoft's “Where's Bob” campaign. The most important part of generating publicity is finding the right hook or angle to grab the attention, talk to the values, and play to the emotions of consumers. Almost anything can be newsworthy if it is positioned appropriately.

If you want to accelerate small business momentum, make sure your promotions have publicity legs.

### **6: Big Boys Watch Their Wallets – Every Project Begins with MROI.**

MROI means maximizing the return on your marketing investment. While the Big Boys have deep pockets, they force brand teams to compete for budget allocation. As part of any project proposal, brand teams assess ROI. Projects offering the most profit upside are funded.

With tight start-up business budgets, it is even more important to continuously measure, refine, and optimize your marketing mix. You should demand that all programs have financial benefits and amplify sales. Spend wisely, and know your cost per generated lead.

### **7: Big Boys Cut and Paste – and Claim the Idea Is Their Own**

We aren't suggesting blatant plagiarism or copyright infringement (smart entrepreneurs don't want their wardrobes limited to black and white stripes). The fact is, first movers grab glory, but you don't need to be a first mover to win. P&G was second to Union Carbide in marketing disposable diapers. Dell unseated Compaq. The secret to second mover advantage: you can't just propose a me-too-idea, you need a unique angle to spin. The Big Boys fondly refer to this as “cut, paste, and tweak.”

You can apply the cut, paste, and tweak idea to any marketing program. How many players in the soda industry offer “instant-win, under the cap promotions?” Pantene (Pro-Voice, targeting young women artists) and Sprite (Direct Effects, targeting urban hip-hop) have both conducted promotional contests searching for the “next musical superstar.” Be on the lookout for great promotional ideas and marketing strategies that have worked for other industries and cutting-edge companies. Borrow and invigorate ideas used successfully by competitors living in other states. Combine two ideas into something fresh and new.

### **8. Big Boys Are Resilient – They Expect and Demand “second Chances”**

Whoever said “there are no second chances” was patently wrong. There are numerous examples of brands (Apple, Vanilla Coke, The VW Bug, the Mini Cooper, and Kraft Tang) that were only marginally successful or shelved only to

be reenergized later, when the timing was right. Second-chance brands. Some persistent brand evangelist kept the dream alive.

Second-chance Big Boy iconoclasts are as common as second-chance brands. Sergio Zyman failed at Pepsi, was rehired by Coke, launched new Coke, was appointed CMO in spite of New Coke's effervescent failure, involuntarily retired, then went on to be a best selling author and entrepreneur. Millard Drexler left the The Gap only to bounce back at J Crew. Even Dick Cheney -- asked to leave Yale University not once but twice and now Vice President -- has touted the "importance of second chances." The big boys don't internalize or personalize their failures. They don't admit defeat. They are focused on eventual success. They take advantage of the fact that people love rooting for an underdog or come-back kid.

If you are disappointed by your company's success to date, or by a new product line's performance, don't give up. Think smarter, take a break, take a vacation, reinvent yourself, the concept, and your thinking. Come back with a positive "second chance" perspective.

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