



Should you listen to your inner marketing child?

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You’re on vacation or at a conference when you spot something that seems like remarkably clever marketing. You take a photo or make a mental note, and plan to “borrow” it for your own business when you get back home. Is that a good idea?

Probably not. The most effective marketing is just like a company’s products or services. It’s unique, reflecting the unique character and nature of the business itself.

Your business may be in a category that involves dozens of competitors, but I’m willing to bet you can identify what it is that makes your company different from all the rest. Maybe your product is truly the finest in the industry. Perhaps it’s manufactured from superior materials. It could be your secret sauce is a consultative sales team adept at creating customer confidence. No matter what the differentiator may be, there’s something that makes you unique.

As a business leader, you’re probably quite knowledgeable and experienced. Your career path likely began in a specialty – such as production, sales, or finance – and your background has informed your view of the other disciplines needed to operate a company. When you consider the amount of knowledge your chosen field requires to simply be competent, it’s much more involved than something as comparatively simple as marketing.

Or is it? It’s common for leaders without a marketing background to view marketing and its close cousin, advertising, as something like morning recess in grade school. After the hard work learning math and sentence structure and all their associated rules, you ran outside to a world of fantasy and play. Your regular role is serious business, but marketing is just an entertaining opportunity to do whatever you want.

It’s true many companies approach marketing that way. But the companies that are consistently successful take a very different approach. They recognize marketing is more of a science than a form of play. It requires a deep understanding of your marketplace, what motivates your prospects, and what combination of product, pricing, and messaging will convince them to do business with you instead of a competitor.

It’s also true that nearly anyone can create a website, write a trade magazine ad, or develop content for social media. Yet there’s a difference between simply being able to create, and being able to consistently develop and implement effective marketing strategies and messages that drive leads and generate new business.

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Your inner marketing child might pop up and say, “That looks like fun! Why don’t we do something like that?” If you also had an inner marketing professional, you’d understand why you shouldn’t. You’d never think of pursuing a legal strategy because you saw someone else do it or take a questionable tax deduction because it looked appealing, or adopt a new personnel policy you dreamed up over breakfast. In all those situations, you’d run your inner lawyer, accountant, or HR child’s idea past a professional who could evaluate whether it was sound.

That inner marketing child isn’t poorly informed or deluded. I’m not suggesting that at all. However, it’s probably not an expert, and a lesson most successful business leaders have learned is to turn to people who know specialized areas better than they do. Just because marketing looks fluffy and frivolous in your eyes doesn’t mean it is. (I’ll be the first to admit there’s a lot of fluffy and frivolous out there – but its existence doesn’t mean it works well.)

While the web and other technological advances have made the marketplace seem simpler, the reality is it’s more complex than ever before. In addition to being exposed to a growing array of channels, companies like yours are discovering competitors you’ve never envisioned or anticipated. That company on the west coast? Two decades ago, they’d never poach business from you, but today, they can put their messages directly into your local customers’ hands.

That increased complexity suggests a greater importance for approaching marketing with true expertise. If you’re one of the few business leaders who has that expertise, good for you! But in our experience, few owners and managers have more than a cursory level of marketing knowledge, and many of them fall prey to ineffective approaches promoted by aggressive salespeople. If someone showed up on your doorstep with an innovative new tax deduction they assure you will mean a significant cut in your taxes, would you jump on it? I’m pretty sure you’d run it by your CFO or CPA first. Wise leaders approach marketing the same way.

Still convinced your inner marketing child has all the answers? Letting it make important decisions for your business is definitely your prerogative. Just don’t be surprised when your competitors who take marketing seriously and put it in the hands of the pros manage to stay ahead of you.

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