

To Build Your Brand Shrink Your Focus

Think Tiger Woods. What does he stand for?
How about Einstein? What do you remember about him?
Why is the Mini Cooper so successful?
What's Volvo's core message?

It all has to do with focus.

Great brands get that way by carving out a unique and easily identifiable niche that's meaningful and easy to identify. Savvy marketers then creatively and consistently promote this uniqueness to ensure it's perceived as the very best solution to their market's need.

You know the old expression: "Do one thing and do it well."

So why don't we all do that?

"Sure we can do that! We can do whatever you need."

It's a competitive and crowded marketplace.

There's so much pressure to get more business and new customers, that it's easy to get sucked into the "full-service, supermarket, one stop shopping trap".

"Hey," we reason. "Customers will have it easier if they can depend on us as their sole resource for everything. We'll be more valuable. And what's more, we'll be able to attract new customers who want those products and services that we're not currently providing."

Businesses do it all the time, don't they? Their urge to grow forces them to become unfocused. And, instead of becoming more valuable, they actually erode their stature.

Trying to be all things to everyone is a quick path to mediocrity.

I met a fellow at a recent event. When I asked him what business he was in, he proudly offered that he had four businesses. He's a printer. And he also offers graphic design and production services. And also web site development and hosting. And also he owns a video production company. (Jack of all trades -- master of none.)

On a highway near my home is a giant auto mall. You know, one of those places that offers twenty different product lines at the lowest prices around -- "We buy in volume and pass the savings on to you."

What's the message that these businesses convey?

Would you trust either of these companies to provide the best quality product? Could either of these businesses ever become a great brand? Can they possibly survive and remain viable over the long term?

There are zillions of companies like this. But can any of them excel? By definition, this kind of business model dictates that their value proposition and attraction to the consumer is going to be based solely on price. The loyalty of the customers they attract can easily be undermined in an instant by a cheaper suitor.

Also, in their attempt to be all things to everyone, these companies convey they don't value anything beyond just your money. They won't go out of their way to ensure that you'll feel pampered and cared for. They won't, or can't tailor a solution to your specific needs and won't have the best resources to provide the best product. Their personnel will be, at best, transient -- or at worst, crooks.

To them, a customer is just a mark -- a sale. You get the feeling that they won't be loyal to you.

And guess what?

As a result, you won't be loyal to them either.

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Focus is the key to greatness.

Think about the analogy of a supermarket versus a boutique. By definition, a boutique specializes in selling quality goods that they love to share.

They cultivate repeat business and referrals by custom tailoring their solutions to each customer's needs. They carefully recruit and train personnel who will support the company culture, who can learn to value the customer and go out of his or her way to serve and ensure customer satisfaction.

A great boutique is ever-vigilant to ensure that nothing erodes it's core competency and focus. It understands the value of doing one thing and doing it well.

If the boutique offers a particularly unique and extra special product or service -- and practices becoming the best at it -- and has a little luck -- and does it day-in and day-out, and long enough -- and they can resist temptation to change their focused idea -- they can sometimes grow a really great brand that commands a premium price and creates loyal and loving ambassadors.

The power lies in specialization.

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A few ideas for creating and maintaining focus.

The following ideas were compiled by Mitch Schlimmer – serial entrepreneur and creator of the Let's Talk Business Network. He summarized them from the wonderful book: *Focus-the future of your company depends on it.* by Al Ries and I in turn, share them with you...

1. Keep it simple. I define "brand" as the story that's formed in the mind of those who are in a position to use or recommend you. Distill, define your core idea as a simple idea, expressed with simple words -- so that it's easily understood and remembered by your customers, your employees, the media or anyone who's in a position to repeat your story.

2. Become memorable. The key to being memorable lies in your uniqueness. Can you find a way to ensure that what you say about yourself and the way you say it is distinctly different from what other companies are saying?

3. Focus gives you power. The more a concept is repeated, the more powerful it becomes. By finding and articulating your focus, you create an environment for repeating your simple story over and over and over. In the process, the idea gains power.

4. Focus will be hard to sell. Single focus, as outlined above, goes against intuition. It's revolutionary and will meet with resistance from your associates. (Share this paper with them to help get them on your page.)

5. Focus needs an enemy. Growing in many different directions robs a company of an essential element for long-term success: a viable enemy. Business is competition. Your solution must be perceived as a better solution than someone else's. For your business to be truly successful, someone else must fail.

A company with scattered focus loses sight of its enemies. In truth, it has too many enemies to keep its eye on any one. This is one of the reasons a diversified company can be repeatedly defeated by surprise attacks from its unforeseen enemies.

6. Focus is the future. The primary job of the company leader is not so much to manage the company as it is to find the future. Finding the right focus is the best way to make a

prediction about where the future lies and then taking specific steps to make that future happen.

7. Focus is internal as much as external. Focus needs to be turned around and applied internally as well. It makes clear to your charges what your mission is. It helps you decide who to hire and where to expend their resources. It tells you what research to conduct and what products to offer.

8. Focus is what the country needs. One of the problems in America is a lack of focus and too much diversification. But what if everything we buy was manufactured in our own country? Wouldn't it make sense for countries to specialize and tailor their products and services for people they had an affinity for? This is exactly what focus can do for a company. It can drive people and resources in the one area where the company can be most competitive.

9. Focus is not a product. Focus is the story about the product, not the product itself. The 914 copier was, by far, the most successful product ever launched by an American company. But Xerox was not focused on building a copier. They were focused on helping people build copies on "plain paper". Plain paper was the flag that led to the 914's success.

Likewise, Volvo, BMW or Mini-Cooper aren't focused on automobiles. Volvo's focus is safety. BMW is the "ultimate driving machine", and Mini-Cooper is an escapist, counter-culture way of expressing your individuality.

10. Focus isn't an advertising umbrella. Some companies think that they've found focus by establishing an umbrella advertising theme to cover all its products. For example, AT&T is fundamentally a networking company, bringing people, information and services together. Yet customers' think that AT&T is a long-distance provider. The concept of "Information management" is too lofty and complicated an idea that's hard to grasp, and therefore doesn't mean anything.

Focus has to be distilled, and distilled and refined to its simplest essence so that it becomes simple to grasp, simple to say -- in simple words, and simple to remember.

11. Your focus won't appeal to everyone. No one product or service can appeal to everyone. The attempt to appeal to everyone is the single biggest mistake a business can make. Much better to stand your own ground and appeal to your own crowd -- and write off everyone else.

12. Focus is not hard to find. A focus is not hard to find, but it is certain to get lost in the crowd. By definition, a committee cannot build a simple idea, and assigning the task of finding focus to a committee is almost always sure to lead to a lack of focus.

Often, it helps to hire outside counsel who can be objective and see the forest for the trees. It usually takes a simple procedure to find the simple idea.

13. Focus won't be instantly successful. In the short term, finding a focus will cost you business. Fewer people will want to buy your product or service. Or you might lose sales by dropping products or services that don't fit. A powerful focus is almost never successful in the short term. If the reverse were true, then every company would be enormously successful.

14. Focus is not a business strategy. A focus is restricting. It implies a narrowing of the business to dominate a segment. Business strategies, as defined by many companies, on the other hand, leave room for expansion and over-diversification (and scattered focus). At GM, for example, anything that moves would fit into its business strategy. As a result, GM leaves itself open to too many attacks from too many competitors. There's more power when you can own a market.

15. A focus isn't forever. The sad fact is, that sooner or later, even the most powerful focus can become obsolete. Companies must then retrench and re-invent their focus. But focuser beware. Focus is much bigger than fashion. It is the driver of your story; and if the decision to re-brand and change focus isn't carefully weighed and considered, there's a danger of confusing and disenfranchising your audience. Change your story only when it's time to change it.

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Allan Gorman is owner of Brandspa, llc - a Montclair, NJ based branding and creative consultancy Download a copy of Allan's informative and helpful report: "*Ten Marketing Secrets for Building a Sexier Brand*" from <http://www.brandspa-llc.com> or send an e-mail to agorman@brandspa-llc.com

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