

Choose Your Own Adventure

Confront the unknown to discover new customers

IF YOU'VE BEEN READING THIS COLUMN for a while, then you've grown up with my kids. Next week, my son is taking off for an extended period of travel in Australia and Southeast Asia. And, in keeping with his personality, the origins of this trip were defined, not by excitement, but by stress. Yes, he chose this trip for himself after saving money for several years, but then he immediately started stressing. Over what, you might ask? The unknown.

If I were to draw a comic strip of how my son deals with change, it would

be of him running to the edge of a cliff, screeching to an abrupt halt, then pacing in circles for about 12 frames. Then he would finally back up, run, and leap—with a giant grin on his face.

I was determined, as a parent, to not raise a child to stop at the edge of the cliff, failing to complete the jump. All the children in my life have been coached to leap off the edge of the cliff, with no allowances for personality, past trauma, or preference.

Because jumping is not optional.

All year I've been exploring concepts

that, had I understood them better at different points in my business career, would have prevented me from making the mistakes (or at least as big mistakes) I made. The details of each situation were framed according to the business realities of that time, but the concepts themselves transcend time and technology.

And as I pondered this month's column, bringing to an end a year of "I wish I'd knowns..." it occurs to me that the one thing we all need to embrace right now is the ability to run forward, grit our teeth if need be, and leap. Because the answers to how to run an excellent business right now aren't known. They aren't fully case-studied, analyzed, diagrammed, and graphed. The answers regarding how to run an excellent business are currently being created—by people just like you and me. Trial and error, testing and refinement, exploration of new technologies and the best ways to use them; these are the business practices of today. Sure, we all need to use good business fundamentals: operations must be managed well, we must hire terrific talent, and we must be disciplined and consistent. But none of those things get us new customers.

And that's the crux. If the 1980s were defined by streamlining and improving accounting and manufacturing practices, the 1990s were defined by using technology to compete with exciting new oper-



ational tools, and the 2000s were defined by the introductions of new technology, then the 2010s and 2020s will be defined by new ways to acquire, bond with, and keep customers. It doesn't matter how efficient your operations are, how great your product is, or how disciplined you are at managing your finances if you don't have a constant flow of existing and new customers to buy your goods.

When I first entered the world of direct marketing in the late 1970s, we were making up direct marketing as we went along. It was at the beginning of accessibility to computer mainframes for mid-sized corporations. We were creating the practices and rules about how to use massive consumer mailing lists for the first time. We didn't have models to go on that would tell us precisely how to do things; we had to make it up, make mistakes, take risks, refine our results, and do it all over again. We did this six million print catalogs at a time, every six weeks. Not only was the direct marketing industry born, but all that data management and insight formed the basis for what Walmart would eventually do to transform merchandising at the local level.

I think we're at the same place today. Only this time, the computing power is available at the individual level, and there are far more of us than ever participating in the testing, refinement, mistakes, and successes. Consumers have all but shut the door on traditional retail. It's not optional to find a new way. It's mandatory.

If you just read that last paragraph and thought, "thank goodness I'm not a retailer," think again. Either you're sell-

ing to a retail base that needs to get it, or you've already realized that you can't depend solely on that retail base for your survival. You have many choices—from working directly within your retail base to make changes, to doing the outreach on your own—but the entire jewelry industry is now in the retail business as a matter of survival.

My son's departure is Monday. Finally, five days before his departure, he is completely excited. He has done his pacing and stressing and satisfied his need to obsess, and now he's ready to go.

So, this column today is about remembering to leap. Grit your teeth if you must, but move forward. Embrace

the idea that you must go find new customers in new ways, and that nobody has figured out "the way" just yet. We have lots of ideas and small successes, but to date there's no charted path, paved and ready for you. You have to start doing it for yourself. Nobody can tell you precisely what is waiting on the other end of that jump, but you can count on one thing: It's not a void. There is another cliff there waiting to receive you. And when you land on it, you will test, and refine, and review, and re-test, and learn to navigate that new land. Consumers still want to buy and wear jewelry. You're just going to have to leap to reach them. ♦

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