

a VANILLA WORLD STRATEGY

You live your life like the paint by numbers; your teachers would be impressed. But it's a lifetime of follow the lines until you're just like all of the rest. —DAVID WILCOX

W by Steve Harvill
e live in a vanilla world, a homogeneous place where sameness is the national language. Replication is a way of life, and if you don't believe me, take this little journey:

- * Open your Sunday paper and fish around for the auto sales section. Every ad looks the same. The same font, same explosive graphics...a journey into the identical.
- * Walk down the chip aisle in your supermarket and enter the world of similar colors and graphics. Blue, red, yellow and large fonts make it amazingly difficult to separate or differentiate. Shelf position has become the holy grail of sales. Get us eye level and we will dominate your salty needs.
- * Drive by almost any strip shopping center and you will find a dry cleaner, donut shop, tanning service and one of the big three pizza places, all blending into Anywhere, USA.

is rapidly followed by a decreasing profit side. It's an equation of equilibrium. They provide a needed product...until the market is saturated.

The problem here is the foundation of our plain old existence. These replicators simply don't have much impact in a highly competitive (saturated) market. The issue is not about money or time, but how we THINK. I know how much time it takes to be an entrepreneur. Your day's time is gobbled up faster than a Thanksgiving dinner. In the world of replication, the ideas of separation and differentiation seem to come down to price. Knock down your price and you win. Unfortunately, that strategy will carry you forward only on big volumes; otherwise, it will close your doors.

But, the challenge to succeed lies in how one THINKS. In short, a successful business must have its thinking focused on separation and differentiation rather than replication.

Let's start where all successful thinking should start: the value statement. Can you define the actual, substantive value that your business strategy brings to your clients or customers? That single issue is HUGE. There is more time wasted in business planning due to the failure to recognize the value statement than in any other aspect of planning.

Take a second to think about your personal value statement. You draw upon it every time you spend money. When you choose where you get your hair cut you make a value statement. Maybe it's based on location (closest to home or office), maybe it's based on your relationship with the barber or hair stylist, or perhaps it's based on price. Whatever the reason, it's a value statement.

After you have answered the value statement for your clients, the next logical move is to determine how your strategy



creates a sense of separation from your market or competition. Does this strategy create a unique approach? Will it differentiate your product or service? This analysis will require one specific process of the three key thinking models...not strategic thinking, and not critical think-

“The strategic focus has to be on thinking—creative thinking—to bring separation and differentiation.”

So what's the deal? Why do we replicate and not originate?

Small business is a huge part of the American economy, and small business—while offering the opportunity for creativity—is also the breeding ground of the commoditization of ideas.

Much of small business is really about replicators. Owners with limited resources start small businesses that mimic those that have gone before. Dry cleaners, movie rentals, and other services and products necessary for suburban life are boats floated to their levels of success by the rising tide of population growth. It's a pretty easy equation to calculate that more people will need more shirts cleaned. There is easy entry and a low risk side, which unfortunately

ing, but creative thinking, the kind of thinking that breaks barriers ignores the status quo and is fearless in its ability to experiment. Creative thinking is truly an "impact creator."

The supermarket industry is a wonderful example that shows how a market will challenge competitors to think creatively to find separation and differentiation as each player pushes for market share.

When the giant that is Wal-Mart entered the full grocery store niche, they brought the power of their buying force to the task and grabbed market share from traditional stores like Safeway or Albertsons. In Dallas, Wal-Mart increased market share by 3.6 percent to represent 31.9 percent of the total market. The traditional supermarkets have been challenged (read "forced") to figure out creative methods of differentiating themselves in an even more highly competitive market.

Initially, prices are the primary battleground. Every week new flyers arrive in your mailbox promising steaks at \$3.49 a pound and Gatorade for \$1.00 when you buy ten. As I said above, unfortunately, in the long run pricing strategies won't beat the competitor with greater purchasing power. Creative thinking is required for survival. New ideas like organic food sections, gourmet items, wine shops, large florist operations, Starbucks outlets, bank branches, and nearly full-service restaurants are becoming regular features. The hope is that these types of additions to the traditional shopping experience will enable businesses to separate and capture market share through creative differentiation.


The hotel industry fights for differentiation with a wide variety of tactics:

- * Special beds
- * Free high speed internet
- * Free in room coffee
- * Free workout facilities
- * Reward programs
- * Cookies in the evening
(love that at Hiltons)

All these ideas are designed to separate and differentiate, to create a small niche of uniqueness in an otherwise crowded market.

When the world is filled with vanilla, the strategic focus is not on the value of vanilla. We know vanilla is good. The strategic focus has to be on thinking—creative thinking—to bring separation and differentiation.

So take some real, substantive time, and use your creative thinking tools to discover the payoff in being different!

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