

Disrupting Business as Usual

In most business circles new products and services have been viewed as the result of either an evolutionary process – being derived from an existing product or service – or a revolutionary process – the introduction of a product or service that is so innovative that it is new in both concept and form. Despite the view that these two options make up the only type of new business, there has always been a third sort – the disruptive product – that which so dramatically changes the way its purpose is achieved that it forever eliminates the way things were previously done. While it is true that some products, such as cellular telephones, are so disruptive that they need little marketing to establish themselves as such. Others, such as Google for example, are disruptive almost entirely because of the way they are marketed. This article is about being disruptive in the marketplace.

The idea of using disruption as a tool to increase market presence and improve market performance is not necessarily a revolutionary – or for that matter, disruptive, concept. The use of disruption is recognized as a viable tactic for the creation or strengthening of a brand (as Apple has done so effectively since the time it introduced the Macintosh). Still, disruption is less widely used than other marketing tactics because it is complex to conceive and even more difficult to implement.

There are 3 phases to developing a disruptive market presence when your product or service is not inherently disruptive. They are:

1. Thinking in a Disruptive Manner

In order to break convention you need to be thinking in an unconventional manner. The process to bring your thoughts “outside of the box” include redefining the product and considering alternative uses and additional, compelling benefits it can deliver (in its current configuration). By reshaping your product or service you will begin to develop a sense of the unconventional applications and purposes you can begin to apply and bring to market.

In addition to purpose and application, some disruption can be achieved simply through positioning, very much like the Virgin group of companies has managed to achieve. By using service, style, and attitude the Virgin group has managed to influence not only their sales, but their entire industry.

The thought process associated with disruption is alternative by definition. Once you have mastered thinking in a disruptive manner you will be able to consistently influence your market while keeping your competitors off balance.

2. Applying Disruptive Thinking to Tactics

The selection of disruption as a strategic objective is both bold and risky. By definition disruption is an aggressive strategy. The idea behind disruption – to dramatically alter the status quo – is dangerous and seductive. The development of a strategy revolving around the disruptive concept, therefore, must take into account not only the advantages to be gained through the successful execution of disruptive tactics, but also the risks associated with trying to change the world.

The application of the concept to the strategy involves the consideration of competitors both from the perspectives of their strengths and their weaknesses, the evaluation and positioning of the product or service you are using to disrupt the market, the channels through which the disruption will take place, the response of the targets of the disruptive product/service, and the reactions of any collateral players that may serve as cheerleaders or spoilers. Once these elements are considered and the tactical paths to disruption are identified, the initiation of the disruptive campaign can begin.

3. Implementing the Disruption Process

The implementation of the disruption process requires the execution of three steps. They are:

- Identify Convention – in order to break the mold on the way things are done you need to understand the common elements in how all the players in your space are behaving.
- Select Your Points of Disruption - once you understand how they are all alike you can begin to identify how you want to be dramatically different.
- Redefine Your Company – now that you have made your company into something different than your competitors, redefine what you do. For example, Starbucks changed the way Americans drink coffee and they redefined the coffee shop.

Disruption is a useful tactic only if you can maintain it and only if you want to forever redefine your company. It is extremely difficult to undo a disruptive image, so you need to make sure you want and can sustain the new reputation you create for your company.