



In Praise of the Purple Cow

Remarkably honest ideas (and remarkably useful case studies) about making and marketing remarkable products.

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For years, marketers have talked about the "five *Ps*" (actually, there are more than five, but everyone picks their favorite handful): product, pricing, promotion, positioning, publicity, packaging, pass along, permission. Sound familiar? This has become the basic marketing checklist, a quick way to make sure that you've done your job. Nothing is guaranteed, of course, but it used to be that if you dotted your *is* and paid attention to your five *Ps*, then you were more likely than not to succeed.

No longer. It's time to add an exceptionally important new *P* to the list: Purple Cow. Weird? Let me explain.

While driving through France a few years ago, my family and I were enchanted by the hundreds of storybook cows grazing in lovely pastures right next to the road. For dozens of kilometers, we all gazed out the window, marveling at the beauty. Then, within a few minutes, we started ignoring the cows. The new cows were just like the old cows, and what was once amazing was now common. Worse than common: It was boring.

Cows, after you've seen them for a while, are boring. They may be well-bred cows, Six Sigma cows, cows lit by a beautiful light, but they are still boring. A Purple Cow, though: Now, that would really stand out. The essence of the Purple Cow -- the reason it would shine among a crowd of perfectly competent, even undeniably excellent cows -- is that it would be *remarkable*. Something remarkable is worth talking about, worth paying attention to. Boring stuff quickly becomes invisible.

The world is full of boring stuff -- brown cows -- which is why so few people pay attention. Remarkable marketing is the art of building things worth noticing right into your product or service. Not just slapping on the marketing function as a last-minute add-on, but also understanding from the outset that if your offering itself isn't remarkable, then it's invisible -- no matter how much you spend on well-crafted advertising.

This is an essay about what it takes to create and sell something remarkable. It is a manifesto for marketers who want to make a difference at their company by helping create products and services that are worth marketing in the first place. It is a plea for originality, for passion, guts, and daring. Not just because going through life with passion and guts beats the alternative (which

it does), but also because it's the only way to be successful. Today, the one sure way to fail is to be boring. Your one chance for success is to be remarkable.

And that means you have to be a leader. You can't be remarkable by following someone else who's remarkable. One way to figure out a great theory is to look at what's working in the real world and determine what the successes have in common. With marketing, it's puzzling though. What could the Four Seasons and Motel 6 possibly have in common? Other than the fact that both companies have experienced extraordinary success and growth, they couldn't be more different. Or Neiman Marcus and Wal-Mart, both growing during the same decade? Or Nokia (bringing out new hardware every 30 days or so) and Nintendo (marketing the same Game Boy for 14 years in a row)?

It's like trying to drive looking in the rearview mirror. Sure, those things worked. But do they help us predict what will work tomorrow? The thing that all of those companies have in common is that they have *nothing* in common. They are outliers. They're on the fringes. Superfast or superslow. Very exclusive or very cheap. Extremely big or extremely small.

The reason it's so hard to follow the leader is this: The leader is the leader precisely because he did something remarkable. And that remarkable thing is now taken -- so it's no longer remarkable when *you* decide to do it.

Stand out from the herd I: Going Up!

Elevators aren't a typical consumer product. They can easily cost more than a million dollars, they generally get installed when a building is first constructed, and they're not much use unless the building is more than three or four stories tall.

How, then, does an elevator company compete? Until recently, selling involved a lot of golf, dinners, and long-term relationships with key purchasing agents at major real-estate developers. No doubt that continues, but Schindler Elevator Corporation has radically changed the game by developing a remarkable Purple Cow.

Every elevator ride is basically a local one. The elevator stops 5, 10, 15 times on the way to your floor. This is a hassle for you, but it's a huge, expensive problem for the building. While your elevator is busy stopping at every floor, the folks in the lobby are getting more and more frustrated. The building needs more elevators, but there's no money to buy them and no room to put them. Walk into the Times Square offices of Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, and you're faced with a fascinating solution to this problem.

Schindler's insight? When you approach the elevators, you key in your floor on a centralized control panel. In return, the panel tells you which elevator is going to take you to your floor. With this simple presort, Schindler Elevator Corporation has managed to turn every elevator into an express. Your elevator takes you immediately to the 12th floor and races back to the lobby. This means that buildings can be taller, they need fewer elevators for a given density of people, the wait is shorter, and the building can use precious space for people rather than for elevators. A huge win, implemented at a remarkably low cost.

Is there a significant real-estate developer in the world who is unaware of this breakthrough? Not likely. And it doesn't really matter how many ads or how many lunches the competition sponsors: Schindler now gets the benefit of the doubt.

The Sad Truth About Marketing Just About Anything

Forty years ago, Ron Simek, owner of the Tombstone Tap (named for a nearby cemetery) in Medford, Wisconsin, decided to offer a frozen version of his pizza to his customers. It caught on, and before long, Tombstone Pizza was dominating your grocer's freezer. Kraft eventually bought the brand, advertised it like crazy, and made serious dough. This was a great American success story: Invent a good product that everyone wants, advertise it to the masses, earn billions.

That strategy didn't just work for pizza. It worked for most everything in your house, including aspirin. Imagine how much fun it must have been to be the first person to market aspirin. Here's a product that just about every person on earth needed and wanted. A product that was inexpensive, easy to try, and promised huge immediate benefits. Obviously, it was a big hit.

Today, a quick visit to the drugstore turns up lots of aspirin and aspirinlike products: Advil, Aleve, Alka-Seltzer Morning Relief, Anacin, Ascriptin, Aspergum, Bayer, Bayer Children's, Bayer Regimen, Bayer Women's, BC Powder, Bufferin, Cope, Ecotrin, Excedrin Extra Strength, Goody's, Motrin, Nuprin, St. Joseph, Tylenol, and, of course, Vanquish. Within each of those brands, there are variations, sizes, and generics that add up to more than 100 different products to choose from.

Think it's still easy to be an analgesics marketer today? If you developed a new kind of pain reliever, even one that was a little bit better than the ones that I just listed, what would you do? The obvious answer, if you've got money and you believe in your product, is to spend everything you've got to buy tons of national TV and print advertising.

There are a few problems that you'll face, though. First, you need people who want to buy a pain reliever. While it's a huge market, it's not for everyone. Once you find people who buy pain relievers, then you need people who want to buy a new kind of pain reliever. After all, plenty of people want the "original" kind, the kind they grew up with. Finally, you need to find the people who are willing to listen to what you have to say about your new pain reliever. The vast majority of folks are just too busy and will ignore you, regardless of how many ads you buy. So you just went from an audience of everyone to an audience a fraction of that size. Not only are these folks hard to find, they're picky as well.

Being first in the frozen-pizza category was a good idea. Being first in pain relievers was an even better idea. Alas, they're both taken. Which brings me to the sad truth about marketing just about anything, whether it's a product or a service, whether it's marketed to consumers or corporations: Most people can't buy your product. Either they don't have the money, they don't have the time, or they don't want it.

And those are serious problems. An audience that doesn't have the money to buy what you're selling at the price you need to sell it for is not a market. An audience that doesn't have the time to listen to and understand your pitch treats you as if you and your product were invisible. And

an audience that takes the time to hear your pitch and decides that they don't want it . . . well, you're not going to get very far.

The old rule was this: Create safe products and combine them with great marketing. Average products for average people. *That's broken.* The new rule is: Create remarkable products that the right people seek out.

As I write this, the top song in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and a dozen other countries in Europe is about ketchup. It's called "Ketchup," and it's by two sisters you've never heard of. The number-two movie in America is a low-budget animated film in which talking vegetables act out Bible stories. Neither is the sort of product you'd expect to come from a lumbering media behemoth.

Sam Adams beer was remarkable, and it captured a huge slice of business from Budweiser. Hard Manufacturing introduced a product that costs 10 times the average (the \$9,945 Doernbecher crib) and opened up an entirely new segment of the hospital-crib market. The electric piano let Yamaha steal an increasingly larger share of the traditional piano market away from the entrenched leaders. Vanguard's remarkably low-cost mutual funds continue to whale away at Fidelity's market dominance. Bic lost tons of market share to Japanese competitors that had developed pens that were remarkably fun to write with, just as Bic had stolen the market away from fountain pens a generation or two earlier.

Stand out from the herd II: Mail Call

Very few organizations have as timid an audience as the United States Postal Service. Dominated by a conservative bureaucracy and conservative big customers, the USPS has an awfully hard time innovating. The big direct marketers are successful because they've figured out how to thrive under the current system, and they're in no mood to see that system change. Most individuals are in no hurry to change their mailing habits either.

The majority of new-policy initiatives at the USPS are either ignored or met with nothing but disdain. But "zip + 4" was a huge success. Within a few years, the USPS was able to diffuse a new idea, making the change in billions of address records in thousands of computer databases.

How? First, it was a game-changing innovation. Zip + 4 makes it far easier for marketers to target neighborhoods and much faster and easier to deliver the mail. The product was a true Purple Cow, completely changing the way customers and the USPS would deal with bulk mail. It offered both dramatically increased speed in delivery and significantly lower costs for bulk mailers. That made it worth the time it took for big mailers to pay attention. The cost of ignoring the innovation would be felt immediately on the bottom line.

Second, the USPS wisely singled out a few early adopters. These were organizations that were technically savvy and that were extremely sensitive to both pricing and speed issues. These early adopters were also in a position to sneeze the benefits to other, less astute, mailers.

The lesson here is simple: The more intransigent your market, the more crowded the marketplace, the busier your customers, the more you need a Purple Cow. Half-measures will

fail. Overhauling the product with dramatic improvements in things that the right customers care about, on the other hand, can have an enormous payoff.

Why There Are So Few Purple Cows

If being a Purple Cow is such an effective way to break through the clutter, why doesn't everyone do it? One reason is that people think the opposite of remarkable is "bad" or "poorly done." They're wrong. Not many companies sell things today that are flat-out lousy. Most sell things that are good enough. That's why the opposite of remarkable is "very good." Very good is an everyday occurrence, hardly worth mentioning -- certainly not the basis of breakthrough success. Are you making very good stuff? How fast can you stop?

Some people would like you to believe that there are too few great ideas, that their product or their industry or their company simply can't support a great idea. That, of course, is absolute nonsense. Another reason the Purple Cow is so rare is because people are so *afraid*.

If you're remarkable, then it's likely that some people won't like you. That's part of the definition of remarkable. Nobody gets unanimous praise -- ever. The best the timid can hope for is to be unnoticed. Criticism comes to those who stand out.

Playing it safe. Following the rules. They seem like the best ways to avoid failure. Alas, that pattern is awfully dangerous. The current marketing "rules" will ultimately lead to failure. In a crowded marketplace, fitting in is failing. In a busy marketplace, not standing out is the same as being invisible.

In *Marketing Outrageously* (Bard Press, 2001), author Jon Spoelstra points out the catch-22 logic of the Purple Cow. If times are tough, your peers and your boss may very well point out that you can't afford to be remarkable. There's not enough room to innovate: We have to conserve, to play it safe. We don't have the money to make a mistake. In good times, however, those very same people will tell you to relax, take it easy. There's not enough need to innovate: We can afford to be conservative, to play it safe.

So it seems that we face two choices: Either be invisible, uncriticized, anonymous, and safe or take a chance at true greatness, uniqueness, and the Purple Cow. The point is simple, but it bears repeating: Boring always leads to failure. Boring is always the riskiest strategy. Smart businesspeople realize this and work to minimize (but not eliminate) the risk from the process. They know that sometimes it's not going to work, but they accept the fact that that's okay.

Stand out from the herd III: The Color of Money

How did Dutch Boy Paint stir up the paint business? It's so simple, it's scary. They changed the can.

Paint cans are heavy, hard to carry, hard to close, hard to open, hard to pour, and no fun. Yet they've been around for a long time, and most people assumed that there had to be a reason why they were so bad. Dutch Boy realized that there was no reason. They also realized that the can was an integral part of the product: People don't buy paint, they buy painted walls, and the can makes that process much easier.

Dutch Boy used that insight and introduced an easier-to-carry, easier-to-pour, easier-to-close paint jug. "Customers tell us that the new Twist & Pour paint container is a packaging innovation that was long overdue," says Dennis Eckols, group vice president of the home division for Fred Meyer stores. "People wonder why it took so long for someone to come up with the idea, and they love Dutch Boy for doing it."

It's an amazing innovation. Worth noticing. Not only did the new packaging increase sales, but it also got them more distribution (at a higher retail price!).

That is marketing done right. Marketing where the marketer changes the product, not the ads.

Why It Pays (Big) to Be a Purple Cow

As the ability to be remarkable continues to demonstrate its value in the marketplace, the rewards that follow the Purple Cow increase. Whether you develop a new insurance policy, make a hit record, or write a groundbreaking book, the money and satisfaction that follow are extraordinary. In exchange for taking the risk, creators of a Purple Cow get a huge upside when they get it right.

Even better, you don't have to be remarkable all the time to enjoy the upside. Starbucks was remarkable a few years ago. Now they're boring. But that burst of innovation and insight has allowed them to expand to thousands of stores around the world. Compare that growth in assets to Maxwell House. Ten years ago, all of the brand value in coffee resided with them, not with Starbucks. But Maxwell House played it safe (they thought), and now they remain stuck with not much more than they had a decade ago.

Once you've created something remarkable, the challenge is to do two things simultaneously: One, milk the Purple Cow for everything it's worth. Figure out how to extend it and profit from it for as long as possible. Two, build an environment where you are likely to invent an entirely new Purple Cow in time to replace the first one when its benefits inevitably trail off.

These are contradictory goals. The creator of a Purple Cow enjoys the profits, accolades, and feeling of omniscience that come with a success. None of those outcomes accompany a failed attempt at a new Cow. Thus, the tempting thing to do is to coast. Take no chances. Take profits. Fail to reinvest.

AOL, Marriott, Marvel Comics, Palm, Yahoo -- the list goes on and on. Each company had a breakthrough, built an empire around it, and then failed to take another risk. It used to be easy to coast for a long time after a few remarkable successes. Disney coasted for decades. Milton Berle did too. It's too easy to decide to sit out the next round, rationalizing that you're spending the time and energy to build on what you've got instead of investing in the future. So here's one simple, tangible suggestion. Create two teams: the inventors and the milkers. Put them in separate buildings. Hold a formal ceremony when you move a product from one group to the other. Celebrate them both, and rotate people around.

Stand out from the herd IV: Chewing my own cud

So, how does an author get his new book to stand out from all of the other marketing books? By trying to create a remarkable way to market a book about remarkable marketing. How? By not

selling it in stores. Instead, a copy of the book version of *Purple Cow* is available for free to anyone reading this article. You pay for postage and handling (\$5), and Fast Company will send you one copy of the book-length version of this article for free (visit www.fastcompany.com/keyword/purplecow67 for details). How does this pay? Visit the site and I'll show you [my entire marketing plan](#).

What It Means to Be a Marketer Today

If the Purple Cow is now one of the *Ps* of marketing, it has a series of big implications for the enterprise. In fact, it changes the definition of marketing. It used to be that engineering invented, manufacturing built, marketing marketed, sales sold, and the president managed the whole shebang. Marketing, better called "advertising," was about communicating the values of a product after it had been developed and manufactured.

That's clearly not a valid strategy in a world where product attributes (everything from service to design) are now at the heart of what it means to be a marketer. Marketing is the act of inventing the product. The effort of designing it. The craft of producing it. The art of pricing it. The technique of selling it. How can a Purple Cow company not be run by a marketer?

Companies that create Purple Cows, such as JetBlue Airways, Hasbro, Poland Spring, and Starbucks, *have* to be run by marketers. Turns out that the CEO of JetBlue made a critical decision on day one: He put the head of marketing in charge of product design and training as well. It shows. JetBlue sells a time-sensitive commodity just like American Airlines does, but somehow it manages to make a profit doing it. All of these companies are marketers at their very core.

The geniuses who managed to invent 1-800-COLLECT are true marketers. They didn't figure out how to market an existing service. Instead, the marketing is built into the product -- from the easy-to-remember phone number to the very idea that MCI could steal the collect-call business from the pay-phone companies.

But isn't the same idea true for a local restaurant, a grinding-wheel company, and Citibank? In a world where anything we need is good enough and where just about all of the profit comes from the Purple Cow, we must all be marketers.

You've got a chance to reinvent who you are and what you do. Your company can reenergize itself around the idea of involving designers in marketing and marketers in design. You can stop fighting slow growth with mind-numbing grunt work and start investing in insight and innovation instead. If a company is failing, it's the fault of the most senior management, and the problem is probably this: They are just running a company, not marketing a product. And today, that's a remarkably ineffective way to compete.

Sidebar: 10 ways to raise a purple cow

Making and marketing something remarkable means asking new questions -- and trying new practices. Here are 10 suggestions.

1. Differentiate your customers. Find the group that's most profitable. Find the group that's most likely to influence other customers. Figure out how to develop for, advertise to, or reward either group. Ignore the rest. Cater to the customers you would choose if you could choose your customers.
2. If you could pick one underserved niche to target (and to dominate), what would it be? Why not launch a product to compete with your own that does nothing but appeal to that market?
3. Create two teams: the inventors and the milkers. Put them in separate buildings. Hold a formal ceremony when you move a product from one group to the other. Celebrate them both, and rotate people around.
4. Do you have the email addresses of the 20% of your customer base that loves what you do? If not, start getting them. If you do, what could you make for them that would be superspecial?
5. Remarkable isn't always about changing the biggest machine in your factory. It can be the way you answer the phone, launch a new brand, or price a revision to your software. Getting in the habit of doing the "unsafe" thing every time you have the opportunity is the best way to see what's working and what's not.
6. Explore the limits. What if you're the cheapest, the fastest, the slowest, the hottest, the coldest, the easiest, the most efficient, the loudest, the most hated, the copycat, the outsider, the hardest, the oldest, the newest, or just the most! If there's a limit, you should (must) test it.
7. Think small. One vestige of the TV-industrial complex is a need to think mass. If it doesn't appeal to everyone, the thinking goes, it's not worth it. No longer. Think of the smallest conceivable market and describe a product that overwhelms it with its remarkability. Go from there.
8. Find things that are "just not done" in your industry, and then go ahead and do them. For example, JetBlue Airways almost instituted a dress code -- for its passengers! The company is still playing with the idea of giving a free airline ticket to the best-dressed person on the plane. A plastic surgeon could offer gift certificates. A book publisher could put a book on sale for a certain period of time. Stew Leonard's took the strawberries out of the little green plastic cages and let the customers pick their own. Sales doubled.
9. Ask, "Why not?" Almost everything you don't do has no good reason for it. Almost everything you don't do is the result of fear or inertia or a historical lack of someone asking, "Why not?"
10. What would happen if you simply told the truth inside your company and to your customers?

Sidebar: Now *That's* Remarkable

Schindler Elevator Corporation

When is a bank of elevators more than a bank of elevators? When it's smart enough to tell you which elevator will provide the quickest ride to the floor you need to reach. A product *that* smart changes how people move, how buildings get designed -- and how companies, in this case Schindler Elevator Corporation, market their innovation.

Tombstone Pizza

It's good to be first with an innovation that the world is hungry for. Ron Simek learned that lesson when he launched the first successful line of frozen pizza. The product was a hit. Kraft bought it and advertised like mad. The rest is history. Of course, 40 years later, introducing another brand of frozen pizza seems less appetizing. Me-too products lead to also-ran companies.

U.S. Postal Service

The runaway success of "zip + 4" might give new meaning to the term "going postal." This simple innovation makes it quicker for the Postal Service to deliver mail, easier for marketers to target neighborhoods, and cheaper for marketers to send bulk mail. But the innovation would never have taken hold without savvy marketing by an organization not famous for its savviness.

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