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## The Default Choice

### **Quick—Give Me a Name**

If you were to list categories and say to me, “Quick, give me a name!” it would go something like this:

*Advertising agency:* Engel Creative—They’re the only ad agency I’ve used for 20 years.

*Computer services:* Bytes of Knowledge—My computer crashes. They fix it. Period.

*Martini:* Any martini made by Stephanie at Mirror—She is the Martini Goddess.

*Pen:* Flair—My workhorse writing instrument. I can’t quit ’em.

*Breakfast:* The Pancake Pantry. Go there and you’ll understand.

*Clothes:* Saks Fifth Avenue. I buy clothes at many places, but if I could choose only one place, I’d take the men’s store at Saks Fifth Avenue.

*Newspaper:* The *New York Times*—I sometimes read three or four newspapers a day. If I could read only one, this would be it.

You get the idea. In each of those product categories, I have a default choice. These companies have become indispensable to me. I can't live without them. Well, okay, that's an exaggeration. I can live without them, I suppose, but I don't want to.

I'm always looking for lessons that I can use. That's the whole purpose of this book. To give you lessons you can use to make your business indispensable to your customers. There are many threads of excellence that the companies in this book have in common. One is that each company has established dominance in one area. They each have their turf, and you know what it is. There's no confusion about what they're good at. By the way, in the interest of full disclosure, Stephanie the Martini Goddess is the bartender at Mirror, where I'm a partner. If she ever goes to work at another bar, I'll probably follow her, have a martini there, then go back to my own restaurant for dinner. She's that good. And make no mistake about it, it's not really the martini. It's Stephanie. Her customers like her martinis, but they love her. That's not just my opinion, either. The Nashville Scene's 2004 "Best of Nashville" readers' poll voted Stephanie second place in the "Best Bartender" category. Second? Personally, I think she was robbed.

Go through your own personal list of "Quick, give me a name!" choices in a variety of product or service categories, then look for threads. What do they all have in common? What do they do that you should be doing? What's your version of the particular strength or advantage that they have developed? This, by the way, is where most people get stuck. They don't have the creative vision required to look at a business totally different from theirs and see what the transferable lessons are. Pity. They lose.

That's why every business but one in any given category is a follower. In their quest for the magic template that they can simply lay on top of their company, people benchmark the best companies in their industry, then try to copy them. This strategy, by definition, means that you will always be an imitator, a follower, and second place at best. One way to help spark innovative ideas is to look outside your own business and see what's working for companies with which, on the face of it, you appear to have nothing in common.

## **Best Pizza on the Block**

I once saw a cartoon of three pizza restaurants all lined up on the same street. One had a massive sign out front that screamed "Best Pizza in the State." The next had a somewhat smaller sign that proclaimed "Best Pizza in the City." The third was the only one that had a line of waiting customers that stretched outside and down the sidewalk. It had the smallest sign of all, which read "Best Pizza on the Block." Get it? The idea is that you stake out your turf and master it.

For you, your turf may be a product category or an area of expertise. The goal is to become that default choice in the minds of your customers. You want your customers to stop thinking, and act from an almost instinctive motivation. You want to become ingrained into your customers' brains in a way that causes tunnel vision through which they see only you. You want to become the default choice.

## **Price Plummetts in Importance**

One of the greatest advantages achieved by attaining indispensable status is that price plummetts in importance as a factor in

the decision-making process. Looking at my list of default choices, I know that when I have a new marketing program to launch, I have total and complete tunnel vision. I call Todd Engel at Engel Creative and turn the job over to him. Todd works his magic, and I pay the bill. I can't remember the last time that price was a consideration. I may ask what his ballpark estimate is on a project, but it's purely for informational purposes, not really as part of the decision. If he thinks it's worth the money, I say go.

I recently referred a colleague to Todd for some marketing work. My friend called and said that he had gotten an estimate from Todd, and wanted to know if I thought Todd's fees were in line with his competition. I told him that I had no idea. What I did know was that I loved Todd's work, and I loved working with his company. Whatever they charge, I pay. I don't shop it around. He's indispensable.

The same goes for Bytes of Knowledge. My computers go down or develop a mysterious malfunction and I go into default mode. I call Bytes of Knowledge, someone comes over and fixes the problem, then they send me a bill and I pay it. I know for a fact that others charge less. This is irrelevant to me. I am typical of today's customer who places a high value on dependability and consistency of performance. I'm looking for the sure thing. I don't have the time, patience, or money to waste on any company that can't get it right the first time.

## **Master of One**

What Engel Creative, Bytes of Knowledge, and most other indispensable companies have in common is that they are masters of one thing. They know their turf; that's what they focus on; and to their customers they have become a category of one. The

age-old, time-tested approach to success through focus requires answering three basic questions:

1. What do we do *best*?
2. What do we *love* to do?
3. What do our customers *value*?

How do those three factors match up? Where do they intersect?

A classic mistake in business is to go after more customers by expanding your product or service offerings too far. This can be a great move, but it's a little like "thinking outside the box." Sometimes I have to advise my clients that before they start to think outside the box, they'd better take care of what's inside the box. In other words, innovation is great, but don't spend money, time, and energy on innovation if you haven't first mastered the basics.

The same goes for diversification. For most companies, the answer to developing new business isn't to add products or services, but to master the product or service you already offer. Getting better at your core offering will usually get you a much greater return in new customers and increased business with existing customers than the same efforts put into diversification would bring. Look at whatever you do and get better at it. Then get better again. And, if it makes sense to add products and services to your business, beware of the almost inescapable trap of letting quality slip. "Hey, you know what else we could do?" were all too often a failed company's famous last words.

This is not to say in any way that you should stop changing, innovating, or improving. On the contrary, you will never be the master of anything unless you are willing to constantly move forward. Becoming really good at one thing does not mean doing

it exactly the same way year after year. The marketplace will leave you behind if you don't always strive to do it better on a continuing basis.

### **Do You Love It?**

After answering the question "What do we do best?" move on to "What do we love to do?" The answer may surprise you. Many companies find their breakthrough to becoming indispensable through a realignment of what they love to do with what they are good at doing. That can sometimes mean some painful letting go of what's bringing in revenue, but not bringing in personal satisfaction. It's a long-term strategy; continuing to do what you don't love will ultimately result in failure on some level.

If it's not fun, don't do it. This idea will crawl all over those who like to see themselves as pragmatists, not interested in business as a "party," but strictly as a revenue creating endeavor. Hey, I'm about 50 of the most pragmatic people you'll ever meet, all rolled into one. But there's nothing pragmatic or practical or effective about trying to force the process of doing work you don't enjoy. It's ineffective and unhealthy. In the short term, you might make some money doing something that makes you miserable.

But today's market demands that you create compelling experiences for customers. You can't do that with people whose hearts aren't in it. It simply doesn't happen. You know that from your own experience as a customer. You can only fake enthusiasm and commitment for so long, then the game is up and you'll be busted by customers who see through the charade.

### **Being Good at It and Loving It Aren't Enough**

It's that third question that makes the final determination of where your business should go. What do our customers value?

Here's where the rubber meets the road. You can be great at something you absolutely adore doing, but if nobody is willing to pay you for it, what you've got is a hobby, not a business. That's the problem with the inspirational but sometimes misguided notion of "Do what you love. The money will follow." Ditto for "Follow your bliss." Hey, nobody loves bliss more than me. I'm totally in favor of bliss and partake of it as often as possible. But what's up for discussion here is business. From my own experience, I can testify that just because I love to do it that doesn't mean anybody loves for me to do it to the point that they'll pay me for it. I'm one of those people who find creative satisfaction in my work, but it's not what I love most in the world. That would be my wife Annette and our daughter Jess. And my friends, family, and my life away from work. But what I have done is find work that I enjoy, that I am good at, that matches up with market demand. Voila. That's what you call a viable business. Now all I have to do is keep getting better at it.

## **Customer Magnet**

I got off the plane in Cincinnati wanting a particular product. As I walked through the airport I passed first one, then another, and yet a few more businesses that sold this product. They all offered a good version of the product at a reasonable, competitive price. I continued walking. When I got to the center section of the terminal I turned and walked out of my way, taking a detour to get to the place I was looking for. When I found it, I stood in line and waited until I moved my way up to the counter, placed my order, and cheerfully paid about 300 percent more for the product than I would have at any of the other places I had passed.

Of course you know where I was—Starbucks. Starbucks has become exactly what you want your business to become—a

customer magnet. The Starbucks brand quite literally pulls customers past its competitors and into its doors for coffee and everything else they sell. Why do half the business magazines on the newsstand at any given time seem to have a Starbucks story on the cover? Because they've done it. They've pulled it off. To their customers, they have become indispensable.

Starbucks has found that magic intersection of what they love to do, what they do best, and what their customers value. They've cracked the code. They know their turf. It's coffee and, more important, the entire experience surrounding the coffee. To their customers, Starbucks is famous.

## **Being Famous**

Being the default choice and becoming indispensable to your customers means, ultimately, being famous. Not to everyone. Just to your customers and potential customers. Rarely is this kind of marketplace fame achieved by doing anything particularly exotic. It's achieved by doing something that may be considered quite ordinary, but doing it extraordinarily well.

I discovered the most wonderful perspective on being famous in a poem by the fabulous writer Naomi Shihab Nye. It's about being famous in a sense that you may never have considered. By taking the concept of being famous and bringing it down to the perspective of who you serve and how well you perform, we can gain a valuable insight into what really matters most. I offer it to you as a wonderful approach to doing business, and I encourage you to buy every book she's ever written. A good place to start is *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*. Read Naomi's work and she'll likely become as indispensable to you as she has to me.



## Famous

The river is famous to the fish.  
The loud voice is famous to silence,  
which knew it would inherit the earth before anybody said so.  
The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds watching him from the birdhouse.  
The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.  
The idea you carry close to your bosom is famous to your bosom.  
The boot is famous to the earth,  
more famous than the dress shoe,  
which is famous only to floors.  
The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.  
I want to be famous to shuffling men who smile while crossing streets,  
sticky children in grocery lines,  
famous as the one who smiled back.  
I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,  
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,  
but because it never forgot what it could do.

Read those last lines one more time, because they get to the heart of what becoming indispensable is all about:

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous,  
or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,  
but because it never forgot what it could do.

That's it! Be famous because you never forget what you can do.  
Thank you, Naomi, for that simple and profound wisdom.

