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Expert Opinion

The top tech businesses: What makes them different

Alan Gregerman

Business success is all about being "different" in ways that provide greater value to your customers. But most companies miss the mark in really differentiating themselves from their competition.

They stumble into battle armed with the general notion they provide "better service," are "closer to the customer," offer "the best products that money can buy," deliver the "greatest value for the cost," use the "latest and greatest technology," or have "the finest technical support in the galaxy." Some companies claim they "go the extra mile" for their customers.

If only life and business were so simple.

Whatever basic value you hang your hat on is only the starting point for competing in a very challenging marketplace. You have to be willing to create a clear and compelling difference that sets you apart.

To do this you need to innovate. You must stretch your thinking about what matters most to customers and about the real potential to deliver something unique and powerful. So let's get started...

Begin by understanding your target market's real bottom line better than anyone else. Ask yourself two straightforward questions: "What are their real needs?" and "What do they consider value in meeting them?"

Are they looking for systems that are reliable? Are they looking for solutions that are brilliant? Are they looking for the highest level of security in an insecure world? Are they looking for someone who really understands their mission? Are they looking for a vendor that will simply deliver on its promises?

Are they looking for a partner who will be there 24/7 and serve them with the most knowledgeable staff members instead of some new hire who is clueless and disinterested, being sent out after 40 minutes of bad music and 10 self-serving "commercials" on commitment to customers? Or are they merely looking for the cheapest product or service that can do a credible job?

Now try to imagine the perfect product or service to meet their needs. Think first about a framework or model that could change the way things are done in your industry.

Here are some ways you might do that:

- Provide an unconditional guarantee of satisfaction that your products or services will always work.
- Make your product easier to use or change its functions in some valuable way.

- Design your products or services to actually fix themselves when there's a problem.
- Use technology in new and different ways to stay in touch with customers any time and anywhere.
- Figure out how to anticipate customers' ongoing needs; teach your customers to be brilliant users of your offerings.
- Build products or services that deliver more value than the customer ever imagined possible.

Once you've decided on the perfect model for your product or service, sketch out the details of how you will deliver on this value proposition.

To stimulate your thinking -- and make the task more fun -- look at the practices of world-class companies in other industries that commit to delivering a very similar value proposition.

Look at L.L. Bean's unconditional guarantee of satisfaction and what it takes to support it. Look at Buckman Labs' use of information systems and knowledge management as a tool for adding value to its products (specialty chemicals).

Look at the customer service "systems" that deliver consistent value for companies such as Nordstrom's department stores and Four Seasons Hotels. Look at automotive engines that actually clean the air. Think about what "Intel inside" really means in building a bond with the computer chip maker's customers and whether you can "brand" the services you offer.

Think about the best technical support you've ever received or the most efficient service or the company that really understood your business or the vendor committed to making you smarter.

And then think about creating the details of a value proposition that really meets the needs of your market. What you will also realize is the most successful product companies make "service" an essential part of their equation, and the most successful service companies work hard to make their offerings as tangible as possible.

Finally, enhance your competency and commitment to deliver whatever you choose with excellence and enthusiasm. Develop your people, organization and everything you do around your value proposition rather than around your products or services.

There are dozens of ways to differentiate your company and raise the value bar in your industry. The only limits are your imagination and the desire to be the best at what you do.

So pull your team together, put on your thinking caps, and picture a world bright with possibilities -- of unbeatable service, world-class response time, absolutely perfect security, user-enabling products instead of just user-friendly ones, 24/7 technical support from the smartest people on the planet, customized services delivered faster than a speeding bullet, products that improve themselves over time, and simple "surprises" that make customers more successful in achieving their objectives. It's not an option. It's an imperative.

You win in business by being different.

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