

James Butler's Newsletter #80

Amuse, Inform and Inspire

April 2009

There are many 'quotes' attributed to Henry Ford that may or may not have been said or written by him, but one of the more infamous quotes is "If I had asked customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse". This is often quoted by innovative thinkers to show that sometimes, creativity requires not trusting customers to solve their own problem.

For me, the quote got me thinking about how we innovate in small businesses, and how do we break out of our current thinking to create solutions that are a quantum leap improvement in what we do?

Faster Horses

The Faster Horses quote shows that when most of us look for improvements, our thinking is determined by what we are doing and where we are when we start (echoes back to the last newsletter and *Vantage Point!*).

A good principle for sales or marketing (which I regularly espouse myself) is "solution selling" – understanding the problem a customer faces, and talking in their language about a solution (eg an osteopath talking about pain relief, not 'what is osteopathy' on their website).

But Ford's quote tells us that this can limit our thinking, if we stay in the incremental improvement mindset that we might expect from our customers. And the issue applies to other areas of the business, not just the marketing. How do we drill down below the surface level of the problem and start to see other solutions?

A key element must be to go back in the design process and ask ourselves "Knowing what we know now (as opposed to what we knew when we designed this), how would we do it differently?" From this earlier vantage point, we can perhaps imagine new pathways that will open up. The principle applies even to thinking about how we can apply this concept to our work.

If we stick too much to Ford's horses vs cars analogy, we can stick with thinking this is only about meeting customer needs through products or services. Yet the principle could apply to many parts of what you do at work.

I am in the process of implementing a new database to underpin my business – to store contact information, coaching sessions and the other things I need to do what I do. For the last 7 years I have used an Access Database built by myself and my very bright ex-colleague Helen, and it has served me very well. But the truth is it is not fit for purpose for the new needs of my business – a team of remote workers, changing services, associates doing more and more work with me, and so on.

I have learnt in recent months (sometimes the hard way) that to get the best solution, I have had to abandon attachment to what I had in Access, and look to what I need going forward. Allowing my past (and the Access database was really first written in the nineties, which anyone under 30 will tell you is "so last millennium, man") to dictate my future would only hold me back.

Recognise anything like that in your work? Are you letting where you started from dictate where you might be heading? And is that really working for you? What can you take from Ford's quote that will open up new creative ground to take your business forward? Here are some things to bear in mind:

- Beware incremental goals (10% growth for example) – if you started the whole project afresh now, what would be a bold goal to set (it's usually bigger!)?
- Get totally fresh input – learn from others in your field, other industries, other situations – how can you come up with a car, not a faster horse?
- Challenge your thinking – look at whether your facts are stone-hard truths, or just your interpretation.
- Create some time to re-think the business. Make a walk by the river or lazing (I prefer to call it thinking) with your feet on the desk a vital part of your day or week.
- Use a sounding board (yes, that's a plug for me) – have someone challenge your thinking and help you be more innovative.

Looking for a solution to deeper level problems could revolutionise your business, or the product or service you provide to your customers. Spring is a time for new ideas – how will you be innovative in your work this month?

Painless Business News

Like all IT projects, the database inches forward at seemingly glacial pace, then reaches a tipping point and could, with a fair wind, be online by the time you get your next newsletter. It may have the smooth running of a Model T Ford when we start, but I am sure my tech gurus will have it more like a Mustang before long!

One of my marketing mantras is to test and measure – so you can manage your marketing efforts. As a result, I am a keen follower of readership trends with this newsletter. Some of you may recall the picture/no picture debate last year! Well, I am happy to report that reader numbers are soaring (welcome to new subscribers, always happy to receive referred subscribers!). More importantly, the number of people who open (and therefore perhaps read) the newsletter is soaring too. This means my reach and exposure is growing – an important issue for an vital part of my marketing effort! To complete the story, we need to consider how many of you call me about my services after reading this. Well, go on, you know you want to!

I mentioned last issue that some new associates were joining Ann and I on the Painless Team. Vicky Millar has been picking up some new clients this month and it is great to have her on board. Vicky is an experienced coach with a previous career in a very large corporation, and a young family to give her perspective and to improve her juggling skills. She is superb at helping clients see the nub of an issue, and developing their own solutions. Vicky, like me, always offers a free initial conversation if you want to explore issues within your business, and she can be reached through my office (see my signature box).

Book Review

I used the phrase tipping point earlier, and I have previously reviewed Malcolm Gladwell's two books *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*. His latest book is equally thought-provoking and well written. *Outliers* is a study of what makes people great, and has some very, very interesting arguments within it. To get the full story, I would recommend you read the book, but interestingly talent is not as important as we might imagine.

Some factors are outside our control – when in the year we are born has a statistical impact in many fields, especially sport – but others are things we can change. One major factor is how much we practice/learn. Gladwell suggest that when we get 10,000 hours of practice at something, we get masterful at it, citing business greats and sporting legends. As Gary Player said, "the more I practice, the luckier I get". Any guys thinking this might be an opening gambit in a discussion about their love life, don't.

Painless Puns

In the last couple of years I spent a fair bit of time working in Budapest (it's a long story), which was a fascinating experience, and opened up a new avenue in influences. So, you might think that was the source of this quote from Albert Szent Gyorgyi, a Hungarian writer:

Discovery consist of seeing what everyone else has seen and thinking what no one else has thought.

But, actually the source of that quote was my good friend and copywriter, Liz (thanks Liz). And I think it is a profound thought. As is the following from an unknown source:

In life we either follow paths or make trails.

Making a trail means being innovative, and not just breeding faster horses!

I have the great pleasure of sitting on a number of community groups, and recent events prompted me to smile when I saw this:

A committee is a cul-de-sac into which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled.

I promise this is unconnected, but I encountered the following put-downs recently:

You have a brain like Einstein's – dead since 1955. Gene Perret

I've had a wonderful evening – but this wasn't it. Groucho Marx

And a great interchange between Blackadder and Baldrick:

"You're fired."

"But, my lord, I've been in your family since 1532."

"So has syphilis. Now get out!"

My HR guru Louise advises me that this is not appropriate etiquette for modern management practices such as appraisals. Shame!

Final Words

Having a faster horse can be a seductive idea, but sometimes a car is actually what we need. Should you be considering an alternative solution to some of your/your customer's challenges?

This week I watched Al Gore's *The Inconvenient Truth*, about global warming. With that in mind, aren't 'cleaner cars' just like faster horses? What's the more innovative solution?

Warmest regards

James Butler

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Careful assessment of your needs ensures that the most appropriate intervention is supplied – whether one to one ongoing coaching, strategic reviews, training events or facilitated group exercises within a team.

To discuss how you can painlessly build the business you want, call James today for a no-obligation discussion of your situation.