

Dick Maggiore: Think like a start-up

By [Dick Maggiore Special](#) to The Canton Repository

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Early and often over the history of this column our counsel has been about the importance of strategy in marketing our products and services.

We say it often because it is so critical. It cannot be overstated. Strategy and tactics are the yin and yang for marketers. Marketing is warfare, said the fathers of [positioning](#) strategy Jack Trout and Al Ries. It stands to reason then that one of history's greatest military strategists might add perspective on the matter.

“Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat,” said Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu.

The words of Sun Tzu ring as true today as they did when he uttered them 2,500 years ago.

A start-up, working from a clean slate, should focus on fundamentals to build the foundation for success. But what about companies that have been around for years, developed habits and now are looking for the growth that seems elusive?

Our advice to them is simple: Think like a start-up.

Every organization has limited resources. Therefore, companies, organizations and even government agencies all need a plan before they spend their scarce dollars.

Strategic marketing begins with finding the hole — the unmet customer need or want. Knowing the need, brands then must develop a marketing plan with strategy and tactics directing their work and their money.

All of this happens with customers in mind. Peter Drucker, the father of business consulting, made a profound yet simple observation: “The purpose of a business is to create a customer.”

To create customers, start with finding that unmet need in the marketplace. Ideally, you determine the need before the product or service exists. More often though, it means adjusting or repositioning what you already have.

Next you segment the market, target the customer and hone in on the right positioning. Do this properly and the product will almost design or reposition itself, aligning naturally with the right price, features, benefits and even how best to distribute in the marketplace.

What remains is to communicate the right message, with the right tone, using the right media. It's not easy with so many choices today. If it were, every brand would be wildly successful.

The progression just described is natural for a start-up. But with an existing product or service, you must innovate. Companies not only can think like a start-up, they must think like a start-up.

The pace of technological, economic and social change in the marketplace continues to accelerate, which means we must be prepared to change, too. Today's customers' needs might be tomorrow's buggy whips.

Active listening and responding with your customers should be commonplace. Engagement with your industry and related industries can be one of the greatest sources of new ideas. Studying your competition should be a regular ongoing practice.

Throughout all of this, the question to ask: “How can we give greater value to our customers at a profit?”

Your organization must be customer-centric, even customer-obsessed. For some, that will involve a change in its culture.

Every organization should feel like a start-up. It should feel like it's in perpetual motion — always adapting. If it feels a little uncomfortable, that's a good sign.

Speed, agility and adaptability define today's successful organizations.

Pay no mind to the saying, “If it ain't broke, don't fix it.” It's a deadly mindset, as you must adapt your organization to the ever-evolving marketplace. Your team's goal should be to examine every which way to break it.

Teams and a culture of collaboration encourage innovation. Each team member brings his or her unique knowledge and insights about competitors, trends and even learnings from other industries to the table.

Connecting the dots can result in an innovation allowing you to leapfrog the competition by meeting an unmet need with your customers.

Opportunities abound for those who take the challenge to boldly set a course embracing change.

To get the ball rolling, even if your company is on its way to its sesquicentennial, think like a start-up.

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