

If it ain't broke, still fix it



At the turn of the Millennium, legendary darts commentator Sid Waddell nominated Phil Taylor as the greatest sportsman of the century. For those of you not well versed with the world of tungsten and flights this might come as something of a surprise. Sid's reasoning was that Taylor (also known as 'The Power') was the undisputed king of his sport, winner (at that time) of eight World titles, and pretty much invincible in any match that he considered to be important.

Whether or not you consider darts to be a sport worthy of such lofty recognition, Taylor's record is certainly impressive. He has been at the top of his game for two decades, and no-one has really come close to toppling him.

Which is why it might seem odd that he spent much of 2001 trying out new ways to improve his technique and scoring. He switched to more rounded flights, and developed a new 'double-stacking' technique to give him an even better chance of landing a succession of 180's.

Okay, okay ... I'll acknowledge that darts is more of a pub pastime than an Olympic sport (for the time being, at least), and 'double-stacking' might not be as revolutionary as the Fosbury Flop, but I do believe there is an important lesson for business in the reason lying behind its development.

Taylor, like so many of the very best sportsman knows that if things are going well and you're at the top of the tree there's only one way to go if you get complacent – down.

Tiger Woods did much the same thing when he was at the top of his game and had just won all four Majors – he changed his swing, suffered a temporary loss of form while he became accustomed to it, accepted the brickbats of the critics, but then emerged as an even more dominant force (at least until other 'distractions' became evident...). Lee Westwood did much the same thing in order to enable him to challenge for, and briefly achieve, World Number 1 status.

The old adage tells us that if things aren't broken, why try to fix them. The old adage is, in my view, all too often cited in order to provide us with an easier ride in life.

Think about the brands that have appeared to be invulnerable, riding on the crest of a wave of success, that have stuck to their tried and trusted formula, and have either been given a rude awakening, or sent back to earth with a crash.

Marks & Spencer was pre-eminent on the high street in the 1990's, with a proven approach and steady band of highly loyal customers. But more contemporary and more nimble rivals usurped its position and made M&S appear tired and plodding – it took a good while, and much soul searching and investment to begin to turn the brand around again, to make it relevant for a new generation. And the lessons have clearly been learnt, and M&S now continually seeks to innovate its food and its clothing offerings to ensure that they remain relevant and appealing.

Sometimes it's the actions of competitors that can threaten a brand's pre-eminence, but sometimes it's the even bigger threat of a creeping social change that suddenly explodes and gains mass acceptance.

Look at McDonalds, whose operational model and single-minded branding made it the unquestioned 'master' of the fast-food sector, and automatic choice for kids for their Saturday afternoon treat. Yet the business's steadfast adherence to its proven model meant that McDonalds was slow to embrace the changing attitudes within society towards obesity and children's dietary needs. Its nods towards healthy products a decade ago always seemed half-hearted, as if it was wanting to be seen to offer a 'better for you' alternative without any real commitment to this area. Only belatedly has McDonalds sought to introduce genuinely nutritious alternatives as a core

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part of its menu, and to change its whole brand presentation in a move that signifies full acceptance that it has to move with the times.

Rapid technological advance and its adoption by the mainstream can also damage, or even destroy a brand that is not fully prepared. The incessant growth of digital cameras severely threatened Kodak's dominance of consumer photography, but at least Kodak did (belatedly, perhaps) seek to adapt to the demands and opportunities of the digital world, moving from being a photography 'software' brand to a camera and digital frames 'hardware' brand.

Polaroid, the only brand in instant photography in 1991 actually had to file for bankruptcy a decade later. Its brand owners simply couldn't see beyond their core product – the camera – to the latent potential of a brand that was synonymous with the excitement of capturing a moment instantaneously.

The truth is, there is no better time to look for new ways of doing things than when you are at the top. That's when you have some breathing space.

It's also when you've probably got the economic security to explore some new approaches, to formulate and test new ideas, and to invest in understanding how best to prolong your success. Sometimes it can be hard to fully appreciate your brand's role and status within an increasingly complex, competitive and changing world – and that's where we can help! – but taking this deep breath and refusing to rest on your laurels is critical to sustaining dominance.

It's what Phil Taylor did. Ten years on, he's still at the top of his sport, and he's still looking for ways to get a new edge. He's now won 15 world titles, and he'll be the strong favourite to win again next year.