

Why Wrong Can Be Right

These days it seems that pretty much every decision that we make has to be justified, quantified and proven beyond any reasonable doubt. Management systems set out careful procedures to be followed, 'stage gates' to be passed through, and ratification processes to be followed – all to ensure that the right decision is reached.

On the face of it there's a sound commercial reason for all of this – it makes sense to try to eliminate as much risk as possible from the product, service or brand creation process. Most new launches still end in failure, so isn't it prudent to do everything possible to make sure that yours is one of the elusive successes...?

Well, up to a point.

But we think there is also value in giving people their heads, and encouraging them to fail. Of course, nobody in their right mind starts out by thinking that what they are trying to achieve is the wrong thing to do, but we should acknowledge the potential virtues of 'giving it a go' and (sometimes) failing gloriously.

Looking back with 20/20 hindsight is a damned sight easier than peering into an indistinct, uncertain future. But without a willingness to do the latter true progress is hard to achieve. As Henry Ford famously said, "If I'd asked my customers what they wanted they'd have asked for a faster horse".

Today's business world is becoming increasingly risk averse. Shareholders demand certainty, and instant returns for their investment. They don't like to hear phrases like, "...well, it hasn't gone exactly as we planned".

Yet, at the same time it is ever more difficult to uncover true innovation – those ideas that don't just build on a market opportunity, but create a whole new sector and set the world on fire.

The kind of ideas that come from taking a chance, and being prepared to risk being wrong.

Because sometimes, appearing to be wrong can actually be the right thing to do. Let me tell you a story to illustrate what I mean;

Back in 1951 the Boeing Corporation in the US were in the midst of a significant military project when commercial aviation began to seriously boom. Passenger numbers were

on the increase, but Boeing was lagging behind in terms of the manufacture and supply of commercial aircraft – they were still relatively small fish in this growing pond.

A bright spark named Fred Halliday wrote a document proposing that Boeing manufacture the largest ever commercial aircraft. The executives at Boeing decided to take a chance and follow Halliday's proposal, but the scale of this risk was enormous – it wasn't just a completely new type of plane; it also required a commitment to building the single largest commercial structure in the world to house the production facility for the aircraft.

The plane was built, tested and rolled out in December 1963. The launch was spectacular, and the commercial aviation world collectively 'oohed and ahed' at the sight of this behemoth of an aircraft, capable of carrying 400 passengers over 10,000 nautical miles. It was a real ground-breaking piece of engineering.

And it was also a commercial flop. Orders were slow, the payback was poor, and it took Boeing to the brink of bankruptcy. A multi-million dollar corporation was virtually on its knees after sinking all its time and effort into this project.

It would have been understandable if someone had taken Fred Halliday to one side and said, "Listen fella, we think we might have made the wrong decision about this 747 of yours..."

Of course, the passing of time has shown Halliday to be right about his hunch, and the Boeing 747 has become the world's best-selling long-haul aircraft, and a brand synonymous with inter-continental flight.

Without Halliday's vision, and a genuine pioneering spirit it is very likely that it would never have been built. And without a determination to keep backing this judgement even when the early signs in the marketplace were distinctly unpromising the 747 would never have become the dominant presence in the sky.

If you are thinking about how to break into, or create, new markets, or to launch a new brand (or even refresh an old one) we'd encourage you to consider the possibility of getting a few things wrong. Learn lessons from those pioneers like Fred Halliday and his Boeing colleagues who had the ability to dream the impossible, and weren't afraid of the odd set-back on the path towards its achievement.

In this day and age the rational head will generally rule on most business decisions, but we believe there's still a vital role for the heart to play in bringing real passion and hope to the development process.

Because that's what makes the difference between a good brand, and a really dominant, great brand.



THE BRAND
NURSERY

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