THE POWER OF FAILURE

By: Andrea Syverson

I want to talk about the F word. Not *that* F word of course, but one that perhaps conjures up just as many emotionally negative connotations: FAILURE. We don't like to talk about failure. We don't like to admit that it could happen to us or that it *has* happened to us. We even think we might just bring it on by talking about it. We remember the shock of seeing a grade school teacher slash our tests with red wrong marks. We might have even gotten an F once or a D or a C- that felt like an F. We try to forget about failure as quickly as possible.

Instead we over focus on praise. Especially in the business world. Who doesn't love hearing customer raves? "We love doing business with you." "Your service is excellent." "Thank you for going the extra mile." "I love your products." Yes, these are the words that bring a smile and a confidant nod to every business leader and are the ones passed around in company meetings when customer feedback is solicited. "We're doing great," we're told and we're soon onto the next topic. But, if this is *all* you are paying attention to as a brand leader, you are failing your brand. You are failing to seize the power of failure.

Brands need to embrace failure. All aspects of it. And, at all levels of the organization. From taking the kind of risks that could lead to failure to encouraging employees and customers to talk about when the brand has let them down to conducting thorough and honest assessments of what isn't working and why. It is only in a culture of failure acceptance that real success can happen. Writer Samuel Beckett encourages us with these words: "Go on failing. Go on. Only next time, try to fail better."

So, as brand leaders, how do we fail better? Here are a few suggestions:

CHECK YOUR BRANSON METER

Many adjectives have been used to describe Richard Branson but he describes himself by what he's not: "I'm not the sort of person who fears failure." I like that about him. It is a rare quality. In his latest book, *Business Stripped Bare,* he acknowledges that real "failure is not giving things a go in the first place. People who fail are those who don't have a go and don't make an effort. Failures can't be bothered. There are few people who've tried something and fallen who didn't get enormous satisfaction from trying and I've learned more from people who have tried and faltered than from the charmed people for whom success came easy." So, how do you view failure? Do you go to great extents to avoid failure or do you purposefully push yourself (your brand, your team, your department) out of your comfort zone to take risks?

Recently, at two unique strategic planning sessions for two different clients in entirely distinct industries, I diagnosed too much brand perfectionism in their organizations. I could tell they were all Type A, driven types who hated getting any red marks on their papers both in school or in the office. They played it too safe. Their neat and tidy product development efforts were getting in their way. All the organizational process bureaucratic I's were dotted and T's crossed. While these processes *once* served them well, they didn't any more. Products were late. Competitors were beating them to market. Costs were rising. Each product had to be so buttoned up before they released it that they lost both market share and profitability to more agile, less risk adverse companies. Even more sadly, they left the customer entirely out of the loop in creating new products so they missed a critical feedback tool that could have helped them hone their offerings. As internal experts, they thought they had to have all the answers themselves. They were used to getting straight A's. But getting an A+ in perfectionism can actually hinder your learning. Learning to let go and invite customers into your brand is the new work of today's brand leaders.

So, what is your brand's Branson Meter? Are you willing to jump in and make mistakes or are you possibly paralyzed by perfectionism? Ray Croc, founder of McDonald's pulled no punches: "If you're not a risk taker, you should get the hell out of business."

WELCOME TO THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

Hopefully, mistakes happen and they are a natural part of your brand's DNA. The real mistake is thinking your brand or company is "too big to fail" or, as Malcolm Gladwell wrote in a ***New Yorker*** article this year, "the psychology of overconfidence." Jim Collins also addresses this dynamic in his latest book, ***How the Mighty Fall.*** Collins' term is the "hubris born of success." There are warning signs all around us about the little guys winning big battles (Just one example: Netflix taking on Blockbuster and now Redbox taking them both on!), but many brand leaders still fail to look up and out. When brand leaders only pay attention to the positive feedback from their customers, they assume they are doing everything right. They get a bit arrogant about their competitive positioning. They think it is theirs forever. Wishful thinking is not part of the School of Hard Knocks curriculum.

In the School of Hard Knocks, stories of failure are welcomed. They are sought after, not hidden in the back of company drawers, hoping never to be noticed. They are analyzed and they become the catalysts of corrective action plans.

Does your brand ask both their employees and customers how they can be better served? Or where has the brand let them down? Are there any "work arounds" in the brand experience that make doing business with you difficult?

Target, a highly successful brand that often gives its biggest competitor a run for its money, once surveyed their customers as they exited the store. "Where are you going next?" they asked. "What *didn't* we have that you need to go elsewhere for?" In these interviews, they discovered that many of their middle-America-mom customers were headed to places like Hobby Lobby or Michael's for craft supplies. With this first hand knowledge, they decided to take a calculated risk and add a craft department to their stores. The risk paid off. Target didn't think they had all the answers nor were they afraid to take a risk with a new product category. Rather, they discovered what philosopher Leo Buscaglia believed to be true: "We seem to gain wisdom more readily through our failures than through

our successes. We always think of failure as the antithesis of success, but it isn't. Success often lies just on the other side of failure."

Bellingham artist Rosie Harris knows all about the surprise endings that can happen when we "listen to our errors." Recently frustrated by an old collection of paintings taking up space in her studio, she tore them up and planned to toss them. Later, upon further musing, she decided the colorful pieces of art could be repurposed into another product…and thus a wholly unplanned line of greeting cards was born. Yes, success often happens by listening to and living with our errors.

What is your brand doing to create some type of "failure feedback loop" to listen and live with your errors? Don't be afraid of what you'll find; rather, think of it as a chance to learn and grow and potentially broaden your brand's horizons.

SLOW TALK POST MORTEMS

I know it *used* to be a common practice for many multi-channelers to take the time to have strategic post-mortem conversations evaluating a season's results by sales channels (retail, on-line and catalog) and by customer segments. Product visual boards would be created and the nuances of what worked and what didn't would be discussed along with promotional strategies and competitive tactics and offerings. In today's attention deficit business culture where every one is chasing the next new thing, I'm afraid these important cross-departmental meetings have morphed into line item reports read individually and acted upon in silos. The subtle underlying threads of what didn't work do not get fully analyzed and the real failure of this short cut practice is that similar mistakes get made again (and possibly again).

I am a proponent of serious, slow talk (like the Slow Food movement!) post mortems where true learning and insights can occur. I have both led and participated in these with my clients and they work and are worth it. Stop and think time. Concentrated focus on the previous season's happenings both for your brand and your customers' experience with your brand. Free flow of information. Open agenda. Robust conversations. Potential surprise endings.

Are you satisfied by the amount of time your brand spends looking back? Where can you slow down and take time to better understand and collaboratively converse about your brand faux paus?

So, please, as a brand leader, hold your head high and go forth and fail better!

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