



BE DIFFERENT or be dead

Your Business Survival Guide

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Never has it been more important to be distinctive — to be different — in the marketplace than it is today. Consumers are spending fewer discretionary dollars. Competition is intense as businesses jockey for the winning formula to attract customers. Those that don't face this reality will slowly wither and eventually fail.

Be Different or be dead describes how businesses can navigate the turbulent waters of the contemporary economy. Drawing on his distinguished career as a business executive, entrepreneur and leader in the telecommunications industry, and business consultant, Roy Osing gives readers the real deal: performance enhancement and survival ideas based on solid business principles that have been successfully implemented in the real world.

Be Different or be dead focuses on strategies that Osing has personally developed and executed: things you can do today to immunize your organization against performance decline and business failure tomorrow. It also offers strategies that work.

For business strategy executives, marketing and sales managers, customer service managers, business owners and entrepreneurs alike, *Be Different or be dead* is an invaluable resource for any leader seeking to create a competitive edge for his or her organization and build long-term success.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to master the art and craft of corporate and product differentiation.
- How to motivate team members to execute a differentiation strategy.
- How to remain profitable and survive in today's challenging business environment.
- How to harness the energy from all parts of your organization to work in unison to win in your market.



by Roy Osing

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: BE DIFFERENT OR BE DEAD

by Roy Osing

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BE DIFFERENT Strategic Imperative

The "Be Different" strategic imperative is based on the reality that most organizations today operate in a world of unpredictability, constantly challenged by random events that test their viability. In such an environment, organizations must develop a business strategy based on the market dynamics most likely to affect them. And they must react fast when planning assumptions fail to materialize.

In today's volatile environment, random external events challenge the traditional techniques used to manage them. Many businesses, however, still rely almost exclusively on traditional forecasting tools and models to predict where they will be in the future, leaving little room for these unexpected events. Exclusive use of these tools to predict business outcomes could be a recipe for disaster.

Momentum Management

You simply cannot assume that the future will be an extension of the past. To do so would suggest that past successes will determine future wins. In an all-things-remaining-equal environment you might be able to get away with this. But the fact is that as a business looks forward in time, all things are not equal. The only thing we can count on is facing uncertainty at an accelerating pace with significant impact on our organizations.

Successful organizations understand the need to learn from the past and apply that learning to future scenarios. They also know that they must lead into an uncertain future by introducing new ideas, concepts and tools to prevent organizational mortality. Those that don't, con-

tinue to toil on in the mistaken belief that the actions behind past successes will continue to work in the future. This *momentum management* results in the demise of organizations. The issue is not whether it will happen, but when.

Long-Term Sustainability

Here are some key external factors that challenge business success and long-term sustainability:

- **Increasingly demanding customers.** Customers today have more choices available to them than ever before, provided by a glut of suppliers in the marketplace.
- **Crazy competition.** The push of new technologies provides new products and services, many of which result in new businesses.
- **Fickleness trumps loyalty.** Customers today find it relatively easy to change service providers; the risks of doing so are low as well.
- **Too much competitive chatter.** More competition and the accelerating rate of new business formation have resulted in more advertising and media clutter than ever before.
- **Rules. Rules. Rules.** Many external bodies in the marketplace play a major role in determining the future of an organization.

External Causes of Business Failure

A Statistics Canada study by John R. Baldwin titled *Failing Concerns: Business Bankruptcy in Canada* concludes that firms fail because of both unanticipated external shocks and internal deficiencies.

The study found that the top six *external causes* of business failure were: economic downturn in the market facing the firm, increased competition, customer difficulties



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— loss of a major customer as the result of relocation or market change, fundamental change in market conditions, government regulation and fundamental change in technology.

It concluded that it is unlikely that there is a single factor alone that kills a business; rather, it is more likely that a number of factors collaborate to produce the destructive perfect storm. However, the study goes on to say that almost half of the firms in Canada that go bankrupt fail primarily because of their own internal deficiencies rather than these externally generated problems alone. In other words, faced with external unforeseen pressures, businesses fail because they are not able internally to figure out how to react to them and survive.

Internal Deficiencies

The four most significant *internal deficiencies* cited were: inability to adapt to change, lack of flexibility and initiative, poor communication and lack of organizational vision and planning.

Addressing these organizational skills is certainly necessary to build business value in good times; they are absolutely critical to survival in bad times. The Be Different strategies will show you how.

Be Different or Be Dead

If you are not *different* you are dead or soon will be. In other words, to be able to survive, an organization needs to position itself uniquely in the marketplace. It must be able to carve out a special place in the customer's mind so that loyalty is not only created but also has a long life.

You don't necessarily have to be better than your competitors; you just have to be different. You must find a way to redefine yourself as different from others in the marketplace and give customers what they want in the quality they expect.

Create Compelling Differences

The challenge is to create meaningful and compelling differences that will separate you from your competition, and to articulate these differences to your target customers in a way that will convince them to do business with your organization and no one else. A meaningful difference is value, provided that it combines a high *must matter* factor to the customer with a low *currently satisfied* factor. It is something that is really important to the customer and is currently not satisfied by any supplier in the market.

You need to get the customers' attention, clear the message clutter and then tell them in very clear and specific terms why they only have one choice, and that

choice is you. This process requires that your organization develop and communicate a value proposition to the market that is truly unique.

The Only Statement

How does an organization know whether it has meaningful value differences to offer existing and prospective customers? One method of answering this question is to compose "the only statement." The objective in developing this statement is to define the exclusive value or customer benefits that your organization provides. The use of the word *only* is critical as it forces you to consider the benefits that you alone provide.

"We are the *only* ones that ..." is a claim that will define your organization's uniqueness. Spell it out and then test it constantly with customers to make sure it is compelling and real; and continues to be so.

Be *bold* in your search for being different. Organizations are inherently rich in opportunity. To create the uniqueness you need to survive, look broadly across all functions and aspects of your business. Evaluate all of your organizational capabilities and look for ways to leverage them, distinguishing yourself from the pack.

Webkinz

Webkinz is the brainchild of GANZ, a company established in 1950 to provide a selection of gift products worldwide. On its Web site, it explains: "Webkinz pets are lovable plush pets that each come with a unique Secret Code. With it, you enter Webkinz World where you can care for your pet, answer trivia, earn KinzCash and play the best kids games on the net."

What is different about Webkinz is that the company has defined its product to be much more than the toy itself. It has added an experience dimension that utilizes the power of the Internet. When you purchase your Webkinz toy, you go online, adopt it and register its name, which is unique to you and no one else. In the Arcade are games to play. You can visit Dr. Quack at the Clinic if your Webkinz gets sick. You can go to the Clubhouse to play with other Webkinz World members. You can also create a home environment for the toy in My Room. In the My Pets area, you can see each pet's status, read its bio and reprint its adoption certificate.

Here is a company that has chosen to provide a product that could be thought of as a commodity, yet has created product attributes that leverage a tool, the Internet, into which its customers are growing in order to differentiate itself. Is it the low price supplier in the market? Not even close. ●

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BE DIFFERENT Business Strategy

First of all, to develop a Be Different strategy, you need to look at every possible aspect of your organization to be different. A business strategy is a very good place to start. If your business strategy is different, everything that flows from that strategy will reflect that difference and your chances for survival and success improve exponentially. A business strategy applies to all areas of your organization, including marketing, sales and customer service.

To many people, creating a Be Different business strategy means building a strategy with a truly unique intent; one in which the fundamental direction chosen for the organization around its various elements — such as markets, products, pricing, differentiation, partnerships and alliances and sales — is fundamentally different from that of all other competitors.

Second, it is highly questionable whether any organization can realistically claim that its strategy is truly unique from all of its competitors. Finally, even if it were unique, the strategy would not, in and of itself, guarantee success.

Dumb It Down

What will enable a strategy to Be Different and be successful? It starts with simplifying the process of creating your strategy. If your strategy is flawed due to incomplete information, changing market conditions and limitations on the strategic choices available to you, why not have a strategic development process that enables you to find your direction fast? Then you can move on to the most effective things you can do for the success of your strategy.

The Be Different strategic planning model involves essentially four components:

- **Creating your Strategic Game Plan.** Your Strategic Game Plan is typically developed by answering three fundamental questions: How big do you want to be? Who do you want to serve? How will you compete and win?

The Strategic Game Plan statement represents the essence of your strategy. It not only directs new activity and behaviors in the organization, it also acts as the main communications vehicle to your employees to describe your future strategic direction. It looks like this: “We intend to (how big) by [desired time frame] by focusing our scarce resources on (who to serve). We will compete and win by (how to win).”

- **Developing your Execution and Accountability Plan.** Now you need to go to the next

step and develop your execution and accountability plan, which addresses how you will bring the game plan to life. It answers these three questions: What are the key things that need to be done to deliver the Strategic Game Plan? When do they need to be done? Who will be held accountable for getting them done?

To provide structure to this process, you must often ask these questions of the major departments that are the main stakeholders in an organization and responsible for the successful execution of any strategy. These include marketing, sales, service, human resources, finance, operations, information technology and business development. Furthermore, all departments must review and eliminate non-strategic activities. Assign someone senior in the organization to oversee the implementation activities and serve as a “strategy hawk.” Pick the most detail-oriented, persistent and tenacious person for the role.

- **Employing a Team Workshop Process.** Design the workshop to involve those people critical to the success of the strategy. The number of people involved in the workshop is usually not an issue, although a good group is in the range of eight to 10. Use the team to create the Strategic Game Plan.

The advantages of the workshop approach over the traditional consulting engagement process include: lower investment from your organization in terms of consulting fees, information generated is only what’s needed to make the specific tough decisions on strategy, substantially less time is consumed, participants own the strategy and its results, teamwork is strengthened and the focus is on strategy execution.

- **Reviewing your progress regularly.** The last component to dumb down your strategic planning process involves a periodic review of the progress being made to execute it in the market. The process is to assemble the strategy workshop team chaired by the strategy hawk every quarter and go through each objective and action plan to determine whether or not it is on track. Where the chosen strategic direction represents a significant departure from past practice, you might decide to meet more frequently, say monthly, to have a closer look at how the implementation is proceeding.

The output from a progress review session is an action plan addressing those objectives that are falling behind, with individuals assigned certain tasks to get things back on track by a specific date. This action plan portfolio then forms a part of the agenda for the next progress review. This structured approach is very effective in keeping the implementation of your Strategic Game Plan alive.

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Focus. Focus. Focus.

Going hand in hand with dumbing down the strategy process is the need to focus your efforts on the few things that matter; that would deliver the highest percentage of results. This is a stark contrast for those who, in the past, have been involved in strategy building sessions that resulted in more objectives and action plans than could ever be implemented. The reality was that they were trying to do more than existing levels of resources would allow.

The test question: If you have people, time and money to do only three things, what would they be? Determine the small number of things that will deliver most of your strategy. Evaluate each objective from the point of strategy impact and devote resources to as few as you can.

Eliminate all activity that does not work toward implementing your new strategy and reassign the people associated with the non-strategic projects. You don't have the time or resources to do anything else. *Managers of irrelevance* must go as well. ●

BE DIFFERENT Marketing — Customerize

To Be Different, an organization needs to *customerize* its marketing strategy and its marketing culture. In many organizations today, marketing is not adequately customer focused to allow them to take the lead over their competitors. It is not that the Marketing 101 approach is wrong; it's just that it doesn't go far enough.

If you want to distinguish yourself, you need to Be Different in marketing and explore new paradigms that define what it means to live for the customer.

Customerization involves a fundamental shift in emphasis from developing products for broad market segments to creating packaged offers for small groups of customers. Market customerization involves moving from a pure product-oriented focus to a customer-oriented one in which both receive prominent status.

Customerized Marketing

Customerized marketing involves adding a new dimension to the product marketing approach. The intent of customerized marketing is fourfold:

First, create new value for the customer as opposed to, in the product world, pushing an existing technological capability. Furthermore, the intent in customerized marketing is focused on building customer loyalty as well as on up-selling new capabilities. You *create* in customer-

Execution

Be Different organizations are informed by strategy and driven by execution. The basic elements of this process are:

- **Build your strategic portfolio with vertical integrity.** Start with a strategy for your overall organization and drive everything else from it.
- **Set the ratio of your execution portfolio: 20 percent of the action to achieve 80 percent of the strategic results.**
- **Establish a learning feedback loop and modify your strategies on the results achieved.**

ized marketing; you *push* in product marketing.

Second, you want to customize the solution that you are trying to create. You want to make it as compelling and relevant to as small a group of customers as is practical. You want to be able to reflect the fact that each customer is unique and, therefore, a more personalized approach is the most effective way to attract the customer's interest.

Third, the focus for customerization is the building of an offer, not a product. As opposed to a product, an offer is very broad in the customer need set it is intended to satisfy. Creating an offer looks at the customer holistically and seeks to provide a packaged, multi-dimensional set of values driven by the many needs people have in their lives.

Having created the packaged offer, the final step is to sell as many of them as possible to your small group of targeted customers.

The end objective is to get as much of the chosen customers' business as you can: Maximize your share of the customer's wallet.

Customerized Marketing Operating Model

A number of Be Different ideas will *customerize* your marketing competencies. These include:

- *Customer learning.* Learn continuously who your customers are and what they want.
- *Customer secret.* This is a detailed personal level of understanding of a single customer, focused on the individual.
- *Holistic offer.* Provide a wide range of customer value created by considering all of the needs plus secrets that you discover about a customer.
- *Unique value proposition.* Capture the overall customer benefits being provided; the objective is to make it different from what your competition provides.

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To yield the maximum value from these ideas you need to construct an operating model that defines how the ideas relate to each other in process terms. Building an operating model has at least two benefits: First it enables everyone in the organization to see the big picture in terms of how everything fits together, and then it lays out the framework for tracking and measuring the effectiveness of your marketing programs.

The operating model built by TELUS involves four components:

- **Understanding the customer.** Gather as much information as you can about the customer through segmentation, customer research and behavior analysis. Lifetime value assessment is also included.
- **Creating customer value.** Construct a unique value proposition, create the offer and integrate the capabilities required to deliver the offer.
- **Delivering customer value.** This is the go-to-market phase: Launch offers through quarterly campaigns, target the intended customer, monitor results and take corrective action based on market response.
- **Maximizing customer value.** Create the optimum value for both the customer and the company. ●

BE DIFFERENT Serving Customers

The fourth aspect of an organization that can be leveraged to Be Different is what has been traditionally referred to as customer service. The term serving customers, however, describes the essence of what is required to Be Different from a service perspective.

Serving the customer places the customer — *not the company* — in the control position:

- The company is responding to the service expectations of customers rather than deciding in advance what it is prepared to provide to them. It is a “customer pull” model, where service policy is engineered from the customer’s viewpoint.
- Service policy is customer inspired but customer-contact employees are empowered to break the rules, when necessary, to accommodate a legitimate customer concern.
- Service philosophy is guided by the customerized notion that each customer is unique, and that providing varying levels of service is appropriate to achieving a consistent level of customer satisfaction.
- The level of cost that the organization incurs in serving customers is treated as an investment in creating customer value rather than simply as an operating cost. Cost is important, but service decisions are made more on the

basis of return on investment and not on cost alone.

Customer Loyalty

Customer service is what the organization wants to supply to the customer; it is governed by policies and rules intended to serve the business. Serving customers, on the other hand, is driven by what the customer wants. The control position is in the customer’s hands; the organization is in the responsive position.

Service has more impact on customer loyalty than any other function of a company, and it must receive priority.

Given the service strategic imperative, each organization faces a significant challenge to clearly define how the service organization is going to Be Different in a way that contributes to the company’s overall value proposition.

Developed by AchieveGlobal Inc., a service-quality consulting organization, the AchieveGlobal Service Quality model is a valuable guide in helping organizations move toward a Be Different level of serving customers.

Core Service

The foundation of this approach is to define service in two components: *Core Service* and the *Service Experience*. This approach helps organizations develop a strategy that is not only precise and measurable but also exposes opportunities to build customer loyalty.

Core service is an organization’s basic deliverable to the customers it serves. Core service represents the most basic level of what you provide. In many respects, it is the foundation upon which your business is built. In the traditional telecommunications business, core service is defined as dial tone. It doesn’t get any more basic than that. For example, in the finance sector, where most organizations are striving to be successful in providing wealth management services, the core service definition could be defined as financial advice. In the computer repair business, it could be a working computer system.

The basis of building a Be Different strategy to serve customers is the definition of the core service that your organization provides. It may appear obvious, but unless you test it with your customers you will not really know for sure. You need to be aware, also, that as your business changes, customers’ definitions of what constitutes the core also change.

Satisfactory core service is the ante for playing the service game. Improve it to the satisfaction level, but don’t go beyond.

Reinventing Core Service

Consider reinventing core service rather than simply

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making incremental improvements to it. Incremental improvements will yield mild results; reinventing core service could yield order of magnitude gains. Customers are worth the effort.

Reinventing core service begins with an assessment of the core service processes that are an established part of your organization. Core service processes may include handling a customer service inquiry, ordering a service, fulfilling a service request or repairing a product that is deficient in some respect.

To reinvent your core service processes, ask these questions:

1. What are your core service processes?
2. Which processes are used by your top three customer segments?
3. Which processes have the highest priority for each customer segment?
4. What needs to be done to reinvent the highest priority processes?

The Service Experience

Core service is what customers get from you. The service experience, on the other hand, describes how they feel when they get it. This component of the service equation is the driver of customer loyalty.

Looking to invest in improving service? Make sure your core service infrastructure can consistently satisfy your customers and then pour on the coals to enable your service team to dazzle them. This is the area that produces healthy returns on investment because it creates a loyal customer base and an annuity revenue stream for a long time.

Remember, the service experience is not only influenced by the human factor in an organization, but also by technology. Technology has a big impact on how customers feel when they try to do business with your organization. So take a look at the technology that interfaces with your customers to ensure that the experience they feel is dazzling. ●

BE DIFFERENT Sales

Sales represents a key opportunity for an organization to enhance its business performance.

You have two options when considering the role of sales in your organization: First, you can generate revenue by selling stuff, which equates to flogging products or, second, you can generate revenue by building deep and meaningful relationships with your customers, which will result in customers buying stuff.

Dazzled Customers

What causes a dazzled reaction from a customer?

Basically, you moved beyond what they expected from you to a level beyond their expectations. You dazzled them because you gave them what they didn't expect. It's kind of counterintuitive in that the WOW factor comes from NOT giving a customer only what they want; but from surprising them.

So what do you get in return? A dazzled customer will most certainly reward you for your efforts and will keep coming back.

Product floggers push their products at us without ever taking the time to get to know us, even a little, and what our specific needs are.

It's All About Relationships

It is true that the relationship-building sales cycle is longer than that of the flogger. It is also true that the revenue and profit streams are longer for the builder, since loyalty is enhanced through the trust that is established with the customer. Long-term results are more positive; the customer tells others about the experience he or she has had with the builder, and the viral marketing process begins.

There is no question that the relationship-building sales approach is the way to go; it is the way to create a Be Different sales strategy. Focus all efforts on building strong relationships with your chosen customers. Trust that sales will follow from this approach. As a leader, ensure that an appropriate sales compensation plan is developed to encourage this type of sales behavior.

Here are some simple relationship-building things a salesperson can do to earn a customer's trust and his or her willingness to enter into a buying mindset:

- **Show honest concern for the customer and his or her issues.**
- **Get to know him or her.** Customers are people, not transactions.
- **Build a personal profile of the customer.** This would include outlining the customer's current situation, with problems and opportunities about his or her specific requirements defined.
- **Spend whatever time is required with the customer to get an in-depth understanding of the issues he or she faces.**
- **Be an active listener.**

Brand Your Warriors

Sales represents a critical function in any organization,

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and should be a major contributor to your Be Different strategy. It follows that sales should have a unique and distinctive brand that clearly differentiates it from other sales organizations in the marketplace.

What is your sales brand? Branding sales addresses the question, “When you think of our sales team, what are they doing that distinguishes them from everyone else?”

Developing your sales brand is a strategic issue. The brand needs to be driven by the Strategic Game Plan of the organization.

Your “how to win” strategy should inform your sales brand to ensure that sales differentiation is consistent with the differentiation objectives of the overall organization. For example, if you decided to win by being first to market with new technology, your sales brand should address sales attributes, such as product knowledge, technological expertise, product migration skills from old technology to new technology, and proactivity, migrating the customer to the new technology early.

In sales, most Be Different strategies require strong customer relationship-building competencies. Sales cannot support any Strategic Game Plan for their organization without these skills.

Lose the Sale, but Save the Customer

Here are two valuable Be Different sales principles:

- **Own the customer forever.** Taking any action whatsoever that jeopardizes this is simply not an option. Earn customer trust in any way you can.
- **Do whatever it takes to protect this position,** even if it means not making a sale. Trying to force-fit a product or service solution doesn’t work, and it eventually backfires on the salesperson because of customer dissatisfaction. The relationships in these cases are impaired because of the reduced trust factor. ●

Conclusion: What’s Next?

If your current business strategy doesn’t give you the Be Different direction you need, create some constructive pressure in your organization to review it and test it with Be Different in mind. Or get a group of your colleagues together and try to translate your understanding of your current strategy into the Strategic Game Plan format. Get confirmation that your work is valid, and move on from there.

Take up the Be Different theme in your organization. Generate some interest and passion in the notion. Get people engaged. Have fun with this. Marketing people, start working more closely with your colleagues in Sales as you begin your Be Different work together.

Start Today

Start to customerize today. If you are in the service area: Start to discuss the *servicing customers* concept, what it means and the changes you can make to create customer loyalty. If you are in human resources or do-it-yourself small businesses: Start challenging what the organization is doing. Encourage a Be Different direction with your views on the ideas and approaches you feel will add value to your organization in the long run.

Accept the fact that new ideas are not universally met with enthusiasm and acceptance, and that some colleagues may push back on the need to change. It takes relentless perseverance to implement change. In the long run, however, the results are worth the effort. The work is essential to thriving and surviving in the marketplace.

Pick a few things that you believe will have the most impact on delivering your strategy and execute them with passion!

Culture Change

Implementing a Be Different approach in an organization is more about culture than about anything else. It’s about raising the energy and passion bar to explore new ideas, albeit ideas with a proven track record of success. It’s about making a right-angled turn to customer obsession and it’s about creating a *serve your people* ethic among your leadership. Culture change requires constant and persistent intervention. It needs different things to be done by many people over a long period of time, and it needs staying the course through strong leadership.

Culture change is a *game of inches*, where the objective is to get as many people in the organization trying as many different approaches as possible, and achieving fast increments of progress along the way.

What happens is that the passionate actions of a few individuals begin to infect the masses; more and more Be Different activity is created and a new momentum begins. This sustainable new momentum, in turn, defines the new culture of the organization: a culture that embraces creativity and innovation, and a business that can look forward to a long and prosperous life. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Be Different or be dead*, you’ll also like:

1. **Strategy Maps** by Robert Kaplan and David Norton. A visual framework for the perspectives of financial, customer, internal and learning and growth.
2. **The New Age of Innovation** by C.K. Prahalad and M.S. Krishnan. Business processes must connect consumers and resources while managing the necessities that ensure efficiency and flexibility.
3. **Corporate Agility** by Charles Grantham, James Ware and Cory Williamson. Offers a blueprint to understanding the evolving work force, inception of new technologies, and the reexamination of workplace structure.