

# Let There Be Bop

I love jazz. At its best, jazz has a unity of purpose and structure. At the same time, it gives the members of the band space to stretch out and express their styles. It rewards risk and creativity.

Best of all, jazz musicians are rarely found writing memos or emails. Rather, they just start playing when they hear the melody or rhythm from a colleague.

I take jazz to work. I encourage marketing teams—in fact my entire organization—to emulate a great jazz band. So in this spirit, I became a little concerned recently when I saw a report published by Forrester Research called “Reinventing the Marketing Organization.” Part of it assessed the most valued qualities of marketing executives.

I’m not knocking the accuracy of the report or the authenticity of the sentiments expressed within it. But the most valued quality among the respondents (most of them marketing executives themselves) was *strategic thinking*. At the bottom of the list was *creativity*.

Any company that adopts such a value system is in big trouble. Maybe this is why the average CMO’s tenure is only 23.5 months. CEOs want more sales, higher margins and new innovations from CMOs—*not strategic thinking!*

I’ve seen marketing campaigns and marketing executives succeed and fail for almost 40 years now. Just as I wouldn’t want a jazz band that was slave to sheet music, I wouldn’t want a marketing team dominated by strategy.

Marketing teams must push to the edge of the new. They need to act with speed and agility. A good executive who can succeed and take a company to marketing success needs to balance a little strategic thinking with a lot of creativity, just like a jazz band balances unity and improvisation. If I had to pick one side of this spectrum, I’d pick creativity.

Creativity includes the ability to bring an awareness of possibility to every assignment. It is rooted in some kind of success—your own or someone else’s—but it also contains the desire to define new territory.

Now that marketing has expanded to include everything from loyalty programs to social networking to experiential marketing, it is more important than ever for executives to take that creative leap.

The brave ones who have taken the leap have

adopted a personal and professional mindset of never settling for the *status quo*. They have not only pushed themselves to the edge of a new marketing frontier, they have taken their teams and their companies there as well.

Too many companies are stuck in neutral. We take 15 percent of expected revenue, call it the marketing budget, and spend it on the same things we spent it on a year ago. We buy pizza for everyone after the campaign launches and too often we want to leave work early when we get the results, which, more often than not, are problematic.

Marketing executives can move from *neutral* to *overdrive* and get the results they need in sales and revenue. The most effective and creative marketing executives exhibit at least five qualities, each of which exhibits some element of creativity:

**They embrace the new.** Anne McDonald has brought a spirit of innovation to Macy’s that truly embodies the spirit of jazzy marketing. Let’s not forget that Macy’s is a true retail player. It has 800 stores and has to compete with Target on the lower end and Nordstroms on the high end. Not an easy gig.

But McDonald has taken Macy’s from a lukewarm newspaper-based marketer to a dynamic mix of events, online, TV and word-of-mouth marketing efforts. She has been quoted as looking at Macy’s new branding efforts as a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” to introduce itself to consumers. I love that passion.

**They’re willing to fail.** Look at Cadillac. Was there ever a brand so behind the beat as Cadillac was when it was the number-one car for the 65-plus market? Liz Vanzura, the current global marketing director for Cadillac, is the kind of risky and creative executive I’m talking about here.

After Liz spent the last few years re-positioning the Hummer from a “tank,” affordable by only the super-rich and eccentric, she is continuing to aim advertising and marketing straight at the young, affluent market. She’s doing it by spending less on TV advertising and more on experiential marketing and interactive strategies.

# Like the best jazz bands, marketing needs to be a structured but creative conversation.

Cutting TV and aiming at the younger buyer isn't something a focus group is going to tell you to do. It takes a willingness to find success through an element of calculated risk.

**They add some spice.** Let's face it, at least two-thirds of marketing ideas and the campaigns that result from them are *vanilla*. They are received with mild approval from the customers and might bump sales temporarily, but most are quickly lost in consumers' minds. How many Super Bowl TV ads can you recall of the 42 that marketers paid \$2.5 million each to push at you?

Overdrive will take a willingness to move away from vanilla and a bit toward the spicier part of the marketing palette. Pepsi knows how to do this, led by Dave Burwick, now president of Pepsi-QTG Canada. Pepsi recruited New Orleans Saints running back Reggie Bush and connected him to an online, offline and experiential campaign to steer funds toward rebuilding New Orleans. That won't be forgotten.

**They involve employees.** Good marketing executives understand the untapped power of their people. Former Home Depot CEO Bob Nardelli understood this. He was competing head-on with an aggressive brand, Lowe's. He also took some heat for a drop in customer-satisfaction ratings in the face of that competition. In the end he couldn't agree with his board on some key issues.

But I have a lot of respect for what Bob did to respond to his customer satisfaction issues. He focused on his employees. He focused on ways to make sure the best advertising (his employees) created brand advocates out of his customers.

I've read press reports that speculated on a perceived lack of employee engagement, but here's what I know from working with Bob and from his own third quarter 2006 financial report. Home Depot launched a \$30 million financial reward program in the second quarter of last year called "Orange Juiced." It was designed to reward employees that "demonstrate a true passion for serving customers."

HD paid out \$20 million to Orange Juiced associates during 2006, according to the company. I think this program will continue to pay dividends well into 2007.

**They involve customers.** Too often, marketing executives go for a hot, or a tried-and-true strategy. These marketers didn't do enough "listening" with their eyes. They don't get out into the marketplace and develop a feel for what customers are saying, doing, buying, missing or dreaming about.

I have been impressed with Revolution Health and Jay Silverstein, its president of coverage. Here's a guy (and a company) who has experienced every facet of the customer experience, and has had the guts to call it *broken*. He's also had the guts to come up with a solution from a business-model standpoint that makes *health* an active part of the word *healthcare*.

Go one step further. Revolution didn't plan a TV ad blitz for its launch in January. It will continue to develop its plan of getting the right content about its approach out to the right people via media and marketing partnerships. Jay is listening to his customers and views the communication as a dialogue.

"Jazz is a conversation," says Wynton Marsalis. I couldn't agree more. So is marketing.

Innovation doesn't have to come from brainstorms and ideation meetings. Just being aware of all the new strategies and tactics out there to foster a conversation with customers can be enough to generate the next home-run idea or even the next effective product positioning. The conversation begins and ends with creativity.

Sure, I think strategic thinking is important. No good marketing executive should lack a strategic vision. But if you want to cross the finish line ahead of competitors—and with better results—then take your strategic thinking in small doses and encourage your colleagues to *improv*, creatively.

You will have much more fun and you will reap much larger rewards. ■



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