

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

BRAND INSISTENCE: DO YOUR CUSTOMERS HAVE IT?

Back in my college days, when my friends and I had the late-night munchies, we would travel 40 miles one-way for White Castle hamburgers. In our minds, nothing else would quite satisfy like a sackful of those little square burgers at 2 am. (Twenty years later, my digestive system can't handle them, but I still love the smell.)

Do your customers go out of their way to do business with you like that?

Nido Qubein, one of the greatest business speakers and consultants of our time, is a part-owner of the Great Harvest Bread Company, a 210-unit chain of specialty bakeries in 39 states. Last year at the National Speakers Association's annual conference, an interviewer began to ask him about how he handled competition.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I have to stop you in the middle of your question. You see, with all due respect to you and all of the speakers in the room, I don't believe I have any competition.

"Please understand, I don't mean that as an arrogant statement on my part. Let me explain.

"I am not trying to get everyone in America to book me for speeches. I am simply trying to build solid relationships with a few people, and I know that if I deliver value to that relationship, they will tell their friends about me, and my circle will grow. So my focus, therefore, is not on what other people do, but on what I can do for others. My staff and I are constantly working on the question, 'How do we get our clients to sing our praises based on the results we deliver?' When we succeed at that, there is no competition.

"We have the same philosophy at Great Harvest Bread Company. We truly believe we have no competition. You may say, 'Nido, you're crazy! Every grocery store sells bread', but they don't sell Great Harvest Bread! No one else sells our cookies, our granola, or any of our excellent products.

"You may say, 'How can you be so sure you have no competition?' Let me tell you how I can be so sure.

"Everyone talks about brand awareness, like that's the #1 thing that business owners should capture. 'As soon as everyone knows about me, I will succeed.' That's a very erroneous and dangerous mindset, and unfortunately helps the local advertising media much more than the local business owner. At Great Harvest, we've developed something much deeper in the hearts and minds of our customers. We call it brand insistence.

"People drive up to 30 miles from where they live to buy our products because they love their families and want only the best for them. We recognize that we only need a tiny fraction of the 280 million people that live in the United States to be this kind of customer for our stores, so we do everything we can to cater to that customer.

"As long as I can continue to cater to that customer, bring that customer more value, more service, and more quality products, do I really have any competition? I think not."

What is Nido really saying?

He's saying this: Advertising can be bought. Reputation must be earned.

No one has the same contacts, the same degree of expertise, the same abilities to solve customers' business problems as you do. What if, instead of selling as many people as possible, you and your staff decided to concentrate on building several solid relationships that produce mutual benefit?

The secret is not to reach everyone in town with 'the right message'. That's an attempt at brand awareness, and it's a never-ending game. Advertising plays a part, but you need to serve your customers so well that they can't help but evangelize about you, even without your advertising.

What could you be doing today to encourage your current customers to insist on you?

I've got a few ideas. Next month, I'll talk about a couple of them.

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