

# STANDING OUT

5 WAYS TO GET NOTICED BY BEING DIFFERENT



By Heath Shackelford  
Founder/Kick Starter  
Good.Must.Grow.





## Moving beyond purpose

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If you are a benefit corporation, a socially responsible business or a nonprofit, your purpose is much of what sets you apart. But as you are probably aware, you don't have a monopoly on "having a purpose". Big brands are growing more and more interested in using purpose as a differentiator, so much so that this concept is quickly becoming the fifth "P" of marketing. Additionally, new purpose-driven organizations are being introduced to the marketplace each and every day as the number of social businesses and nonprofits continue to multiply.

On the one hand, you should be celebrating the rapid growth and increasing strength of the good revolution. All do-good organizations look forward to a day when socially conscious companies and causes rule the world. But in an environment where purpose and social responsibility are so prevalent in marketing campaigns and in mission statements, you need more than a charitable business model to stand out from the crowd.

At a loss for how your organization can be heard, get noticed and truly be different? In this paper, we'll take a look at brands big and small who have effectively set themselves apart by:

- Creating a killer product or service
- Delivering a unique customer experience
- Investing in a strong organizational culture
- Smartly positioning themselves in the market
- Cultivating an active tribe of supporters

You'll notice that these strategies can work closely together, and that many of the featured organizations employ several of them to successfully stand out. As you read, ask yourself how you can apply one or more of these principles to rise above the competitive fray.



## Creating a killer product or service

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Over the past century, we haven't seen many dramatic improvements in the design of the bicycle. Seats might be more comfortable. They might go faster, last longer. But largely a bicycle is still a bicycle. Enter the Fliz. This recent invention (pictured above) requires riders to "strap into a harness and build up speed by running, with their head sticking out between the frame." The designers describe the Fliz as a fresh option for urban space that supports healthy, ecological mobility.<sup>1</sup>

The jury is out on whether the Fliz will make it big, but it is a great example of the creativity needed by your organization when it comes to the product or service you offer.

A more thoroughly tested experiment in disruptive innovation comes via Lucky Brand. The company was launched in 1989, at a time when charging upwards of \$70 for jeans was a foreign concept. However, the founders behind Lucky weren't exactly conventional personalities.

Their irreverent sense of humor and rebel style made the brand very appealing to rock stars, and by default the fans who wanted to be like them. After building a successful business, Lucky Brand was sold to Liz Claiborne and continues to be a thriving part of the Fifth & Pacific portfolio.

From the outset, the Lucky team didn't worry about how to make money. They just made the best jeans they could. They spent more time and incorporated better materials, which meant the jeans cost twice as much as other options in the market.

Even the Lucky name bucked the trends of the times. The founders came up with the moniker while in Chinatown one day and thought it was a great way to differentiate from all their French and European sounding competitors. In the early days, Lucky was just a different kind of animal. According to the founders, they "had long hair and loud music, which was a different way of doing things then."<sup>2</sup>

Lucky's founders have urged other businesses not to stop when they become successful, but to make their products better and to keep taking risks. They say, "You can either have a job, or you can build something."

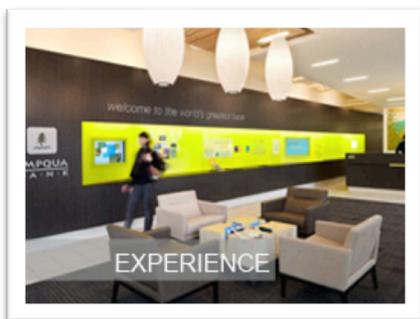
You can distinguish your organization by producing a killer product or service. Your goods can stand out because of their creativity and ingenuity, i.e. bringing a new solution to the market or solving an old problem in a new way. You can separate yourself by the quality of what you produce. Or you can separate yourself by what you are really selling.

Lucky Brand did all three. Their designs were highly unique and unprecedented. They raised the bar on quality. And they attached their product to a lifestyle, striking an emotional and aspirational chord with their target market.

Are you offering the best possible product or service? Is there a way for you to innovate? Are you selling yourself short by trying to fit in with your competition? Can you separate yourself by creativity, quality and/or lifestyle?

Your best products and services are discovered when you are being who you are, not who you think you should be. Watching competitors and following suit is the fastest way to limit yourself to incremental gains. You have to be true to your organization's DNA to break out.

Lucky's founders were rock and roll. They had expensive taste. They were rebels. And they stood out like a sore thumb. In the process, they built a hugely successful business and ushered in a new era of designer jean fashion. If you are truly being creative and innovative, don't you think you'll have a hard time fitting in anyway?



## Delivering a unique customer experience

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Way back in 2006, the *New York Times* featured one organization's unorthodox approach to banking. Since then, Umpqua Bank has continued to grow and thrive throughout the Pacific Northwest because of its highly differentiated banking experience.

From the company's promotional materials:

"Dubbed 'Starbucks with tellers' by the *New York Times*, Umpqua Bank is recognized nationally and internationally for pioneering the concept of bank branch as retail store. Its locations are inviting spaces designed as both financial hubs and communal gathering spaces for consumers and businesses. Staffed with Ritz Carlton-trained associates focused on providing an unparalleled customer experience, Umpqua's stores encourage visitors to read the paper, enjoy a cup of coffee, host a meeting and surf the web."

Not exactly the banking experience most consumers endure.

It's tough for a bank to stand out with the financial products it offers. But it can dramatically distinguish itself by the way it packages those products, the quality of service it provides and by the experience it creates for its customers. Umpqua deeply believes it is a community hub, not a traditional bank. As a result, the company doesn't refer to its locations as "branches", instead calling them stores. Their website doesn't feel like a bank either. It's fresh, dynamic and inviting. Friendly even.

Umpqua has never asked how it could be a better "bank" but instead focused on how it could be "better." Along the way, it has followed the model so effectively executed by giant retailers such as Starbucks and Whole Foods. Both of these household brands built their businesses on a unique consumer experience.

Starbucks isn't just a coffee shop; it's a "third place between work and home." Whole Foods isn't a grocery store, it's a vibrant, local marketplace, a thriving community where you can pursue a healthy lifestyle. In both cases, their stores (and their customer experiences) are strategically designed down to the millimeter. They relentlessly cultivate meaningful and magical encounters, and customers feel it every step of the way. There's another small company that does this well. They're called Apple, and they offer some pretty cool technology solutions.

Have you mapped your customer experience? What does it feel like to "do business" with you? Are your customers consistently delighted? Are they immersed in your brand? The companies above have created equal or greater value in the experience itself than the actual products or services they sell. And in doing so, they have differentiated themselves from the competition. That's not easy to do in retail and financial services. How can you think differently about the way you interact with customers and the overall experience they have with your organization?



## Investing in a strong organizational culture

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For more than 30 years, health has been a priority at Lincoln Industries, a manufacturer specializing in high-performance metal finishing. The leadership of this small Nebraska company has long believed that if people embrace healthy lifestyles, those people will be happier, more satisfied and more productive at work. As a result, the company has gone to great lengths to build a culture that embodies its belief in health and wellness.

Senior executives frequently go on team building expeditions such as hikes and bike rides. A robust set of wellness programming is available to the entire workforce. As a regular course of business, Lincoln requires all employees to undergo quarterly checkups measuring weight, body fat and flexibility. It also conducts annual blood, vision and hearing tests. Each Wednesday, employees participate in special wellness events, ranging from gardening to yoga. The company also helps employees set a life plan, working with staff individually and in groups to define their personal purpose and related goals for wellbeing.

Another unique element of Lincoln's culture is an annual excursion to a 14,000-foot mountain in Colorado. The company pays for all qualifying employees to trek to the peak in celebration of achieving their wellness goals. Approximately 80 Lincoln employees make the pilgrimage each year, and the climb is a much-anticipated annual event for the workforce.

As a result of this strong wellness culture, Lincoln has been routinely recognized as an innovative employer. It's far out-performed industry averages in terms of healthcare costs, coming in at 30% lower than benchmarks. It has significantly reduced workers compensation costs and unscheduled absences, while also improving on the job performance.<sup>3</sup>

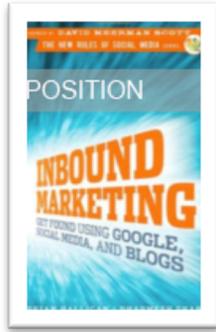
But the power of Lincoln's commitment to a wellness culture goes far beyond these direct economic gains. The company credits its culture to an improved ability to recruit and retain key employees, produce high-quality products and consistently grow its business.

A second example of the power of a great culture is Wegmans'. The East Coast supermarket chain has been around for more than 90 years and rings up annual sales of \$6 billion. It is a perennial member of Fortune's Best Places to Work list and is often referred to as the "best supermarket in the country" by news media.

One of the keys to Wegmans' success is the company's unwavering commitment to its employees. It fosters a culture where employees are well cared for and provided ongoing opportunities for growth and development. This includes flexible schedules, a wide range of career opportunities and a significant scholarship program that fuels continuing education. The company also throws in unexpected benefits such as adoption assistance, just to put them over the top.<sup>4</sup>

What is true for Lincoln and Wegmans' can be true for you. In Lincoln's case, the focus of their culture is wellness. At Wegmans' it is growth and opportunity. What could you center your culture on to create a differentiated organization? Are you currently nurturing a unique culture for your company or cause? Does your organization have a true identity?

If you want fiercely loyal employees and volunteers, a well-respected brand and all the attention you can stand, you first need an extraordinary culture.



## Smart positioning in the marketplace

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Cambridge-based HubSpot makes software used by small and medium-size businesses to manage online marketing and social media. The company has dubbed its approach “inbound marketing,” because it attracts customers who are already searching for a given company’s products or services. Currently, HubSpot boasts more than 8,000 customers, and recently raised an additional \$35 million in funding.

While HubSpot certainly has a killer product and service, uniquely integrating social, email and web tools and effectively training customers to use the technology, the company’s positioning strategy has likely been the most important catalyst of their success.

When HubSpot was founded in 2006, the company smartly took advantage of a fragmented and crowded marketplace. There was a wide range of related service providers and the category for all this competition was not clearly defined. So, HubSpot defined it, labeled it and claimed leadership over it. They coined the term “inbound marketing” and then proceeded to literally write the book on it (pictured above).

Through successful thought leadership, the company promoted its founders as experts, espoused their philosophies on inbound marketing as the next big marketing phenomenon and ushered in a new niche of which they were the undisputed authority. The company could have easily languished in the status quo of the marketplace, but instead, they carved out a space they could own, and then owned it.

Another company who accomplished this with great success is Healthways. The company now offers a range of solutions geared toward improving the overall wellbeing of individuals by supporting them physically, emotionally, socially and in community. But the company’s roots come from the disease management industry.

In its early days, Healthways was a pioneer in supporting chronically ill patients by connecting them with registered nurses for telephonic coaching. The company played a significant role in shaping an industry to support the proliferation of “disease management” solutions to health plans and employers. Today, the vast majority of payors have some form of disease management programming available to employees or members who have diabetes, heart disease, asthma and other chronic conditions.

Healthways helped form a professional organization, the Disease Management Association of America, pushed for the industry’s first common measurement methodology to prove its efficacy and consistently served as a source for best practices

and innovation as the industry matured. The company aggressively pursued platforms where it could share its thought leadership, ranging from congressional hearings, to news media to speaking engagements. It formed think tanks and conducted and published frequent research.

As a result of its efforts, Healthways was widely revered as the clear-cut leader in the disease management space as it grew to widespread adoption. Because of this position, the company flourished, showing up regularly as one of the fastest growing small businesses in the nation according to *Fortune Magazine*.

Based on the success of HubSpot and Healthways, how can you redefine your marketplace? Can you think differently about the solution you provide and where it fits? Is there a way for you to separate yourself and own an idea or concept in the minds of your key constituents? How can you gain share of mind through thought leadership?

The takeaway here is that when it comes to positioning, you aren't restricted to fitting in to existing paradigms. You don't have to adhere to status quo's way of organizing and labeling the service you provide or the product you offer.



## Cultivating an active tribe of supporters

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Possibly the best example of a company who has fully embraced its customers and turned them into living, breathing brand advocates is Harley Davidson. The company's Harley Owners' Group initiative has more than 1 million rabid members, who all consider themselves part of the Harley family. Harley has become more than a product. As with Lucky Brand, when you buy a Harley, you are buying into a lifestyle. You are joining a movement. Not just buying a motorcycle. People purchase Harley clothes and caps, show up in droves for member events, get Harley tattoos and in some cases probably name their children after the company.

Harley has always understood the power of loyal, passionate customers. Executives spend significant time with customers, including weeklong rides with Harley owners. Employees of Harley fight for the right to represent the company at consumer events. No company stays closer to its customers.

The company also wants long-term relationships. Their famous Ride Free initiative was designed to move owners up to bigger, more expensive motorcycles. The company promised owners who bought an entry-level bike that they could trade them in a year

later for a bigger Harley and get their full original purchase price credited toward the price of the new bike.<sup>5</sup>

Like every company, Harley has had ups and downs. But when times get tough, Harley leans on its tribe.

Successful brands that stand out don't have customers. They have fans. Members. Ambassadors. Tribes. Creating a loyal group of supporters who actively engage with your organization, promote your company or cause and feel like they are part of your mission is a powerful thing.

In his book "Tribes", marketing guru Seth Godin provides three key activities for using supporters to grow your business and/or to fuel your purpose. You must motivate, connect and leverage.

To see this in action, research the story of HopeMob. This online community was recently formed with the purpose of helping people who were falling through the cracks of traditional philanthropy. HopeMob is where "generous strangers unite." Through HopeMob, founder Shaun King has been able to build a loyal band of followers who are motivated for change. He has connected them in a thriving community where they feel like part of something bigger than themselves. And now, this community is consistently leveraged to accomplish greater good. The HopeMob tribe is frequently mobilized to help individuals in need, ranging from a single mom who needed to repair her car to get to work to a family that was displaced by a hurricane.

To set yourself apart, you need your own tribe. Word of mouth is the most powerful marketing tool available to you. In today's connected world, social media has created unprecedented ways to nurture a passionate community of supporters. How can you make your supporters feel like they are part of something special? How can you motivate them to spread the love? How can you create connections among them so that they are in actual community? And finally, how can you mobilize your tribe to carry your purpose forward?

You can increase your chances of having a tribe by adhering to some of the other strategies discussed, such as creating a killer product or service and/or delivering a unique customer experience. But in the end, cultivating an active community of supporters requires intentional and ongoing interactions. It requires following Godin's checklist of making sure you have a plan for motivating, for connecting and for leveraging. It requires communication strategies that aren't solely targeted at selling products or raising funds. Strategies that are focused on relationships and not just transactions.



## Climbing out of the box

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Most organizations struggle to stand out because they are caught up in the status quo. Climbing out of the box is the first step toward success, albeit the toughest one to take.

What if you were to think differently about your company or cause? What if you freed yourself from the chains of your specific niche or sector and the business and social norms it imposes?

What if you set conventional thinking aside for a day and dreamed on behalf of your constituents? What would amaze them? What would inspire them? What would capture their hearts and imagination?

It might just help you create a different kind of experience for the people you are engaging. It might just lead to a truly unique position in the marketplace. It might result in a killer new product or service or a powerful organizational culture that attracts people to you. And possibly a passionate tribe of supporters who will help you carry your brand forward. Because in the end, the best way to stand out is to actually be different.

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### About the Author

Heath Shackelford is the founder/kick starter for Good.Must.Grow. He is an experienced marketer and national thought leader with 15 years of varied experience and a master's degree in mass communications. Heath has led strategic campaigns and developed integrated marketing solutions for global brands and local causes.



### About Good.Must.Grow.

At Good.Must.Grow. we provide strategic marketing support for socially responsible businesses, nonprofit causes and organizations that are committed to making our world a healthier place. Learn how we are #GrowingGood at [www.goodmustgrow.com](http://www.goodmustgrow.com).

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