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BENEFITS

Be Different, Not Better

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Jeannie Ruesch • Jun. 02, 2022



The internet is saturated with inspirational quotes and sayings about achieving success. Type in "success meme," and you have hundreds of thousands to choose

from. But there's one saying that's been around for decades (at least) that still carries a strong relevance today:

Good, better, best – never let it rest.

Until your good is better and your better is best.

As individuals, this certainly rings true—we're taught from an early age that we should always strive to be the best versions of ourselves. However, with apologies to the unknown author of this rhyme, this same advice may not be the best (pun intended) to take when it comes to our businesses.

“Better” is a constantly moving target, especially in today's rapidly changing market, and may not be the right north star to aim your growth goals toward. **Instead of being better, find a way to be different.**

Wait ... what?

It may go against your instincts to hear that aiming for “better” may not be the right goal. We all want to be better than our competitors, don't we? But “better” is subjective. What I might see as better, you might disagree with. It's harder to prove, and when everything about how you do business changes so much, being better is more a goal line that keeps shifting rather than a stake in the ground. Your customers' goals may vary, and what they consider to be better about your firm compared to another will also vary.

So how do you differentiate? There's an old adage in the realm of product marketing called the “iron triangle” (no, this is not *Game-of-Thrones*-related). If your firm could be known for two of the following three qualities, which would you pick?

- Cost of services
- Speed of delivering your work (time)
- Quality of your final product

The instinct is to pick the two that would make you better than your competitors — but how do you do that, exactly, when being *better* is a moving target? One customer may prioritize cost over quality today, and another may feel that nothing is more important than turnaround time.

Longevity is also a key consideration. Even if you could currently be the better option based on cost, time or quality, what stops another accounting firm from eventually

besting you by finding a way to offer the same services faster or cheaper? Being in a constant competition for lowest cost is a race to the bottom and devalues the work you do as a whole.

Prioritizing What You're Known For

I used to work for an event center and restaurant located in the middle of a business park. There were plenty of lunch goers in the neighborhood, but the restaurant struggled to bring in consistent traffic. Why? Because as those lunch-goers considered what mattered most to them (getting their food quickly, cheaply or the best quality), the restaurant couldn't win two of those arguments and was therefore never the top-of-mind choice.

Think about your own process for making a major purchase. What factors into your decision? How do you weigh the three options—cost, time and quality—against each other? Amazon has taught us well the benefits of fast with “Prime” delivery. You may have a price you can't go above (or below), or a certain quality level you won't budge on. Quality can narrow down your top options, but then it likely comes down to price—unless there is a WOW factor that makes you open to not letting your final decision be dictated by cost. Ultimately, you're weighing those three options and choosing based on which two matter most to you.

Why can't you be all three? Because the options of cost, quality and time work against each other in many ways. Quality can suffer the faster something is delivered unless you increase costs and resources to meet the level and speed desired.

So, as you consider what makes your firm stand out, what can you deliver against?

How to Be Different

As you think about what you want to be known for, put yourself in the shoes of your ideal customer (the type you'd love to work with over and over again). What will drive your customer to choose you? What options do you want to deliver against? Do you have the resources to meet what you're offering? For example, if you choose speed as a cornerstone, can you meet that for every customer, every time? Is that the customer you want to work with every time? Are you willing and able to ramp up resources whenever needed in order to keep that promise?

Maybe you'll focus on a niche or quality of services you can deliver at a lower cost because you've standardized and automated with technology that saves time for both you and your clients. If that is the case, weigh the options of what your firm

currently offers (or doesn't offer) compared to your competitors, and what changes could you make to stand out. Some options to consider:

Subject matter expertise (quality and time). Developing expertise in a certain sector allows you to differentiate your practice from your competitors by showing industry-specific customers that you understand their specific needs and the landscape they operate in, as opposed to a more-generalized practice.

Enhanced services and offerings (quality and cost). The more you can be seen as a one-stop shop, the more valuable you are when compared to another firm that only offers certain services and necessitates additional resources (and probable delays) to achieve the same results.

Innovations in client management (cost and time). You may offer the same services as your competitors, but is the way your clients will utilize those services streamlined and/or more efficient? Are you leveraging the right tools and technology that give your clients time back? To some customers, saving time with a more efficient process is just as valuable as saving on cost.

Making “Be Different” a Reality

Now that you've identified ways to make your firm stand out, what changes can you make to successfully implement these ideas?

Get insight from current customers. The best way to make sure you are innovating for your clients (and potential clients) is to have a firm understanding of what their needs are. If you aren't already doing so, add regular touchpoints with the customers you love working with via surveys and one-on-one interviews to better understand their needs and determine how you can innovate to meet them. Customers also may not realize they have a pain point that you can alleviate, so this is a great way to identify those pain points and show that you can advise them in broader ways. Make sure you are letting customers know about new services, technologies, and offerings as they are rolled out.

Develop your employees. Offer education and training to help your employees become specialists in areas they are enthusiastic about. Not only does this build subject matter expertise into your firm, it also allows your employees to expand their roles and act as true business advisors.

Constantly review your processes. Things change rapidly in our world, so introspection cannot be a one-and-done thing. Make sure you are regularly

reviewing your operations to see where you can make improvements to enhance the customer experience. These reviews are also a good touchpoint for determining if there are mundane tasks that can be streamlined or made more efficient—freeing up time for your employees to focus on other high-value services.

Embrace Your Firm's Differences

Standing out against your competition is always going to be a moving target. But knowing how your ideal customers will make their decisions and what matters to them most can help you determine the right goals and ideas—oriented around what makes you the right choice for the client, not just what makes you better than someone else.

Rather than ending with a *better* rhyme than good/better/best, I'm going to offer you a *different* poetic takeaway (partly because there are no easy words that rhyme with “different”). So, I leave you with this haiku:

A crowded market.

Want your business to stand out?

Find your differences.

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Jeannie Ruesch is the director of marketing at [Bill.com](https://www.bill.com) and has been in the accounting industry for more than seven years. She previously worked at Xero and The Sleeter Group. She has more than 20 years' experience in brand creation and strategy, design, social media development, demand gen, and customer marketing. She's a tech geek at heart, an author, an award-winning graphic designer, and loves finding ways to help customers solve problems.

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