

Bright Ideas



Supporting Organizational
Excellence & Innovation

What strawberries teach us about organizational excellence

In French markets, strawberries have different varietal names and different flavours—some sweeter, some tarter, some richer. In North America, they are just strawberries. I recently set out to discover just what those strawberries are that I eat in the spring and summer months. Along the way, I realized that the principles followed by the strawberry industry apply to all organizations.

Principle 1: Know Your Market

Markets differ, and if you fail to take that into account, you can lose out big time. In North America, consumers don't just buy an apple, they buy a particular variety, because some apples are good for eating out of hand while others are better for pies. Apples are sold on the basis of their qualities: sweet, tart, crisp, smooth, as well as their ability to keep well. Strawberries, on the other hand, are all alike, as far as consumers are concerned.

If you knew the strawberry market well and based your marketing strategies for apples on that, you would miss the mark. Likewise, if you know the apple market well

and based your marketing strategy for strawberries on that, you would waste money and effort on something that doesn't matter to your audience. So, be careful about the assumptions you make. Do some

research to be sure what you think you know about your clients or customer base is true.

Principle 2: Diversify

The season for any particular strawberry variety is short. If you want to lengthen

the season you must

diversify and grow more than one variety. Likewise, to have longevity as an organization, you cannot provide just one service or product. I'm not saying that you must have radically different offerings (like strawberries and clocks); but there should be some flexibility in what you provide. Services that can be combined or can stand on their own give consumers options and a sense of control.

All organizations have cycles where they expand what they do and then eliminate those activities deemed not to be their "core business." In consulting, the maxim is that if you are a generalist, poten-

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tial customers will not think of you when they have a specific problem to solve because your name is not tied in their mind to that kind of work. On the other hand, having too narrow a focus means that you cannot handle complex needs. It also makes you prone to lose out when the bottom drops out of your particular market. For example, training and travel budgets tend to disappear in a recession. If your organization only delivers classroom training, you would do well to start developing webinars and online training.

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Principle 3: Be Consistent

In order to sustain the market for strawberries across the season, all the varieties must be consistent in appearance and taste. Strawberry marketing in North America has no need to identify the variety, because it makes no difference to the average consumer. Likewise, there should be consistent quality across all the services or products your organization provides. A client who has received one type of service should feel confident that you will deliver an equal standard of quality with respect to another service.

Do what you do well. No one person has only a single talent. In the same way, an organization made up of people can do many things well. Find the stars in your various offerings and create a framework that supports them to shine, rather than one that con-

strains them to deliver to the lowest common denominator.

Principle 4: Look Good

In the strawberry market, customers choose with their eyes. They want strawberries that are large, well-shaped and deep red. These qualities are associated in their minds with good taste (even though in my youth we avoided large berries as woody and tasteless). A lighter red strawberry doesn't sell as well, even though it may taste better than a deep red variety.

Your organization's marketing materials, whether paper or web-based, create a first impression for potential customers. And we all know how important first impressions are. Written information should be error-free, neat and clear. The look of your information

should convey visually what it will be like to experience (taste, if it was a strawberry) your organization's services. Websites should be easy to navigate and built with your customers' (or stakeholders') needs in mind. Although a picture may be worth a thousand words, video is worth even more. Research shows that a web video can reduce the number of sites visited before deciding to buy in half.

Whether you work for government, manage a non-profit, or run a business, these three principles are central to excellent up-front customer service. An attractive first impression gives customers confidence in your organization on first contact. Diversity of services helps you meet their needs or solve their problems. Consistency across contacts and services helps maintain customer satisfaction.

From Where I Sit



Share what you know

Anyone who knows me well, knows that I love to travel. Any time, any place, for any purpose. I recently returned from a two-week road trip through the American Southwest, our first major driving expedition since the mid-1980s.

My husband says that my favourite part of travel is the planning, and he is probably right. Picking a route (whether by land, sea or air) is an enjoyable challenge for me. Before the Internet, researching options meant lots of guide books. I still have files of brochures and guides from past trips going back decades. (Cleaning is obviously not my strong suit.) But now, I rely more on websites and the opinions of people who have gone before

and have been willing to share what they have learned from experience. TripAdvisor is a favourite source. I have chosen (and chosen not) to stay at particular hotels or take specific tours based on what others have reported. Sometimes I have chosen a tour despite a few negatives and simply adjusted my expectations. It works.

Although one can use TripAdvisor and other review sites without contributing, I always think it's important to share what I've learned in my personal life as well as my professional life. I hope my actions will help people make more informed choices, not necessarily the ones that I would have made.

As Baby Boomers head toward retirement, they need to share what they know and let younger generations take from that knowledge

whatever can help them make better decisions. Likewise, Gen X and Y should look for what is still true and useful in those "ramblings." Times and market expectations may change, but informed is always better than ignorant.



K. K. Biersdorff Consulting supports organizational excellence and innovation through an array of planning, research, communication and training services that take projects seamlessly from start to finish.