



Accidental Branding

Book profiles seven entrepreneurs who eschewed traditional marketing

By Mike Taylor

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Gary Erickson was an avid cyclist and rock climber who couldn't stomach any more tasteless energy bars. Julie Ainger Clark, a Denver resident, couldn't find a video she liked for her baby. Craig Newmark wanted a free online forum where people could exchange information on buying and selling merchandise.

These are the inspirations that gave birth to Clif Bar energy snacks, Baby Einstein multimedia products and the online forum Craigslist. They're also three of the seven entrepreneurs and companies that author David Vinjamuri explores in his book, "Accidental Branding: How Ordinary People Build Extraordinary Brands," due in bookstores this month.

Vinjamuri defines "accidental brands" as product identities created by entrepreneurs who were trying to solve their own problems and who lacked any formal marketing training. According to the author, these entrepreneurs relied on their own consumer instincts in the absence of marketing experience to build their brands.

"They were not listening to some focus group of customers to tell them what to do; they *were* the customer," Vinjamuri writes. "These entrepreneurs could trust their instincts because they had retained the ability to think like their own consumer."

The other companies that fit this mold and are profiled in "Accidental Branding" are Columbia Sportswear (founded by Gert Boyle), The Art of Shaving (Myrian Zaoui and Eric Malka), Burt's Bees (Roxanne Quimby) and the J. Peterman Co. (John Peterman).

Vinjamuri is an adjunct professor of marketing at New York University and president of a marketing-training company. One of the more interesting beliefs he shares is that even as a former "marketing expert" for firms such as Coca-Cola and Internet ad company Doubleclick, he began to have doubts around 2003 about the effectiveness of conventional marketing in an age where audiences are increasingly able to choose when and how their media is delivered to them.

"There was a lot of data suggesting that television advertising just wasn't as effective as it had been 20 years before," he writes. Vinjamuri also credits Malcolm Gladwell's book, "The Tipping Point," for adding to those doubts.

"Gladwell suggested that ideas spread like viruses and that marketing messages take exactly the same route," Vinjamuri writes. "This implied all of that television advertising wouldn't work if there wasn't some underlying message that people would really want to share with each other."

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From his interviews with the aforementioned entrepreneurs about their seven companies, Vinjamuri offers six rules for succeeding in accidental marketing:

*Do sweat the small stuff: Successful entrepreneurs don't just pay attention to the big stuff; they obsessively sweat every detail.

*Pick a fight: Successful brands disagree with the status quo. They are vocal about what other brands are doing wrong.

*Be your own consumer: Unlike corporate marketers, successful entrepreneurs are the consumers of their own products. The best of them work hard to keep these consumer instincts.

*Built a myth: Successful entrepreneurs work to determine the narrative of their brand and how it will be shared.

*Be faithful: Successful entrepreneurs figure out who really supports them and keeps listening to them even as their brand becomes more successful.

To me, the most important point that Vinjamuri reinforces throughout the book is the value of trusting your own instincts and paying attention to your own likes and dislikes - whether you're an editor deciding on a lineup of stories for an upcoming issue, a real estate investor comparing residential properties, or in the case of these "Accidental Branding" subjects, an entrepreneur looking to launch a product.

If a product or service appeals to you or fills a need in your life or business, chances are it will do the same for others. Besides that, it will be a lot easier and more fun to promote. If the product or service doesn't fill a need or appeal immensely to you, it's worth asking yourself what's so different about your targeted consumers that they'd buy in.

Mike Taylor is managing editor of ColoradoBiz.

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