

# CHURCH OF THE CUSTOMER

## 10 Questions with David Vinjamuri

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Is it possible to build a very successful company and know zilch about marketing, branding or maybe even business?

Yes, according to David Vinjamuri. He's an [adjunct instructor of marketing at NYU](#), a [brand consultant](#) and author of the new book, "[Accidental Branding](#)." It tells the stories of eight entrepreneurs who built brands such as J. Peterman, Columbia Sportswear and Clif Bar (one of my faves) without any experience in marketing or branding.

David answered our 10 questions on how a marketing n00b can still become a successful entrepreneur.

### **1: In a nutshell, what are you trying to convince readers of?**

That the brands of successful entrepreneurs are fundamentally stronger than most corporate brands.

### **2: If a company launches and grows by "accident," what's more at play — the successful riding of a trend or a smart entrepreneur who has passion for an idea or cause?**

Riding a trend certainly can make a company more successful than it might have otherwise been, but I don't believe that any company lasts 10 years or more simply because of fortunate timing. Several of the entrepreneurs I write about were lucky with timing, but those same entrepreneurs have started successful second endeavors.

### **3: Let's say two people were starting a company at the same time. One was an MBA who tended to accumulate reams of data and conduct detailed analysis. The other was someone who never graduated from college, doesn't understand marketing but is quitting her paying job to launch a company. Who would you bet on?**

I would really want to know which person was solving a problem they experienced themselves – which person had passion for the business and was doing it not for the potential rewards but the desire to make something better. The 'reams of data' actually makes me less confident about the MBA because we often use data to augment a lack of personal understanding.

### **4: What do the accidental branders you profiled understand about customer evangelism and word of mouth that a typical business does not?**

Accidental branders do not have the resources that corporate brands do, so they're forced to rely on their customers for word of mouth. Along the way they see that treating customers as the messengers actually works better. And they realize that employees, vendors, suppliers, friends and family are also important conduits for the brand message.

### **5: What lesson would you engrave in stone for entrepreneurs?**

Learn how to tell your story really well. I call it 'building a myth' because like a myth the story has to be easy to remember and share, dramatic, and it has to have a lesson contained within it. That shareable founding story is what consumers use to convert people to your brand.

### **6: You talk a lot about sweating details. At what point does that become destructive micro-management?**

Sweating details is about choreographing the brand interaction – whether that is opening your brand packaging, approaching the customer service counter, calling your business on the phone or even having a vendor meeting. If any of these interactions fail to represent the brand, then you've just lost your brand positioning. Micromanagement is more an attitude towards people – assuming that they need to be directed on a minute-by-minute basis. It is not necessary. What you really want to do is to find people who have that same fanatical attention to detail, who can absorb the brand DNA. Then there is no need to micromanage.

### **7: How does an entrepreneur recognize he's in over his head?**

That is a really good question. I think the key thing is to know what you enjoy doing and recognize when the job has shifted away from that. Many of the entrepreneurs I write about sold the businesses when they were still pretty small in terms of employees because they recognized that they didn't want to spend all of their time managing an organization. Personally I was never happier than when I was a brand manager. By the time I was a director and then a vp and I realized that most of my job was presenting to senior management I didn't love it so much anymore.

### **8: Service providers have a tougher job than product makers to grow a company. True or false?**

False. I actually think it is easier as a service business because you immediately realize that the actions of every employee affect your brand. Customers take cues off of incredibly small things when they make judgments about you. You see that first hand as a service business. When you're selling a product you are often not there when the consumer expresses displeasure and you don't always get that designing a bad package can kill a good product.

### **9: Which industry tends to have the tougher job in sales and marketing: B2B companies or B2C companies?**

I believe it is a very similar job but that it is harder in B2B because marketing and especially brand positioning get short shrift. B2B is so often influenced in the short term by personal relationships that it is sometimes hard to remember that you are building a brand and that your customers are reading the way you do everything from answer the phone to negotiate a contract as a reflection of your brand. That's why I think you see so many brands in the B2B space – from Bloomberg to Bain – that were started by an individual with a very strong point of view.

### **10. Philosophically, there are no accidents. Agree or disagree?**

There are many happy accidents in business, but an accident alone won't build a multimillion dollar brand. The book is called "Accidental Branding" because in each case there was some fortuitous accident (like Roxanne Quimby thumbing a ride from beekeeper Burt Shavitz or Gary Erickson choking on his 6th Power Bar) that caused the entrepreneur to realize that he or she was uniquely positioned to solve a problem. What followed was a huge amount of sweat and hard work. That's why solving your own problem — something you uniquely understand — is so important.

*Interested in a free copy of David's book? Go to the Society for Word of Mouth (registration is free) and add a comment expressing your interest to [this forum post](#). Deadline for the book giveaway is Thursday, April 10 at 5 pm CDT. We'll give 10 autographed copies away (to be drawn randomly).*

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