

MIGHTY MERCHANT eCOMMERCE BLOG

Book Review: Accidental Branding: How Ordinary People Build Extraordinary Brands

By Vanessa Salvia

April 28, 2008

How *do* ordinary people nurture their ideas into multi-million dollar enterprises? That is the question author David Vinjamuri attempts to uncover and understand in his new book, *Accidental Branding: How Ordinary People Build Extraordinary Brands*.

Vinjamuri spends time with the people behind such successful brands as Columbia Sportswear (Gert Boyle), cragigslist (Craig Newmark), J. Peterman (John Peterman), Clif Bar (Gary Erickson), Baby Einstein (Julie Aigner-Clark), Burt's Bees (Roxanne Quimby), and The Art of Shaving (Myrian Zaoui and Eric Malka). Some of our best-known brands were born after what may seem like little more than luck, but after getting to know these people through Vinjamuri's observant prose, we can begin to think the way they did when they experienced their business epiphany, and hopefully distill their wisdom into a strategy that can be used in developing our own brands.

Vinjamuri befriends each of his subjects, spending weekends at their home and shadowing them on the job. We get a sense of their business acumen as well as their mistakes and how they learned from them and used them to become stronger. One chapter focuses on John Peterman, the founder of the J. Peterman Company. He built his mail-order business into \$70 million in sales and reinvented the catalog as we know it, with a catalog wasn't called a "catalog" at all.

Peterman referred to it as an Owner's Manual, and it was sized differently than other catalogs of the day. These are just two of the "rules of marketing" that Peterman intentionally broke. Rather than the usual product specs, the Owner's Manual described the items in romantic and exotic settings, almost as characters in their own short stories. This approach resonated with the people who actually owned the items, and was an attractive source of novelty to people who discovered the catalog through word of mouth or Peterman's direct mailings, which only served to increase their popularity.

Peterman and his small but cultishly popular catalog business was forced into the mainstream by the buffoonish caricature of him as Elaine's boss on the TV show 'Seinfeld' starting in 1995. While most business owners can only dream of getting that kind of publicity, ironically it damaged him in a fundamental way. In 1999, Peterman went bankrupt at a time when millions of people heard his name each week during prime time television. Through conversations with Peterman, Vinjamuri helps us understand that this happened for the very reason that his company did *not* follow the "traditional" model of what a business was supposed to do and how it was supposed to grow. We also come to understand how Peterman was able to quietly restore his lost cachet and rebuild the empire he lost.

What we come to realize is that the people behind the brands were ordinary people just like us, who didn't follow the rules. For the most part, they had no formal business training so they didn't know what they were "supposed" to do to market their fledgling companies. They weren't following the advise of

marketing focus groups and big-ticket PR firms, they listened to their own advice; *they* were the consumers and focus group participants, and they put all of their energy and resources into meeting a specific need they felt needed to be addressed.

Many entrepreneurs got lucky, and took many risks that some people might not be comfortable with. For instance, Gert Boyle gambled her home and her mother's home to get money for Columbia Sportswear. But the wisdom that leaps off the page for each of these "accidental brands" is that for the most part, these entrepreneurs were convinced that they were going to be successful, and didn't let any perceived failure stop them. If they didn't get the idea right the first time, they readjusted and started over.

For anyone interested in how brands are built this is a must-read book. For other small business owners seeking inspiration on how to think for yourselves, follow your own rules, and develop a strategy that might seem to be outside the norm, I highly recommend reading this book.

David Vinjamuri is Adjunct Professor of Marketing at New York University and President of ThirdWay Brand Trainers. Find out more on his website, AccidentalBranding.com.

#

Hyperlink: <http://blog.mightymerchant.com/2008/04/28/accidental-branding/>