

When everyone's selling the same thing, the difference is in the dean

 By [Douglas Kruger](#)

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"Here's the problem: The top three or four business schools in the country all work from the same sources. We use the same textbooks, the same materials, even the same ideas. And yet *one* always comes out on top. And I've always wondered *why!*"

I was chatting with the frustrated marketing manager of a business school that found itself perennially competing for second and third place. I had just delivered a presentation titled 'Own Your Industry,' and he had been in the audience. I had made the point that knowledge alone is insufficient to create an industry leader; be it an individual or a brand. One has to add two more ingredients to the mix before industry leadership may be achieved, in the form of *personality* and *publicity*.

"The penny dropped for me when you said that," he told me. "Because our dean is not keen on speaking in public. He is reluctant to appear in the media. And the dean at the school that holds the top spot is the exact opposite. He's an outspoken public figure who's always seen in the limelight. *That's* their differentiator. That's why they are seen as number one. The difference is in the dean."

His alliterative phrase so perfectly caught the principle, that I have now added it to my presentation: 'The Difference is in the Dean.' Sometimes, it's the sheer iconic status of the individual that sets a brand apart.

When your buildings look the same, stand on the roof with a colourful flag

Where there is no differentiation, being an outspoken character can set your business apart. There are plenty of industries in which the core offerings of competitors are essentially identical. The great mistake is then to determine that you have only one variable with which to tinker. Can you guess what that go-to variable invariably becomes?

If you guessed '*price*,' you have the correct answer. But there are no prizes for actually competing with this variable. Price wars can be a death-spiral for your business.

Three ways to announce yourself loudly

If you find yourself battling against industry competitors on essentially equal grounds, here is an alternative to the self-mutilation of price wars:

1. Resolve from the outset that you will not compete on price:

Instead, you will discover, create, or generate a point of distinction that sets you apart. You will believe in yourself and your brand sufficiently that you will find a flag to wave rather than digging away at your own foundations.

2. Determine what causes are naturally and logically associated with your industry:

The dean of the leading business school speaks on the development of entrepreneurs, comments on legislation that affects business, generates thought-leadership content around where industry in his country is headed and so forth.

Richard Branson engages the world with the idea of 'bold adventure.' When he's not paragliding nude into a volcano or rocketing into outer space with his toes on fire, he's speaking on breaking rules, forging new frontiers and acting boldly.

Dove, the soap brand, creates campaigns around 'Real Beauty' and women's perceptions of themselves, commenting on societal norms and sharing ideas about 'how beauty *should* be perceived.'

So what cause is most closely associated with your line of business? What can you champion, comment upon, speak, and write about? What can you lead? How can you make interesting noise that draws attention to your brand? By doing so, you raise your brand above the status of 'identical commodity,' and into the realms of 'energetic force to be watched and followed.'

3. Think beyond mere commentary and venture into the world of entertainment:

Is there something you can do that elicits that most simple and gut-based reaction from the public: 'That was awesome!?' That can be a more powerful insightful intellectual commentary.

BMW excels at this. Rather than commenting exhaustively upon the automotive industry, they take the route of 'appeal to the gut.' Perhaps it's no wonder that, in the same year that the company won 'Coolest Brand in South Africa,' the following video clip was doing the rounds on the internet. This is footage of a 'flash-mob,' as created in a public city, using cars. I first saw it yesterday, at which point the video had been up for a couple of days. Today, as I write, it is sitting at just shy of three million views:

Your leadership of your industry depends upon three qualities, working together:

- Knowledge;
- Personality;

- Publicity.

When your knowledge (for which you may substitute 'technical competence,' 'expertise,' 'talent,' 'skill,' 'experience' or 'know-how') is identical to that of your competitors, you have to find an additional point of differentiation. Personality and publicity are your keys.

Begin by determining a logical cause; something that people can feel passionately about. Then find your voice. Decide to be something spectacular, and take to the stage and the airwaves, the media and the internet.

Boldness is key here, so pick up your flag and lead your brand into its rightful place. Stand out as an iconic industry leader.

The difference is in the dean.

ABOUT DOUGLAS KRUGER

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