



A BIG IDEA:

BIG IDEAS DON'T WORK

{A MANIFESTO FOR THINKING SMALL}

CRAIG WILSON

Patagonia recently announced what many would call a big idea. They boldly proclaimed: “We’re out to change the industry,” the denim industry to be exact. They’ve developed a unique dyeing process that enables the reduction of water, energy, and chemicals in the production of denim, 84% less water in fact. To most brands, that’s a big idea, a reason to hire a big agency, to create the campaign de jour. But for Patagonia, this is just one more story shared about one more innovation from a company that has been incrementally changing the way they (we) do business for over forty years. Little by little, they chip away, delivering hundreds of little ideas. It shows up in different ways: an innovative wetsuit, a lighter more effective waterproof jacket, even a plea to their loyal customers to buy less. They just keep picking away finding new ways to make the best tool for the job: new ways of making and selling less harmful tools and wears. It’s not a campaign.

It’s not a big marketing idea, because big marketing ideas don’t work.

Principled, character driven decision-making does.

That is essentially their mission statement. And from that one statement emanates incremental improvement and innovation that lasts for decades. It's what drives long-term sustainable customer relationships and it's why Patagonia has some of the most loyal customers on the planet.

Most companies don't think this way. They place their bets on one big win, or they think in terms of short-term campaigns like politicians. Big campaigns make big promises and celebrate big ideas. Brand managers, CEOs and CMOs end up asking questions focused on the big win, the big idea: How do I find the right idea to inspire and grow my business? And, where is that person, or group of people, that can generate the kind of creativity and thinking that will net that big idea?

To the big idea hunters, these seem like good questions. But what if big ideas don't work? Let's examine the premise. You own a business. That business provides goods and/or services. You try to distinguish those goods and/or services by some means. Your widget is the best, or cheapest, or most coveted because of its uniqueness, or you simply promote your widget with advertising that drowns out the competition. But in a world of near instant commoditization and destructive price promotion, the eventuality is that these approaches wane over time, and so begins the quest for the big idea that you believe is going to save your business.

These big ideas typically come in the form of a new campaign tagline or logo, or a new way of talking about an old idea, or they come with a general makeover. Not necessarily lipstick on a pig, but the vast majority of re-branding efforts are simply a new way of looking at the same old thing. Rarely are they grounded in the principles of the organization. Rather, something else that feels all shiny and bright. With time, the veneer rubs off uncovering the fundamental truth that resides beneath. If you are best in class, not much reason to talk about it. Customers know. If you are the lowest price and the best deal there's little need to worry. Customers know. But, if you're truly caught in a competitive environment where the buyer has choice, the knee jerk reaction is to think of something big.

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Levi's is a shining example of big idea marketing. They've continued to build campaign after campaign after campaign seemingly in a continual effort to capture a semblance of relevance. Levi's has fits and starts. Their woes have been analyzed and critiqued for years. They've been described as everything from a beleaguered, discount brand among premium hipster brands to an American classic that's lost its story. At the 2009 outset of their Go forth campaign, a big idea brought to fruition by Wieden+Kennedy, Levi's once again embarked on a quest for relevance. It failed. In 2012, three years into the campaign, Levi's sales were down \$1B.

Popular opinion was that Levi's, or Wieden+Kennedy, or both, failed to marry the story with the brand. In the words of Kirk Cheyfitz, at the time Chief Editorial Officer at Story Worldwide, "... there are too many disconnects. They haven't figured out how to integrate content and brand or think it through strategically." This is Grade A big idea thinking. Let's reconnect the American jean buyer with the American dream. Sounds good on a big white board in a fancy conference room with awards hanging on the walls, but in terms of the critique it didn't connect the brand and the story, it wasn't an expression of Levi's core reason for being, and in retrospect didn't move the sales meter. Yes, Levi's is as Americana as it gets. And, yes, Levi's is a believer in the American worker. But does a 150-year-old brand require a major campaign to communicate something as simple as this? Does it need famous artists and a 20% increase in ad dollars to make the point? No.

Today, three years later, Levi's is on to another campaign, Live in Levi's, another attempt to tug at a sentimental thought, to invent authenticity (an oxymoron for those paying attention), to find a way into the American mindshare. This one touted as a means to "keep things light and fun-focused"—Adweek, July 2014. The CMO quoted in Adweek citing that "too many fashion brands are 'overly serious.'" Perfect. The CMO says the other brands are too serious. Is Levi's a light-hearted brand? Is fun-loving part of its core character?

Ugh. Will the throwing of darts never end? Out with Wieden+Kennedy and in with Draft FCB. Maybe not a revolving door, but big idea hunting among campaign oriented brands and ad agencies is like sport hunting, one big kill every few years seems to satisfy the urge. Levi's left FCB in 1998 for TBWA Chiat/Day, then Levi's fired them and went all in with Bartle Bogle Hegarty, then out with them in 2008 and in with Wieden+Kennedy arriving on the scene for their stint as AOR.

Will FCB's "Live in Levi's" campaign net a different result? I wouldn't bet on it. Big idea campaigns don't work. In the end, one of the most highly recognized campaigns in history, Got Milk, didn't work (The End of Got Milk?). Go Forth didn't work. Live in Levi's won't work either. Why not? They simply don't net long-term development of relationship between the brand and their customers because customers know the efforts are superficial.

What does work is more analogous to farming than sport hunting. Tending to seeds works. Nurturing growth over time works. Being steadfast to the character of the organization works. Another hundred-plus-year-old brand, IBM, keeps on keep'n on with its own version of sowing seeds. Their approach is not about big campaign ideas nor is it about defining the brand based on its product, rather, they persist as a result of nurturing the character of the brand. John Iwata, IBM's Senior Vice President, sums this up nicely when he says:

“We’ve never defined IBM by what we are selling. We’ve learned that at some point in the future if you make that mistake you will have to go to a lot of expense and trouble to take out of people’s hearts and minds that definition of IBM because the punch card will have had its day, or the Selectric typewriter, or the mainframe, the PC, Watson, cloud, analytics, all those things. So if we are not going to define our brand by what we make...what defines us? And it comes back to this notion of our corporate character, and that’s our belief system, our purpose, and our mission, and what makes us Us. We tend to that and the brand takes care of itself.”

This is beautiful commentary. Levi’s continually spends millions putting ideas in people’s heads and then is forced to spend more money unraveling them in preparation for another and another. It’s tedium that never truly nets any true relationship development with their constituency.

And herein lies the secret. Agencies and Big Idea oriented thinking is oblivious to the concept of relationship building. Marketing and advertising agencies and Big Idea campaign oriented CMOs are made for one another because they are looking for the same thing, the big splash, the shiny object that looks cool and makes them look cool. This is the stuff that wins awards, the ADDYs, Clios, Summit Awards, and on and on.

IBM is in the business of relationship building, so is Apple (old Apple), Patagonia, Harley Davidson, Chubbies, and Howies (more on these two in a minute). These are brands that incrementally invite customers into a relationship based on what they do consistently over time. They don't talk about their story, they live their story and share it, the good the bad and the ugly.

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What then is fundamentally different between the farmers and the sport hunters? Farmers are steadfastly committed to the discipline of understanding their own character and sharing it by living it. Not talking about it, not telling stories about it, but sharing genuinely who they are through their actions, their every day behavior, the minutia. This effort requires clarity about who you are at a foundational level, the values and beliefs that truly drive your organization's way of being. Patagonia is a great example. So are Chubbies and Howies.

Chubbies is a retro-styled men's short shorts brand founded by four Stanford graduates. They had begun a tradition of wearing similar shorts, found at thrift stores and handed down from their dads, in college. And, after initially going down separate career paths of their own after graduating, they struck upon the idea of getting back together and mass-producing shorts of their own. So, Chubbies was born, and they hit the beach to sell them, quickly learning, as co-founder Tom Montgomery says, "The shorts struck the same emotional chord with other people that it struck with us. It reminded us of our dads; it reminded us of the weekend."

And as they extend their product line, they adhere to that feeling: "We're constantly building this brand around the weekend and the feeling you get around Friday at 5 p.m.," Montgomery says. "When a guy throws them on, the stress and rigors of the work week can be put on hold for a bit."

Their sales quickly moved from the beach to an online store, where the sales and brand took off, and they have now even opened a bricks-and-mortar store in San Francisco.

Howies is an “active wear” company that makes clothes for biking, running, the outdoors, and the everyday. And making clothes for the outdoors, they focus on simple durability and quality, because they believe that “making a product which lasts longer is better for the environment.” They also focus on eco-friendly fabrics like organic and recycled cotton, and Merino wool, and have built a strong identity and following in the UK using these simple principles and practices.

Contrasting Chubbies and Howies is a simple way to demonstrate how unique character results in unique, but avid customer followings. Both companies clearly practice what they believe in, and note, both believe in vastly different things, and, hence, both attracting vastly different audiences. No big ideas. No campaigns. Just steady relationship development. Tending steadfastly to the character of their organizations, character manifesting in imagery, product style, supply chain, pricing, merchandising, communication styles, virtually everything. In the end, Chubbies and Howies succeed because of their unique character and because they’ve chosen to be steadfast to who they are. They’ve tended to their crop, and have nurtured a relationship with their customers such that they now are reaping the benefits of deeply committed customers that uniquely relate to the values of each.

The Chubbies and Howies stories are in stark contrast to Levi's path. Levi's travels are full of forks in the road. Chubbies' and Howies' journey a well-worn path. As a customer, it's easy to discern the character of Chubbies, truly fun-loving, and Howies, a heartfelt dedication to living simply. What is the character of Levi's? Can't tell you. I doubt if FCB, Chiat/Day, Wieden+Kennedy or any of the other highly paid agencies they've employed over the years can tell you either. And sadly, I'd guess the CMO at Levi's couldn't even tell you. More importantly, most jeans buyers likely can't tell you. That's the rub. They know Levi's make jeans and they've been doing that a long time, but that's doubtless the extent of their understanding, the extent of the relationship.

But that's not our problem. Our problem is actually how do we build organizations like Patagonia, Howies, or Chubbies? How do we enlist help? If not big idea agencies, where do we find the talent that can help all of us communicate our values? Obviously Patagonia, Howies and Chubbies have some talent at visual presentation and story telling, but where do the rest of us turn?

Unfortunately, there aren't many places to turn. The reason being, the small creative agencies the rest of the world can afford for creative services are just as broken as the big ones, just as enamored with big idea thinking and guru worship as all the rest. In fact, internally, agencies are wrought with a structural problem that force them to focus on the big idea because they can't operate cost effectively enough based on their business model to do any effective gardening.

Farming is incremental and takes time and is a discipline that demands accountability. Agencies are anything but accountable.

The problem is that the closed system model of creative development is increasingly out of step with producing meaningful, incremental, measureable impact. The full time employee model motivates the wrong things such as an over zealous tracking of billable hours, or the application of junior designers with minimal experience filling in for the higher cost talent, or the exaggeration of hours and billable project management and brainstorming and team consultation all pawned off as necessary time and research to net a big idea.

More importantly this model doesn't allow agencies to amplify creative resources in a flexible way. It forces the true talent to focus on business development and selling to clients while the lesser talent does the grunt work of producing creative. Agencies are simply disempowered by their dependency on maintaining client relationships to cover overhead, which results in account managers chasing revenue in a manner that the entirety of what's wrong spirals further and further out of control. This makes it hard to tell clients the truth, which creates inefficiency in marketing. Bad brand ideas get worked on for far too long, wasting resources on big ideas that eventually fail.

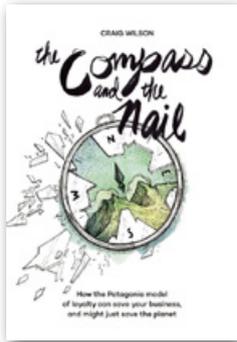
Based on circumstance—the high cost of running an agency, and the need for good brands to build incrementally—the creative world is working with two opposing truths: 1) Great ideas come from the alchemy of the right person working on the right project at the right time; and, 2) Any given agency has a static base of creative people to apply to an ever evolving and diverse pool of creative projects, or in more personal terms, your brand. In simple terms most agencies (I'd say all, but that would offend) are limited by their very existence to make this happy accident happen often enough so they can consistently satisfy their clients.

Long term, iterative development of communications requires deep understanding by those creating the communications. Lack of attention, turnover, and cost concerns rotate human resources from project to project on the agency side leaving the client frustrated with inconsistencies. The agency solution is all in big idea production for short stints of time. That's their model. They produce cool stuff on an ad hoc basis, but not stuff that lasts. So, go forth—and fire your agency.

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I've been working around this conundrum most of my professional life, which is why I endeavor to increase the odds of the right idea getting married to the right question. The answer certainly includes employing a truly heart felt creative, but more importantly, the real answer resides in the clarity of strategic direction that a creative individual or team is given to execute against. Good creative is guaranteed with an excellent recipe going in. The talent then brings it to life. So the paradox in this instance is solved by replacing the old question about how to generate a big idea with a new question—**How does one glean clarity of strategy?** 📖

Info



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