

Outmanoeuvring the Big Guys!

Taking full advantage of being local

by Jim Danahy

Outmanoeuvring the big guys is about competing from your strengths, not theirs. Don't try to go toe to toe with the buying clout, floor space and marketing leverage of big grocery or mass merchandise chain competitors.

By its nature, convenience retail is about being local. Don't worry about national averages or regional trends. You must be master of the here and now.

HERE ARE EIGHT PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO HELP YOU OUTMANOEUVRE THE BIG GUYS:

➤ **Be customer-centred** – In convenience retail, customer-centredness is all about truly building your business around **local customer needs**. Everything you do must be motivated by a simple objective – “Don't sell stuff, satisfy customer needs!” You can test each action with a simple question – “What would our customer say?” If the answer is “no,” find another solution.

Ask customers and colleagues who will give you the unvarnished truth. Find the things you're already doing which are hard to copy yet consistently lead to high marks from customers in your area.

➤ **Be flexible** – the power to pounce. Be prepared to jump quickly on hot items and tailor services to the needs of customers in your locale. You don't always need permission from head office to try something different.

➤ **Anticipate local needs** – Anticipate what customers want *before* they ask. Specialize in items suited to local festivals and events that others don't. Listen to customers from kids to seniors when they're in your store. Always ask what's new. Read



the magazines your customers buy. Set time aside with your vendors to keep abreast of the latest and greatest.

➤ **Do the unusual!** Begin by looking carefully at your market area to identify which local customer needs tend to go unrecognized and unmet by larger format chains. This is the key to differentiating your business and giving your customers a tangible choice.

Dare to serve ethnic, seasonal and local employers' needs in the trading area. Experiment with dry cleaning, shoeshine, snack bar, religious gifts, fresh flowers, fishing licenses, photo-finishing with corner store convenience and no lineups.

➤ **Innovate selectively.** Innovating is a powerful way to differentiate your business, but it is also costly in time and money. Use your creativity to innovate only when there is great advantage to be had and when ready-made alternatives are not available.

➤ **Poach shamelessly.** A good idea is a good idea! Pay attention to initiatives which are working, for convenience and other retailers outside your area. These ideas will be fresh, relevant, market-tested and ready to implement in your store. This is by far the fastest and most efficient way to bring new products and services to your customers.

➤ **Refresh constantly.** You don't have to be big to look professional. Convenience

retailers who regularly refresh décor, fixtures, staff attire and customer service procedures stand out from the competition. Make sure you know what your basics are doing for you.

➤ **Stay current with your industry.** Be a student of retail. Attend retail industry conferences and trade shows to keep up with the latest product and service developments. Make time to read **YCM** and other industry publications. Always have a good book on the go. Here are a few classics – “EVEvolution, The Eight Truths of Marketing to Women,” by Faith Popcorn; “Why We Buy, How to Profit from the Coming Demographic Shift,” by Paco Underhill; “Pour Your Heart Into It!, How Starbucks built a company one cup at a time,” by Howard Schultz; and “Power Retail,” by Stevenson, Schlesinger & Pearce.

Benchmark your operation against the companies (big or small) you admire most for service, efficiency, innovation, working environment, staff quality, etc. Then keep track of their progress.

YOU CAN DO IT!

Pay attention to what makes your trade area truly unique and how it is changing. Listen to your customers, your staff and your vendors. Take calculated risks.

Remember, work from your strengths to outmanoeuvre the big guys – Be customer-centred; be flexible; anticipate needs; do the unusual; innovate selectively; poach shamelessly; refresh constantly; and stay current.

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