

Winning Business Ideas from Kinky Boots ...

I was indulging in one of my favorite Friday evening habits a couple of weeks ago, relaxing and watching a movie. On this particular Friday night my wife had decided (isn't that how it works in your house?) that she wanted to see a movie that a number of people in her office had enjoyed. It's called "Kinky Boots".

It's about a family run shoe manufacturer in the U.K. that has been producing a high quality product for four generations. (By the way the movie is based on a true story.) The hero inherits the business only to find that, while his father had led everyone to believe that the business was holding its own, it was, in fact, in very serious financial trouble. A visit to one of the firm's largest customers revealed that its traditional market had been taken over by cheaper, lower quality, imported shoes (can anyone relate to that problem?).

The young owner has to begin immediately laying off long serving members of the workforce. While doing so, he gets a lecture from a young female employee who tells him that, instead of moping around asking "What can I do?" he should get out and find a new market niche (really, they actually use the word "niche" several times in the movie). She goes on to suggest that this was perhaps something they (management) should have done long before the firm got into trouble.

Without spoiling the plot for you - let's just say there are alcohol and female impersonators involved - our hero does manage to find a new niche. It's an easily identified group with a specific need which is not being met by the firm's competitors. The group is large enough to generate sustainable profits and they want a quality product. The company uses its experience and knowledge base to develop a unique solution. It supplements that by attracting a designer with specialist knowledge of the niche's thinking.

I couldn't believe it. Right there in the middle of my Friday evening, was a movie about "Kinky Boots" giving pointers on leadership and an excellent example of how to develop a winning marketing strategy. And it was doing it in a far more entertaining way than many of the books and articles I've read or courses I've attended.

But there was more. The movie went on to deal with some of the other issues we face in this fast changing, demanding world in which we operate. For example, reaching quality standards which are different from those of the traditional business demands more of workers than has ever been done in the past. As an owner how do you communicate the absolute necessity of making the change? And make them understand that even if they are willing to do their traditional best it is no longer good enough? How do you push and how far do you push to maintain their enthusiasm while motivating them to do even more?

We know things never happen one at a time so while driving up quality our hero also has to meet a deadline for launching the product line. When the pressures mount on you how do you communicate a sense of urgency to a work force that already believes it is doing its best? And while you're expecting them to change, is that enough, what about you, the owner? The movie's example of the personal

challenges owners face began early when our hero decided to leave the firm. A simple sense of duty to his heritage and the employees after his father's death pulled him back. But the changes required by the new strategy were so radical and the risks (including the personal, financial risks that all entrepreneurs take) of implementing it were so great that he had to develop enormous commitment to the success of the new direction.

Then there were the people issues which seem to dominate our lives. The company culture reflected the solid, traditional values and roles on which it was built. The potential solution, however, involved embracing customers with very different roles and values. And bringing the specialist designer into the firm raised all of the challenges associated with integrating minorities into the workplace.

Recognize any of this? Ever found yourself in a similar situation? Realistically most of us have had to deal with one or more of these issues one time or another. And it's hardly unusual for several crises to erupt simultaneously (the perfect management storm).

I'm working with a couple of companies at the moment which missed opportunities to develop new niches when they were busy. I also see situations where owners ask "What can I do?" without knowing where to find the answer. (Alcohol and female impersonators are not universal "cure alls" and I certainly don't recommend either or both.) Then there are companies that had a product for which they went to find a market, rather than starting with a market need first. Finally, some companies also pick niches that are too small or which require too much investment to ever yield a reasonable, sustainable profit.

But the challenges inherent in change, motivation and communication are ones which we all deal with on a day to day basis. And are ones with which we can all use some help.

Watch the movie and you'll see how the characters made out. You'll also see some examples of excellent strategies being put into practice – and the courage and persistence in the face of adversity that you know, as business owners, are required to implement them. You may even pick up a few tips – I know I did. And if you get nothing else out of it, you will be entertained.

In case you missed it....."Kinky Boots" is from the same team who created Calendar Girls. While not achieving the same critical or box office success it is, in the words on one reviewer, impossible to dislike. A comedy drama with a PG-13 rating, it was released in Canada in April 2006, Distributed by Buena Vista International and Miramax Films, it is available on DVD from Amazon.com

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