

Win By Playing To Your Strengths

Alan Nicol, Executive Member, AlanNicolSolutions



It's easy to get carried away trying to adopt initiatives and programs that other businesses have adopted or used to improve performance or achieve success. Sometimes, though, the best strategy is not to do what others do well, but to do what you do well, better than anyone else.

The Rest of the Story

What is true in games is also true in life, and in business. Last weekend my family and I were visiting some friends and a strategy board game broke out. I know it sounds geeky, but that's my crowd. My wife won the game handily with a playing piece of apparently limited usefulness.

Her playing piece was very strong in one particular attribute and weak in every other, with no special characteristics to help. And, in spite of the apparent limitations, she wiped the board with the rest of us. Her secret? She played to her piece's one strength.

She avoided situations that required her piece to use her weak attributes and she sought or caused situations where her strength could be used, especially against the rest of us. I know, it seems trite to talk about board games in a post about business improvement, but games, particularly those that are engaging, emulate real life challenges, at least in thought.

Consider the similarities. Our businesses and we have competitors. We struggle against our competitors for resources, skills, performance drivers, and the gold of the game; customers and their purchases.

Win By Playing To Your Strengths

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

He with the best strategy, who produces the best products and service, and who has the strongest business, wins. Be it a sport, a board game, or business, it sounds pretty much the same when considered in those terms.

So what are your business's strengths? Are you especially good at efficient operations and production? Does that allow you to beat your competition for price and quality? Do you understand your customers better than the competition and can, therefore, provide better product offerings and services?

Consider a specialist like my wife's playing piece. Let's use an example of a machine shop with a particular strength in rapid response. This machine shop can't handle especially large orders, and though it is skilled, isn't especially creative at machining the "impossible" components. It is the place to call if you need something tomorrow, or even today.

Rather than trying to compete with larger machine shops for large orders, or with other specialty shops for intricate machining challenges that this shop's equipment simply isn't suited to do, the speedy shop focuses its marketing and sales efforts on customers with urgency.

This machine shop's desired customers are the ones that need a small order, right now. Its skills are specific to taking models or prints and rapidly turning them into programs for their machines. A small inventory of common materials keeps them ready for most orders, and a responsive supply system enables reasonable response to unusual needs.

Over time, the shop has learned what businesses in its area need, or have come to rely on, rapid machining of prototypes or components and has built a reputation and relationships with these businesses. It also solicits business with manufacturing and engineering firms by advertising that it can meet their emergency needs when the occasion occurs.

As a result, the machine shop runs a very successful business. What's more, the owner realizes that if he were to entertain large orders or intricate challenges, he would lose business with his regular customers because those orders would interfere with his shop's one strength by preventing it from responding to urgent orders.

Let's look at a completely different version of playing to one's strengths. Let's look at a small town boat shop. In this particular situation, both the customer base and the competition are somewhat small and limited. The key to success becomes leveraging every resource to its maximum potential.

So, not only does the boat shop sell small watercraft, mostly from a catalog, not from inventory, but it rents watercraft too. Also, it will sell other people's watercraft on consignment. In this case, the shop's strength is presence. It is the only shop on the main street of the town and the first place tourists and locals alike will go for watercrafts. As long as that is the case, it might as well have something to offer them all.

Win By Playing To Your Strengths

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

Now, the same boat shop, because it has a shop, has space it can leverage. So, a local gunsmith has a counter inside the shop, and shares customers with the boat shop.

Lastly, because of the small-town environment, it is best for the boat shop to service its own assets. As long as it has the skills, equipment, and space to do so, it also services anyone else's watercraft and trailers. Because of similarity between small engines, the shop will service motorboat engines, lawnmower engines, and yard tractor engines.

So, the boat shop has turned its variety of resources, that it has to have in order to be a viable boat shop, into a variety of services to offer to local and tourist customers. Its strength might be defined as versatility.

Our two very different examples show us two extremes of playing to one's strengths. One specialized and avoided diversity because entertaining such would diminish its particular advantage. The other leveraged every resource to its maximum utility to achieve a versatile offering for a limited market.

Where in that perspective does your business fit? Does your business have a specific advantage like the machine shop? Do you target your marketing and sales efforts on customers who need that specific strength from you?

Do you have strength of presence or resources like the boat shop? Have you maximized your utilization of those resources to provide the best offering for your customers?

I find that the backgrounds of our business leaders often dictate the business focus and therefore a business's strongest traits. Leaders who grew up in production operations tend to drive businesses with highly efficient production and quality. Leaders from a marketing background tend to drive innovation and product development or product diversity.

The key to winning in the business game is to know your strengths and play a strategy that capitalizes. Avoid scenarios that, like the rapid response machine shop entertaining orders too large for its system, interfere with your strengths or demand you to perform where you are weak.

One last thought is that often we can engage others to protect, cover, or supplement our weaknesses. Many times other specialized businesses or consultants, with strengths that are other than ours, can do what we do not do well, and we can engage them to do it well for us. Logistics specialists are a common and an excellent example.

Take some time this week and review your business's strengths and weaknesses. Compare your strengths with your business strategy and make sure that the two match up.

Win By Playing To Your Strengths

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

We don't need to be great at everything all the time to be successful. We do need to do business where we are stronger than our competitors. Adjust your strategy wisely and be victorious.

Stay wise, friends.

Source URL (retrieved on 09/17/2014 - 8:09am):

<http://www.impomag.com/articles/2011/07/win-playing-your-strengths>