3 Reasons Why I Gladly Welcome Competition

When it comes to facing the crowded field, I say: Bring it on.

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After vying endlessly for the attention of your target market, you've hit the jackpot: They understand your brand identity, and they're buying what you're selling. Suddenly, the competition swoops in with a trendy product, a viral campaign or a celebrity spokesperson. Now you feel like the kid in the back of the class wildly waving your hand and shouting, "Pick me! Pick me!" to no avail.

Setting your company apart in your industry is an enormous challenge, and it can be devastating when a competitor steals your thunder. But there's no need to fear competition. In fact, you should embrace it. What I've learned over the last 14 years of building my business is that competition will always be around and, if harnessed correctly, it will push you to strengthen your brand.

Here are three reasons to lean into a competitive market.

1. Competition makes your category bigger.

When hint, my healthful flavored-water company, was first starting out, a few large soda brands launched direct competitors to our product. While this initially frustrated me — "How are we supposed to stand out from the crowd when we're

being overshadowed by giants?” I thought — I now appreciate that it expanded my category. These behemoth soda companies brought attention to the niche in which I was trying to establish myself, which in turn helped consumers notice my product and understand it.

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This competition also forced me to take a harder look at how my product appeared to consumers. My family has learned over the years that anytime we walk into a grocery store, I make a beeline for the beverage aisle. I want to see where my product is on the shelves, what it looks like to a customer and who’s getting better shelf space. Sometimes, differentiating yourself from the competition can be as simple as understanding whether you’re presenting to the consumer in the way you intended.

2. Competition helps you tell your story.

Nothing will force you to hone your message like a crowded field. Competition can come from anywhere — from another startup or from a large company — and it may take you by surprise, but no one can take away your story.

Tell consumers about your brand: Who are you? Why are you doing this? What is your purpose? If you’re just another product on the shelf, you won’t resonate with customers. Large companies often don’t have a story behind their product, or they can’t tell one as authentically as a smaller startup. Let your voice be louder.

Consumers respond to sincerity, and they want to buy from brands who are solving problems: According to the 2018 Cone/Porter Novelli Purpose Study, nearly eight in 10 Americans say they are more loyal to purpose-driven brands

than traditional brands, and nearly 73 percent are more willing to defend them. And 66 percent report that they would switch from a product they typically buy to a new product from a purpose-driven company.

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3. Competition forces you to diversify.

When Coca-Cola came out with a competitor to hint, it was a major blow to our business. We received a call from one of our major retailers, and they told us that they were going to stop carrying our product to make more space for Coke's new beverage. It was an incredibly disheartening moment, but we chose to see it as a hiccup, not a deal-killer.

Our solution: Diversify. We got our flavored water in front of new retailers and last year, we launched a fruit-scented sunscreen. Competition may take a share of your audience — maybe for a short time, or maybe forever — but when you diversify, it doesn't matter if the competition disrupts your channel, because you can always refocus to another one. For us, diversifying revenue streams was essential to our success.

Thankfully, we got a happy ending to this particular story, but along the way I learned an important lesson: Maintain your business relationships, but be nimble. Don't structure your company so it has to rely on a single retailer or client. The ability to adapt and pivot quickly means that you'll survive (and thrive) the next time competition strikes.

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