How Being an Outsider Helps You Disrupt Industries

Sometimes you're better off outside the inner circle.

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It's hard to disrupt the industry that pays your bills. People are taught a way of doing things, and companies pride themselves on their systems and processes, all codified in lengthy and monolithic manuals. "Reputation" and "experience" allow certain businesses to charge insanely high fees or prices, even if their services or products are subpar and don't fully satisfy their customers' needs.

I'm a Latinx immigrant who has called the United States home for more than 20 years. Even as a naturalized American citizen, being an immigrant will forever render me an outsider. But that has also been my greatest advantage.

I entered the art world only 12 years ago as an interloper. When I opened my art advisory and consulting company, I had been practicing law in a big New York firm for several years. I was miserable doing something I never enjoyed, and in 2009, after plotting an exit for a few months, I left to open my own business with no formal education, background or experience in the arts. Being outside of the industry's inner circle ended up propelling me to success, and here are three advantages I've found along the way:

You find opportunity where others don’t

I decided to go with my gut and was informed by passion. As a lawyer, I had started collecting emerging artists, visiting galleries and attending art fairs in my very limited spare time. Meanwhile, my novice eyes noticed how opaque and impenetrable the art world could be. Other advisors seemed to have no excitement and were only interested in the transaction. Blogging, expanding their knowledge on social media or branching out to different areas and projects that diversified revenues and kept their businesses relevant wasn’t being done. They saw other ventures as a waste of their time — time that should instead be spent selling.

This odd behavior struck me as an opportunity, and while putting together a business plan, I drafted a mission statement that is still valid today: to open a company that bridged the gap between collectors and artists and demystified the art world. I wanted to help my clients understand and live with contemporary art, use all forms of social media to educate and enlighten my audience (Back then only Facebook and Twitter were somewhat widely used, video wasn’t prevailing and Instagram didn’t exist), and never stay complacent or afraid of exploring different areas of an industry that today has become a $50 billion global market.

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You become a blank canvas for new ideas

Being out there with a distinct outlook from those who accepted “the way things were” helped me enter the art scene with a certain naivete and zero preconceptions. This blank

canvas allowed me to differentiate myself and my business in an industry known for chaining itself to old ideas.

Years after I opened my company, venture capitalists began funding websites that sold art online. Slowly, those websites started using content and social media to drive traffic and boost their sales. Brick-and-mortar galleries followed suit. Even until a couple of years ago, some gallery owners told me their businesses still hadn't joined Instagram because they didn't understand the value. It turns out that in 2020, Instagram was by far the most widely used social media channel by art collectors and 34 percent of them used it to purchase art.

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You continue to explore

Insiders are usually hard-wired for self-preservation — once they reach a certain level, long periods of smooth sailing can lead to complacency. Coming up with ideas that disrupt requires unlearning "how things are done." Even if you aren't an immigrant or an outsider to your industry, there are ways you can challenge the status quo.

Having an outsider's perspective has allowed me to keep asking the question "What else is there to explore?" Twelve years later, I not only have sold more than $60 million in art inventory while operating with minimal overhead costs, but I've had the exciting opportunities to curate exhibitions in three continents, collaborate with world-famous artists and create and host my own TV series, among many other exciting projects.

Sometimes groundbreaking ideas come out of situations you encounter daily. What could be done better? Where can a middleman be cut? Leave all your assumptions, hard knowledge

and biases at the door. Ask yourself why something has to be done in a specific way. How many other ancillary areas can be incorporated into what you offer? Does your idea violate the laws of nature? Is it illegal? Usually the answer is no, which means you can keep exploring and eventually, disrupting.

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