Overcoming ‘Expert Bias’ in Order to Innovate

Being an ‘expert’ is an enormous asset in starting and growing a business. Staying an expert is something else again.

January 8, 2019 4 min read

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One of the greatest challenges to an entrepreneur’s continued success is his or her *expert bias*.

Established entrepreneurs typically have entrenched beliefs about what works (or doesn’t) in their industry, and any contrarian idea is often met with extreme resistance. This is a problem because, while being an “expert” is an enormous asset in starting and growing a business, *staying* an expert requires a constant and ongoing search for even better solutions, ideas and customer pain points outside of the individual entrepreneur’s realm of expertise.

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Discerning expert bias

I think that any time an idea meets with loud resistance, that idea is probably tapping into a business opportunity that has yet to be explored. For instance, last month, I published an article about SEO guarantees that ignited a Twitter storm. In it, I argued that selective guarantees to customers show them “the objective value of your service” and “make clients happier and keep them around longer.”

Since so few people in the industry offer this assurance, I argued that doing this can "give you a competitive advantage."

What transpired on Twitter shortly after the article went live was a case study in expert bias! Ian Laurie, for instance, is an SEO veteran. So he had a perfect right to challenge my assertion. But, in fact, as Laurie dug deeper into our public conversation, he realized that the nuances of my argument exposed his bias as an expert in the industry.

Martin MacDonald, another industry veteran, did something similar – except that he simply posted a leading poll in which most of his followers predictably agreed that I was wrong. What was fascinating about both threads was that Laurie wanted to prove me wrong *by learning more about my perspective* but, in doing so, he became more open to my approach.

MacDonald, on the other hand, wanted to prove me wrong *by affirming his expert bias* with his followers' support and did so using the poll results.

Want to tackle your own expert bias? Here are three strategies you can use:

1. To innovate, you have to be able to change your frame of mind.

You can build a thriving, successful business, but if you don't pay attention to technological advances, customer attitudes or the shifting approaches of competitors, your business will be left behind. Think of how Netflix capitalized on the declining DVD rental market and pivoted to introduce streaming content. Unlike Blockbuster, which was its initial main competitor, Netflix was able to innovate to bring its business back from the brink of bankruptcy to global success.

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2. Expose yourself to different industries to gain insight into solutions for your own.

For instance, I took inspiration for our core product, fast SEO implementation, from a web application firewall, a product in a completely unrelated industry.

3. Simply look backward from your customer's perspective.

Steve Jobs said it best at Apple's Worldwide Developers Conference more than 20 years ago: "You've got to start with the customer experience and work backward to the technology. You can't start with the technology and try to figure out where you're going to try to sell it." In other words, if you want to build a thriving business, you can't get siloed in the technology – you have to stay in your customer's mindset always.

4. Keep a flexible mindset.

Ultimately, an entrepreneur with strong expertise has to have flexibility in his or her thinking. Flexibility opens up new opportunities.

Personally speaking, I've found that my customers and their ever-evolving pain points keep me on my toes. My exposure to other industries (such as information security, web publishing and machine learning) help me realize that different industries solve problems in many creative ways.

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While followers may consider me an expert in SEO, I don’t want to become shackled by my strong beliefs. And you shouldn’t either: When you open yourself up to learning, you open yourself up to opportunity. Extending your knowledge and wading into the uncharted waters of alternative industry ideas opens doors for new products, better services and new companies because you can more clearly pinpoint what the market is missing and what it needs.

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