

Intelligent naivety: The vitality of inexperience

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In our previous article, 'What is a challenger brand?', we described the Challenger Strategic Approach and the Eight Credos of successful challenger behaviour.



What is a challenger brand?

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Let's unpack the first one: Intelligent naivety.

The great wave makers in any category are those who are new to it. Jeff Bezos of Amazon was a hedge fund manager when he determined there was an opportunity to go into online retailing and start up in a garage with his father's pension fund behind him. Reed Hastings, with no prior experience of the film and television industry, applied the gym-model of subscription to movie rentals to create Netflix. Airbnb's Brian Chesky practised as an industrial designer and strategist when he co-founded the online accommodation and travel experience marketplace.

So, what's the point here?

The point is we are taught that category experience is valuable, perhaps essential. But far from category inexperience being a drawback, it has proved to have a vitality that allows new players to envision fresh possibilities in the category, possibilities that those who have worked for years in the category are unable to see because they have grown too close to the status quo. It is the ability to think without 'category blinkers' on that is often the mark of a great challenger and the foundation of businesses that build a newly defined category.

Look at Bezos, Hastings, and Chesky: Naivety, applied intelligently, has changed the face of the categories around us more profoundly than all the expertise in the world.

This goes beyond marketing.

In 2016, Ugandan entrepreneur Brenda Katwesigye left her career in risk management and IT auditing at Deloitte and launched Wazi Vision. After a trip to the optician's in 2015, Katwesigye questioned the reality of eye-care in Uganda, noting that glasses were prohibitively expensive, plainly designed, and disproportionately available in urban areas. She set out to create a high-quality, cost-effective eye-care solution for her fellow Ugandans by developing an app that uses virtual reality to perform visual tests and by selling glasses constructed out of recycled plastic, reducing the price of the frames by 80%. In 2018, Katwesigye was recognised by Quartz Africa as one of its 30 Innovators for 2018 and Wazi Vision was named by Forbes as one of its top 60 Women-Led Startups.

Gugu Nkabinde had a stable and well-paying job as a successful creative strategist but, following a discussion with friends about how they navigate wearing white shirts as black women, Nkabinde decided that enough was enough. Nude underwear at the time was only being designed for pale/light skin tones. She started Gugu Intimates to accommodate women of all skin tones, shapes and sizes, designing underwear that not only helped fill a commercial gap but also to help women own their identities in a world that is dominated by Western ideals of beauty.

This is Intelligent Naivety. It is the questioning attitude born of applied inexperience, rather than familiarity with the category, that has changed the face of the categories around us in the most profound way. It something more than "do the opposite

of what everyone else is doing.” Like Siimon Reynolds said, it’s knowing when to zig when others zag.

Econet’s Strive Masiyiwa started out in business at 25, with only \$75 pooled between himself and a friend, going around the suburbs fixing broken lights, and gates. His philosophy has been led by four key principles: start with what you have, do what you can, invest what you get, so that you can do bigger and bigger things. Masiyiwa has said of his approach to business, “Whether you’re a farmer, builder or engineer, the opportunities are equal: Just add a little innovation.”

Such a mindset empowers challengers to take a larger group on your ambitious journey.

Challengers mean, very specifically, to bring a fresh and dynamic set of questions to the category, a set of questions that deliberately break with the immediate past of the category (and our brand, if we are an established player) and looks at what can be learned from other categories - both in terms of what we can bring that is new, and also in terms of which bits of so-called wisdom we need to unlearn in order to break through.



eatbigfish. is a strategic brand consultancy whose unique focus is challenger thinking and behaviour. Our expertise is grounded in The Challenger Project - our study of how challenger brands succeed by doing more with less.

We act as catalysts rather than consultants and, through our collaborative approach, we provide inspiration and frameworks which enable ‘would be’ challengers to deliver breakthrough solutions for their teams and brand.

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