

## Negate competition by 'owning' your space

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*Rules to help entrepreneurs with specialized visions become unique providers—and rule their turf as long as they care enough to maintain it.*

Competition is one of the most studied aspects of business strategy. Conventional wisdom holds that companies should seek to outmaneuver, crush, and obliterate their opponents. An alternative, softer school of thought holds that natural competitors should cooperate on shared concerns in order to compete on the "bigger" issues.

But why try to one-up the competition, thus starting a zero-sum race? Or sleep with the enemy, thereby risking the growth of a core business? What if you could simply negate the competition by creating your own market and owning the space?

Before you object, let's clarify an important point: This strategy won't work for every business. If you're Starbucks (SBUX), you'd better worry when McDonalds (MCD) beats you in a blind taste test. If you're General Motors, you ignore competition at your peril because sooner or later it will catch up to you.

But for the lone entrepreneur, the business that decides to stay small on purpose, or the aspiring microcelebrity, the strategy of negating competition by owning your space may be right up your alley.

Here's how to do it.

First, become the name that comes up when people think of the space you want to own. Tech news? TechCrunch. Wine? Vay-ner-chuk. It works for non-profits too. Microlending? Kiva. Fixing the global water crisis? Charity: Water.

The important question to answer is: Where's your space? What must you do to become the go-to name for that subindustry? Owning your space can be a lot of work. But you want to win, right?

Second, establish microcelebrity around your brand. I'm a full-time blogger so this is easy for me. I'm not the best in the world at many things. I never went to business school and I never sat in a cubicle. I just know how to do what I know how to do and enough people like it that I'm able to thrive.

Don't write off blogging as a difficult-to-replicate example. Everyone's an expert at something and everyone's famous on the Internet. Where I live in Portland, Ore., a guy named Gregg Abbott started a food cart selling fried pies at midnight on a busy corner. He called it "Whiffie's," and he publishes the daily menu online to a growing crowd of pie fanatics.

Laugh if you want, but you were to say "fried pies" in Portland, everyone who knows anything about such matters would immediately think of Whiffie's. More than 40% of Abbott's business comes through Twitter and he's making money in the restaurant business after less than six months in operation. I defy anyone in Portland to enter the mobile food market and try to compete with the man who owns the space.

Third, remember that the rich get richer. Trust on the Internet is a trickle-down process. I write about things like round-the-world plane tickets and how to crash-land in Pakistan without a visa. Why people trust me on college advice and business consulting, I'm really not sure—but for some reason, they do. Once you enter the sweet spot of owning a space, establishing a

microbrand, and regularly providing real value to your customers, you'll be more concerned about discerning the right way to grow than about beating the other guy.

Oh, and just because you can negate the competition doesn't mean you'll never need to fight. When you own the space, the battle you'll face every day is against inertia. Can you keep going? Can you keep raising it up to the next level? It's not necessarily easier than dealing with the big-box store across the street, but I'd rather go up against inertia than Wal-Mart (WMT). I like the odds better—and it's a lot more fun.

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