



THE 19 CONTRARIAN RULES OF BUSINESS



DON'T PROMISE EXCELLENT SERVICE?
DO RUN ANNOYING ADS? BUSINESS LEADERS INSIST
THESE **COUNTERINTUITIVE PRINCIPLES** WORK.

THE BIG STORY BY Chris Burslem | ILLUSTRATIONS BY Mar Jefferson Go

To make a point about how our brains operate, the American neuroscientist Gregory Berns likes to encourage people to close their eyes and imagine the sun setting on a beach. If you just tried that, odds are the image that arose was the clichéd one — a warm tropical island scene, most likely framed by the frond of a coconut tree, awash in orange, as opposed to, say, a dark, wind-whipped pebble beach off the coast of northern Scotland.

The brain “is fundamentally a lazy piece of meat,” Berns writes in his book, *Iconoclast*. It needs energy to operate and has evolved to use it as efficiently as possible. As a result, it defaults to shortcuts as it can — past experience, other people’s opinions, common practice — to avoid the taxing effort of perceiving or imagining afresh.

There are, of course, people who make it a habit to buck conven-

tion, who have a knack of seeing something no one else does. Berns refers to these disruptive original thinkers as iconoclasts. We like to think of them as contrarians. These are the brave, sometimes downright odd souls whose questioning of the conventions of society or their professional field have repeatedly caused history to change course or leap forward.

In business, entrepreneurs are

often contrarian by definition — they see value and opportunity where others do not. The contrarian investor Bill Gurley notes that “you can only make money by being right about something that most people think is wrong.”

The idea of being an independent spirit appeals to many. In a recent Brain Squad survey, 96 percent of our readers identified themselves as contrarians compared to 4 percent who said they were conformists. Of course, by definition, it’s not possible for the majority to be contrarian. We suspect the result reflects most pet pros considering themselves as independent operators, charting their own destinies in a world where most of their fellow citizens opt for the security of more conventional employment.

It is not easy being a true contrarian. There is the risk of ridicule, having to live with constant uncertainty. Being contrarian for the sake of contrarianism is pointless. There’s no inherent benefit in being unconventional.

There is, unromantically, much to be said for doing the things the timeworn “best practice” way.

We thus begin our exploration of contrarianism with a caveat — doing something differently is exciting, possibly liberating, sometimes more lucrative than the conventional way ... and often dangerous.

Go charging away from the herd with care. Ultimately, you want to choose the ideas — new or old, intuitive or rational, bizarre or conventional — that serve you (and your business) best.





1

THE CUSTOMER IS NOT ALWAYS RIGHT.

IT'S ACTUALLY irrelevant if a customer is right or wrong. This is, after all, a commercial transaction, not a debate. Just because a customer wants, needs or expects something does not mean that delivering it is the best thing for your business. Indeed, “keeping certain customers happy can be a horribly inefficient and downright distracting way to run a business,” note Brent Adamson, Matthew Dixo and Nicholas Toman in the *Harvard Business Review*. It’s also not much fun.

As a business owner, you need to make decisions that best apply your company’s capital, intellectual energy and product capabilities. Rather than customer satisfaction, the ultimate goal should be running a sustainable business. Have a written, legally defensible terms of service statement, warranties, guarantees and a simple process to determine which clients or customers deliver the strongest

ROI and which are actually costing you money. In some cases, it’s better for long-term growth (not to mention morale) to jettison a high-maintenance client and focus on improving the quality of your customer base.

2

IGNORE TERRIFIC OPPORTUNITIES.

ONE OF THE dangers of business success is that it leads to more opportunities. Pursue them at your peril. In business, there is always a trade-off. Doing one thing well invariably means you can’t do another at a high level as you spread yourself too thin. The result is a damaging mediocrity.

In his book, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, Greg McKeown cites studies that show the loss of focus is a key reason companies fail. The antidote? Spurning good opportunities. “Not just haphazardly saying no, but purposefully, deliberately and strategically eliminating the non-

essentials. Not just getting rid of the obvious time wasters, but being willing to cut out really terrific opportunities as well,” he says. “Few appear to have the courage to live this principle, which may be why it differentiates successful people and organizations from the very successful ones.”

3

DON'T GIVE YOUR STAFF THE RESOURCES THEY NEED TO FIX A PROBLEM.

CONSTRAINTS BREED resourcefulness. This is an idea that has been gaining influence for the last few years. “Is there something in the nature of constraints that brings out the best creativity?” writes Scott Berkun, the author of *Mindfire: Big Ideas for Curious Minds*. Consider a good haiku or sonnet, and the answer is obviously yes: It’s precisely the limits of the form that inspire new ways of working inside them. That means no more “blue sky” brainstorming: If you want the best answers to a question, focus it narrowly; consider a time limit, too. Google sometimes puts fewer engineers on a problem than it needs; it inspires ingenuity. Be-

hind all this is the counterintuitive insight that discipline and structure are often the path to freedom, not its enemy. See constraints as a game. Not only are games about fun, but they are distinguished by the rules that govern them.

4

FORGET TRYING TO FIX YOUR WEAKNESSES.

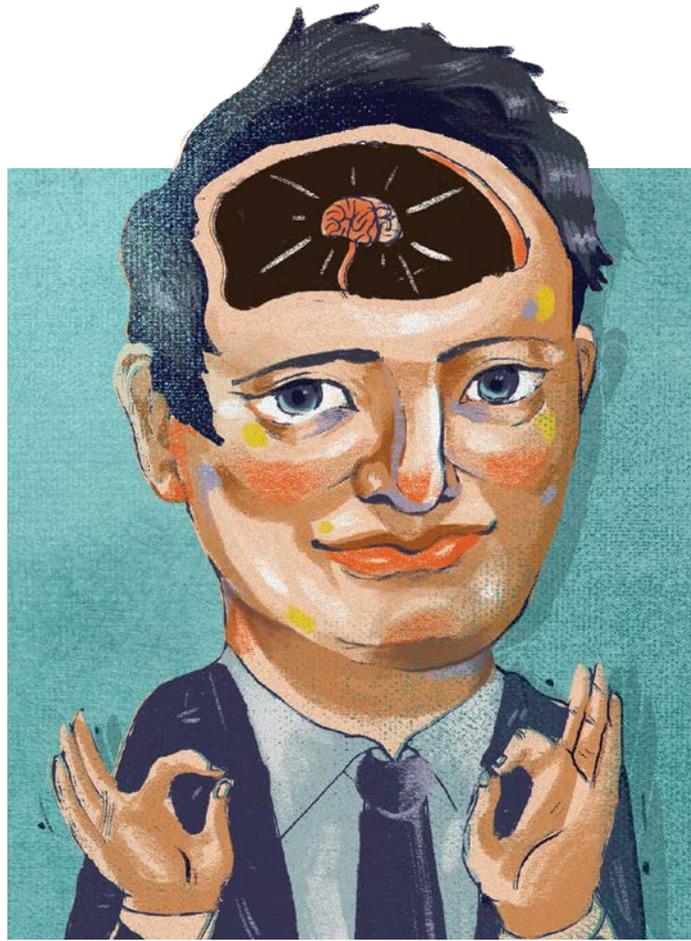
IN A SERIES of bestselling books, consultant Marcus Buckingham has made a persuasive case for a strengths-based approach to life and business: It’s both more effective and more enjoyable, he argues, than struggling to fix your weak spots. According to Buckingham, most people try to “plug” their weaknesses, while the really successful focus on exploiting strengths. The weakness-plugger is the employee who goes on courses to become less awful at public speaking, when she’d be better off in a job that calls on her written skills. You’ll rarely improve a weakness beyond mediocrity, argues Buckingham. If you truly know what you’re bad at, you’re already ahead of the pack. Don’t throw that away by wasting your time getting slightly less bad.



5

THINK SMALL.

IN HIS 1994 book *Built to Last*, Jim Collins introduced the world to Big Hairy Audacious Goals, or BHAGs, his term for the ambitious long-term goals that he argued galvanized successful companies. And it seems the term is rolled out in every discussion of good business practice. But the problem is that the excitement, energy and envelope-pushing boldness stirred up by such endeavors often dissipates quickly in the face of the day-to-day running of business. Worse, such big-picture thinking, telling yourself something is epic and of crucial importance, often leads to fear, resistance and ultimately inertia and disappointment. As the psychologist John Eliot writes in his book *Overachievement*, “Noth-



ing discourages the concentration necessary to perform well ... more than worrying about the outcome.”

The marathon runner who’s reached a state of “flow” isn’t visualizing the finish line, but looking through a narrower lens, focusing on one stride, then another, then another. Like the formula for contentment (happiness = reality - expectations), it’s often better to forget the end goal, aim low and just focus on the process if you really want to get things done.

This can apply to everything from setting low targets for salespeople (spurred on by achieving the goal, they will often break through and hit a higher number) to big projects. Jerry Seinfeld’s writing technique involved marking an X on a calendar for every day he sat and typed. His goal was an unbroken chain of Xs. If he’d aimed instead to write masterful jokes, he’d have been distracted and intimidated. Forget audacious. Just go do it.

An advertisement for Buffalo Hornz Water Buffalo Dog Chew. The background is teal. In the top left is the QT Dog logo, featuring a white dog's head in a circular frame with the text "QT Dog" above it. The main title "BUFFALO HORNZ" is in large, bold, teal letters with a black outline, followed by "TM" in smaller teal letters. Below the title is "WATER BUFFALO DOG CHEW" in white, bold, sans-serif font. In the center, there are four packages of Buffalo Hornz chews, labeled "SECTIONS", "SMALL", "MEDIUM", and "LARGE". Below each package is a corresponding piece of the chew. To the left of these is a photograph of a brown dog lying down, holding a large piece of the chew in its mouth. To the right is a vertical "CLIP STRIP" of the chews, with a red starburst graphic above it that says "NEW LOOK". At the bottom right is a photograph of a retail display rack filled with the chews. A list of benefits is centered at the bottom:

- 100% NATURAL
- LONG-LASTING
- PROMOTES DENTAL HEALTH
- 5 SIZE OPTIONS AVAILABLE

6

GET RID OF THE RULES.

TOO OFTEN, managers assume the key to improvement must be clearer procedures, more exactly enforced. But the result is organizational structures that permit zero autonomy — and extremely annoying customer service (“Sorry, sir, our policy doesn’t allow you to ...”). Perhaps even worse is that such management fails to capitalize on the talents of those lower down the hierarchy. Zappos founder Tony Hsieh made headlines a few years back when he said he was rolling out “Management by Holacracy,” which relies on the employees themselves to decide how to get their day-to-day responsibilities completed on the basis that they probably know best. That may be

too much for most business owners, but striking the right balance between autonomy and control is very likely the essence of being a good manager.

7

DON'T BELIEVE IN LONG WORK.

FEW THINGS ARE as American as the belief in the merit of hard work. The problem is too many small business people confuse work and progress. A day when lots of things get done, when you arrive home exhausted after holding six meetings with staff and vendors, clearing 300 emails from your inbox and finally straightening

those old files in the backroom, sort of feels like a productive day, but it’s unlikely to have helped your business take the next step forward. Marketer Seth Godin calls this “the trap of long work.”

Long work is what the lawyer who bills 14 hours a day filling in forms does. Hard work is what the insightful litigator does when she synthesizes four disparate ideas and comes up with an argument that wins the case — in less than five minutes.

“Hard work is frightening because you might fail. You can’t fail at long work, you merely show up.”

The management guru Peter Drucker suggested the best way to address this issue is by constantly asking yourself the question, “What’s the most important thing for me to be doing right now?”



What’s the most important thing for me to be doing right now?”

PETER DRUCKER

8

GIVE AWAY YOUR TIME.

OVERWHELMED BY WORK? Feel you are in a constant race against the clock to get things done? Try making some time for others. “While it might seem counterintuitive to sacrifice some of the very things you think you don’t have enough of, our research shows that giving a bit of time away may, in fact, make people feel less pressed for time and better able to tick things off their to-do,” Cassie Mogilner Holmes, an associate professor at UCLA, and Michael Norton, a professor at Harvard, told the *Wall Street Journal*. Another hack to deal with time scarcity: Erase a day from your schedule. Busy? Don’t schedule anything for Fridays. The work you didn’t get done will flow over ... and you’ll finally knock off those to-do list items.

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9

HIRE MORE INTROVERTS.

ON THE SURFACE, introverts don't seem to have the makings of great salespeople or even managers. Social interaction tires them, they have trouble with insincere flattery, they don't like to push people, and they don't tend to contribute vocally to meetings or brainstorming sessions.

But there are upsides to all this: Introverts tend to demonstrate a higher degree of sensitivity in emotional interactions, they are more likely to be experts in their field, they are less likely to be yes-men or women, and as for managing people, they do better than extroverts when the staff itself is full of go-getters.

"Although extroverted leadership enhances group performance when employees are passive, this effect reverses when employees are proactive because extroverted leaders are less receptive to proactivity," says Susan Cain, author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*.

10

BE LAST TO MARKET.

AMONG BUSINESS GURUS, few things are as unquestioned as the notion that innovation is the path to success. "Innovate or die!" goes one mantra.

Yet if innovation was a surefire way for companies to achieve dominance, the world might look very different. White Castle, RC Cola, and Diners Club were all innovators, but think of fast food, soft drinks and credit cards, and those are unlikely to be the first names that come to mind.

The upsides of unoriginality are clear: Imitators let others make the costly mistakes, and if they're clever enough, can incorporate the lessons learned into a far better product.

In his book *Copycats*, the management theorist Oded Shenkar argues we need "to change the mindset that imitation is an embarrassing nuisance." Rather, it's a "rare and complex" capability, one we could all do with cultivating, he says.

11

RUN ANNOYING ADS ... OFTEN.

THERE'S A REASON that grating TV ads work: The more they grate, the more you'll notice them, and noticing — thanks to what psychologists call the "mere exposure effect" — leads to liking.

Depressingly, whatever we're repeatedly exposed to, and regardless of any other reason to like or dislike it, we'll end up growing fond of.

According to Roy H. Williams,



author of *The Wizard of Ads*, there's actually no way for successful advertising to avoid being irritating to some degree. "Ads that twist our attention away from what we'd been doing are always a bit annoying," he says. But if you fail to get your audience's attention, your ad has failed at the first hurdle. "Consequently, most ads aren't written to persuade; they're written not to offend. But the kinds of ads that produce results make us answer yes to these three questions: Did it get my attention? Was it relevant? Did I believe it?"

Williams claims 98.9 percent of all the customers who hate your ads will still come to your store and buy from you when they need what you sell.

"These customers don't cost you money; they just complain to the cashier as they're handing over their cash."

12

STOP HOLDING MEETINGS.

JIM BUCKMASTER, chief executive of Craigslist, has a simple policy: "No meetings, ever."

There are several reasons why meetings don't work. They move, in the words of the career coach Dale Dauten, "at the pace of the slowest mind in the room," so that "all but one participant will be bored, all but one mind underused."

A key purpose of meetings is information transfer, but they're based on the assumption that people absorb information best by hearing it, rather than reading it or discussing it over email, whereas in fact, only a minority of us are "auditory learners." The key question for distinguishing a worthwhile meeting from a worthless one seems to be this: Is it a "status-report" meeting, designed for employees to tell each other things? If so, it's probably better handled on email or paper.

That leaves a minority of "good" meetings, whose value lies in the meeting of minds itself — for example, a well-run brainstorming session.

13 DROP SOME F-BOMBS.

SWEARING, when done judiciously, according to various psychologists, boosts endorphins, promotes social bonding and makes people more persuasive. Periodically, let your staff — even customers — know you're human.



14

STOP ASKING, "WHERE DO YOU WANT TO BE IN 5 YEARS?"

HIRING EMPLOYEES who will challenge management is another staple of business advice, but everyone has probably worked with "yes, but" employees who basically oppose every new idea and approach. To find true contrarians, Peter Thiel in his book *Zero to One*, recommends asking the following question when interviewing employees: "Tell me something that's true that nobody believes in."



Tell me something that's true that nobody believes in.

15

DON'T ASK FOR THE SALE.

THE TRADITIONAL approach to selling says tout the benefits, close throughout, close with an assumption and then push for the add-on followed by another. You're just efficiently taking the customer in a direction she wanted to go anyway.

In contrast, the "slow sales" movement, which has been gaining ground recently, argues that there are intelligent, deliberate customers who prefer an almost "do-it-yourself" zero-pressure environment. Granted, getting them to the cash register may take longer.

But according to *Inc.* magazine, this technique alleviates the extra costs of post-purchase dissonance from returns, customer service

time, negative feedback and customer churn.

16

LOOK FOR MENTORS AND STAFF WHO DO IT THE "WRONG WAY."

TIM FERRISS has an interesting approach to considering contrarians: Be on the lookout for the anomalies, like the wispy girl who can deadlift 405 pounds. They're performing with techniques rather than genes. "These iconoclasts show the differences in techniques and attributes," he says. "If someone has become really good at doing something in a very nonstandard way, you can infer that the standard path isn't necessarily the best methodology for learning a skill."

17

DON'T PROMISE EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE.

ASK INDEPENDENT pet stores what is their point of competitive advantage, and they'll overwhelmingly say excellent customer service. But something big corporations know (but never publicly say) is that delivering excellent customer service ultimately results in unhappy customers. Thus the field of "expectations management."

"If you want satisfied customers,

it's certainly wise to act in ways that will satisfy them. But it's also wise to pay attention to (and, if possible, influence) their criteria for feeling satisfied," writes Oliver Burkeman in *The Guardian*. Training customers, employees and partners not to expect a "yes" in response to every request might be crucial for preserving sanity.

18

ASK CUSTOMERS FOR FAVORS.

THE "BEN FRANKLIN EFFECT" states that if you want to get someone to like you, you should ask him or her to do you a favor. The strategy, named for the founding father's habit of borrowing books from opposing politicians to win them over, works because humans hate cognitive dissonance: We can't stand a mismatch between our actions and thoughts. So if we find ourselves helping someone out, we'll unconsciously adjust our feelings for them. The implications are striking. Don't suck up to your

customers — ask for favors or even just their opinions ("What'd you think of that new food topper?").

19

DON'T BE SO PROFESSIONAL.

WE LIVE IN an era with more opportunity than ever to burnish the image we're projecting, and more pressure than ever to do so. But in her book, *Cringeworthy: A Theory of Awkwardness*, Melissa Dahl makes a persuasive case for celebrating those times when "someone's presentation of themselves ... is shown to be incompatible with reality in a way that can't be smoothed over." Awkwardness pierces that facade, exposing the imperfect life behind it. Quoting the words of the philosopher Adam Kotsko, she says it creates "a weird kind of social bond" — a solidarity arising from seeing that behind the fakery, we're all just trying our best to seem competent.

The awkward you, then, is the real you, the one without the defensive performance. And people will like you for it.



8 MORE RULES ONLINE: petsplusmag.com/contrarian