

Principle 11

Pre-Emptive Advantage

How to influence perception

Did you know that potatoes have more vitamin C than oranges? It's true. So why is it that many people automatically think: "I need more vitamin C in my diet; I better go buy some oranges." It's because oranges have a pre-emptive advantage over potatoes when it comes to the vitamin C issue. For whatever reason, whenever nutritionists talk about oranges, they almost always mention the fruit's high vitamin C content. Sure, oranges do have a lot of the good stuff - it's just that a lot of other fruits and vegetables, including potatoes, have even more. But you almost never hear anyone bragging about all the vitamin C in potatoes. It almost seems ridiculous.

Perception is a very powerful thing

It's all a battle of perceptions - what matters is what holds sway in the minds of consumers. You can use this same perception game to gain an enormous pre-emptive advantage over your competition. You do that by seizing upon a positive aspect of your product, linking it with your particular brand or name, and claiming that position as your own. Then, even if your competition has everything you have, customers will still come to you more often because they have linked what they want with what you have.



Many examples of this already exist. For example, a bottled water company called in the American Midwest "Ice Mountain" issued a series of ads, press releases and other promotional material describing the strenuous purification and filtering process that made its water a superior product. The result was a significant regional switch to that brand over a lot of competitors, even those with well-established reputations for quality.

Perception is more important than reality

But the real kicker is: All drinking water in any modern country must meet more or less the same standards of purity. As it happens, Ice Mountain water was not much different than ordinary tap water, and its filtration system is

the same as just about all bottled water distributors used, and also used by municipal water treatment plants! But by projecting and broadcasting its processing techniques loudly enough, it captured the position of being a water produced by some kind of exclusive or superior technique, and thus gained a pre-emptive advantage over the others.

When you capture a particular position pre-emptively, you also prevent others from using it as effectively. When others follow suit, they are perceived as playing catch-up, or having had to change to match an original superior. That's not the position you want to be in. Rather, get in first and gain the pre-emptive advantage.

Best of all, you may not have to change anything about your product, or anything that you are doing. By simply telling people how you do what you do, or just what goes into making your product a good one, you can create the perception that you are doing something special, and by implication, say the others are not. That's how you gain a pre-emptive advantage.