

THE SEWA MARKETING PLAN



DR. RASHID ALLEEM

GCC Happiness & Peace Ambassador

The SEWA Marketing Plan

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EIGHT PLAIN AND SIMPLE MARKETING
STEPS LEADING TO HIGHER PROFIT
AND HAPPIER CUSTOMERS

Dr. Rashid Alleem



The SEWA Marketing Plan



Keep Challenging Tomorrow

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Writing a book is neither easy nor quick; it can take its psychological toll not only on the author but on his family as well. A special warm hug and thank you to my family for your help, patience, and encouragement. You truly are the wind beneath my wings. I love you. You made this writing much easier.

To the people of SEWA, I did my best to tell your story accurately, interestingly, and usefully. To our readers, thank you. I believe you've picked up the right book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Rashid Alleem is ranked third among the 25 most influential CEOs in GCC and is considered one of the 100 most influential CEOs in the Middle East. Recently, the Academic College of Oxford, United Kingdom, honored Dr. Rashid Alleem with the title of “Honorary Professor” in recognition of his scientific, administrative and humanitarian efforts, and contributions, especially in the field of sustainable development. He is a passionate writer; an environmentalist; a sought-after thought leader; the creator of CRITICAL Thinking, a unique blend of “critical and lateral” thinking; and an internationally respected transformational leader. The founder of Alleem Knowledge Center, Dr. Alleem is a dynamic leader who has worked with prestigious governmental, semi-governmental, and nonprofit organizations. He is an entrepreneur par excellence with a flair for effective, strategic decision-making by means of innovative thinking. Dr. Rashid was recognized as “The Knowledge Ambassador of the UAE” by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum—the Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and ruler of the Emirate of Dubai—and as “Environmentalism of the Year 2012” by the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad.

Dr. Alleem earned a Ph.D. from the University of Salford, in Manchester, UK. Being a “sustainovationalist,” he has received five honorary doctorates from different universities: Atlantic International University (USA), in recognition of his achievements in the socioeconomic fields; Somalia National University, for his humanitarian services; American Global Interna-

tional University (USA), for his global business contributions and numerous academic achievements; Indian Peace University, from which he received a Doctorate in Philosophy for his exceptional contributions, dedication, and social services to society; and Doctor of Philosophy (D. Phil) from Amity University, in recognition of his exceptional vision, deep commitment to the environment, professionalism and direction in the pursuit of excellence, his strategic vision and inspirational leadership in steering his organization towards continuous growth and dedication to the good of humanity.

Dr. Alleem was recently recognized as “The Global Green Ambassador” by DMG. Under his leadership, SEWA received the Voluntary Cancellation Certificate for excellence in energy-saving and the reduction of CO2 emissions by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2017 and 2018 subsequently. He was bestowed with the Friend of Singapore Sustainability Award 2017 by the government of Singapore, and he became a member of the advisory board of the Singapore World Water Council. He has received the prestigious title of “The Ambassador of Peace & Happiness in the Arab World” by Voice of Kerala (VOK) Radio Station.

As a highly sought-after keynote speaker, presenter, and teacher, Dr. Alleem is well-known for delivering compelling and practical messages to audiences of more than 200,000 people per annum, including at some of the largest regional and international venues.

Last but not least, he is one of the most interviewed and published charismatic media personalities in the region. A prolific writer both in English and Arabic, Dr. Rashid Alleem is the author of several books on management and leadership. His newest book, *The SEWA Way*, showcases 15 winning principles, providing a roadmap for achieving success both on an organizational

and a personal scale. Aiming to improve social, economic, and environmental living conditions worldwide and helping to improve the quality of life for hundreds of millions who have not yet seen the benefits of sustainable development and inclusive growth, he has written four books on the topic of sustainability: *My Green Journey in Hamriyah*; *Sustainability: The Fourth Wave of Economy*; *I Am Committed: 17 Global Goals*; and *Alleem Sustainable Development Goals*.

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FOREWORD

A THOROUGH TURNAROUND

APRIL 22, 2014: It would be a day like no other in Sharjah's history. Not surprisingly, more than 1.5 million of Sharjah's residents soon were asking the obvious questions: Who is this Rashid Alleem? Why him? And where on earth did he come from?

No, you haven't picked up the wrong book mistakenly: this isn't a book about my career or my personal achievements. It's about business, and specifically, about the way organizations can learn faster and become more agile and competitive when the customer is the focal point. The book contains a great deal of useful lessons from my many successes and few failures.

THE TURNING POINT

Monday, April 21, 2014, was a historical and momentous day in my life. It was 3pm and I was in the middle of a late lunch with my beloved family when I received a call from the executive office of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qassimi, a member of the Supreme Council of the United Arab Emirates and the President of Sharjah, stating that His Highness had chosen me exclusively to chair Sharjah Electricity and Water Authority (SEWA). SEWA is the only utility that provides electricity, water, and gas to the entire city of Sharjah. His Highness's decision was a repercussion of his displeasure with the

previous management's performance, both financially and administratively. The call was a huge surprise! I could not believe my own ears and was speechless for a moment. I could not even enjoy the rest of my lunch.

INTUITIVE DECISION

I was asked if I would accept this almighty task. The time was not perfect for me to decide, as I was preparing for my sixth annual leadership and management congress next morning, which one of my non-profit organizations, Alleem Business Congress, had organized. I was at sixes and sevens!

After consulting with good friends and colleagues, 99.9% told me no, don't do it. Yet deep inside me, there was a voice that said yes, definitely yes. I did accept the appointment because it came directly from the President of the Sharjah government, whom I love and respect for who he is and his leadership philosophies.

There is no doubt in my mind that corporate transformation is difficult, but someone has to do it, and do it well. Despite all the confusion and uncertainty, I used my *intuition* to decide to accept the position, and I was committed, emotionally, to do all I could to help it succeed.

EXECUTIVE ORDER

Without delay, the very next day, the executive order of my appointment as the new chairman of SEWA was given and issued, but not made public, because His Highness wanted to see me personally first and share his words of wisdom. Indeed, my

mind was full of thoughts and big ideas, as I thought to myself, *How will I frame my transformation game plan and present its roadmap? What will I do first? What are my top priorities?*

ZERO HOUR

His Highness wanted me to meet him at 9 the next morning to appoint me as the new chairman officially. I still remember that *defining* moment when he signed the executive order in front of me and issued it to the public. This act was followed by a private meeting in his office where he gave me some personal directions and instructions, explaining the way forward. The news spread like wildfire and soon was the talk of the entire country. As the announcement reached the blogosphere and other social media channels, it gained momentum and was tweeted and retweeted thousands and thousands of times, acquiring traffic even through my personal Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram accounts.

It was decided that I was to report to His Highness directly without intervening board members to ensure speedy and efficient decision making. SEWA's performance had to improve rapidly to rescue the authority from expected bankruptcy—a struggling brand in obvious decline. The transformation must be both bold and rapid to be successful. The story is interesting in itself.

How then, did I save SEWA from its brush with bankruptcy? I took an approach that has not been discussed and codified in the business literature, and the goal of this book is to define and explain that approach. I assure you, if applied appropriately, this approach can help recover any organization of any size spectacularly. It wasn't all a matter of clearing the decks, though. I had to immerse myself in the world of SEWA.

MAKING A COMMITMENT TO LEAD

There was no turning back, no backpedaling. Surely, this event was a turning point in my life. I felt thrown into a moment of truth, and indeed, it was a transformational moment. I recognized that this was going to be the most difficult assignment I had ever been asked to do, which was self-evident, as His Highness had given me the responsibility personally. I knew that right then and there, I was re-defining myself. His Highness's order definitely filled me with pangs of inner conflict. One voice beckoned me back to the security of my comfort zone, yet another pulled me forward so powerfully that I simply couldn't say no to realizing the business's continued prosperity.

We either can keep on cruising along the same old track, or we can veer off the path and forge our own trail. I told myself, *Rashid, it's time you write a brand-new script for your life. Just go that extra mile...but remember, that extra mile is a lonely place.*

It was one of those *daring* moments when life called to me, “Well, here’s your chance. Show me what you have.” Well, I am not a debutant! I have experienced many of these dramatic shifts over the past several years. My daring moments have been the turning points. Hence, I took the plunge. It was inevitable that I would have to struggle against a myriad of obstacles and challenges to restore the authority’s image and reinstate its honorary position in the country. To do so, it required significant internal cultural and brand changes.

When I was just about to write this paragraph, I came across a book entitled, *Tough Calls from the Corner Office*. I was quite intrigued with the review of this book because it claimed to offer invaluable insights into the mind of CEOs. The book looked promising to me and honestly speaking, it was consistent with

my thoughts. Below I have cited one of my favorite paragraphs from the book where the author described the meaning of corporate culture as the following:

“Corporate culture is a company’s value system, its DNA, its personality. Corporate culture defines the shared goals that drive executives as well as rank-and-file employees. It determines which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. It encompasses a code of conduct that people intuitively draw upon when they deal with fellow employees inside the company and with customers or vendors outside of it. If you ever hear someone say, ‘That kind of approach is encouraged here,’ or, ‘That would never fly here,’ the speaker is probably referring to the company’s culture. Corporate culture starts from the top and is driven by management into all the nooks and crannies of the organization.”

TAKING CHARGE

Leading can be a strenuous mental and physical activity, and I wanted to be engaged in it fully, not involved peripherally. I wanted to have a real influence on SEWA, where I could see the direct results of my actions. I always believe that if you are going to do something, you must make a total commitment to the task at hand. I wanted to make a commitment not only to save the business but, in fact, turn it around so that it became highly profitable.

When I took the helm at SEWA, the organization desperately needed a leader who could set the agenda and point the organization in the right direction. His Highness wanted me to be the “Mr. Fix-It” who could do both of those things.

I concluded that SEWA could be prepared for the future only through a complete overhaul of its management processes and a top-to-bottom transformation of its culture. As a leader, my primary responsibilities are to set the direction and remove the roadblocks so that the organization and the people as well, succeed, and that doesn't happen if your people think that what they're doing is meaningless.

MY LEADERSHIP SECRET

In my old book, *My Leadership Secrets*, which was published in 2004, I shared a handful of my leadership traits, qualities, and competencies. Here I am going to reveal a new important secret. Be ready!

Defining SEWA's core business was my secret. To set things back on track, I needed to ensure that everyone knew what SEWA's core business was. Deciding on a core business may sound like a simple task, but there are plenty of examples that suggest otherwise. For example, when Jack Welch assumed GE's leadership, the company saw itself as one of the world's manufacturing companies. However, Welch launched a *disruptive* process of transformation, and transformed it into one of the world's largest service organizations.

I believed SEWA's core business was *service* as well. It is an organization driven by service in which the customers are kings—we serve at their pleasure. That was my *defining* moment. In the first few chapters, you'll learn the way SEWA re-designed its core business processes from the outside in, beginning from the customer's perspective, and became one of the most successful and admired organizations in the UAE in a comparatively short time.

BREAK THE RULES

I used a command and control management style. I wanted to create a professionally managed firm where making decisions is delegated to the right people and where participation on the part of many levels of management is encouraged. I saw the need for a system that would allow me to draw upon the knowledge, talents, and judgment of others in the organization, a system that gives us the opportunity to tap into the creative powers of everyone in the organization. I also wanted to create a more agile and streamlined SEWA. The management rules and culture that had worked earlier had become handicapped, and speed is a valuable feature.

I knew I had to break the “Golden Rules.” I don’t mean to do or suggest anything unethical or illegal. Instead, I mean advocating the need to change habit patterns, break familiar rhythms, and turn stones that “shouldn’t” be turned. There were patterns and anchors in the organization that somehow had evolved into “holy rules.”

I believe that it takes *courage* to break the rules, and when you begin to change the way things have been done for years, you need *confidence* that what you do is the right thing to do. You also must be *committed*, because people will make fun of you or challenge your ability, by saying, “You’re totally wrong,” and “This is how we’ve always done it.” However, I say, “Life is tough and dreams don’t often come true.”

I wanted to transform *behaviors* to achieve results. Leading has its own language. At last count, there are roughly five thousand languages spoken in the world today, and the language that crosses all borders, cultures, industry types, and organizational sizes is the language of results-oriented leadership. When you know exactly what you want, when you believe in yourself, and

when you have a plan for action, the potential for success becomes limitless. When you're clear about what success means to you, opportunities will present themselves, new doors will open, and to your amazement, anything will be possible.

This book will, I hope, be a tonic for many readers and leaders. It answers three questions: (1) How did SEWA grow successfully through service marketing? (2) How can you adapt the SEWA customer-centric methodology to work in your company? and (3) How did SEWA develop passionate employees, loyal customers, and superior business profits in a short period of time?

SEWA's turnaround story is one of the most successful business stories in the UAE. It's a story that has never been told fully in the media, so sit back and enjoy.

Rashid Alleem
Sharjah, UAE
New Year's Day, 2019

INTRODUCTION

DARE TO DREAM BIG

GET IT OUT THERE

Robert Louis Stevenson said, “Everyone lives by selling something.” Sales is the lifeblood of any business. Selling is everything in life. Selling applies to all people, and all aspects of life, both business and personal. This is the foundation of this book. If you have a product or service that you want to tell people about, in the most effective way and at the lowest cost, you need to sell it. And that cannot be done without a good marketing plan. Peter Drucker predicted boldly in his early 1950s article in the *Journal of Marketing*, “Selling will become marketing.” He definitely was years ahead of his time.

Like Drucker, I want my insights and conclusions to be disseminated and applied. Yet, the world doesn’t need another marketing strategy, does it? We’ve got plenty of them, and to be very honest, many are underwhelming.

Some time ago, I happened to meet an old friend at an evening event. He looked sad and downtrodden. That was quite unusual, because I’ve always known him to be a happy-go-lucky person. Clearly, he needed help. I decided to approach him, and after probing him with a few questions, I came to the root of the matter.

He told me that he couldn’t keep good employees because “...they all end up wanting too much money.” His company was

engaged in a constant race to keep pace with competitors, so he relied on cost management (cutting corners) and aggressive pricing tactics as his means of differentiation. He'd outsourced and subcontracted so many pieces of his company that a customer was apt to believe it was schizophrenic. Yet he believed somehow that he could solve all of these problems by hiring someone from outside to design a better logo, tidy up the website, and clean up the advertising. Delusional, isn't it? The experience agitated me because that kind of thinking is widespread, and it poisons the well of true marketing and branding. It takes great discipline to create and manage a *real* brand.

However, before you begin to develop your marketing and sales strategies, you need to understand your *customers'* expectations well first. You need to make your organization a customer-centered culture, which doesn't happen by accident. It requires the leadership and the people in the organization to make it purposeful and meaningful on a daily basis. In Henry Ford's words, "The man who does not get a certain satisfaction out of his day's work is losing the best part of his pay."

We cannot continue to apply old-fashioned models in today's markets. Organizations must go beyond "customer satisfaction" to customer amazement. One must amaze every customer every time and that can never happen if you don't inculcate a customer-first attitude throughout your organization: Period.

I had ambitions in addition to developing a great customer-centric organization. I started out knowing the way I wanted my customers to be treated. Quixotic as it sounds, I wanted to create a company where work was meaningful and employees felt free to pursue their passions. I also wanted to create a community where people and their families were cared for.

To help you navigate through this book, I have divided it into five chapters.

Chapter 1, “The Journey,” focuses on the way I found a sense of my purpose and direction successfully to redeem SEWA. The idea of redemption always is good news, even if it means sacrifices or some difficult times.

Chapter 2, “Return to Reality,” describes the stage in which we answered the question, “Are we ready?” This chapter focuses on exploring new solutions from various perspectives. Here we uncovered needs that had not been met yet and also paved the path to crystallize ways in which we had to innovate to meet those needs. In describing this process, this chapter narrates the way we thrived in the market.

Chapter 3, “The SEWA Marketing Plan,” is a stage-by-stage rundown of SEWA’s marketing plan. The stages have worked wonders for the organization, and they’ll work magic for yours as well. I’ll show you the way the nine integrated stages of the plan qualified SEWA to be on the top of the list as the most preferred company.

Chapter 4, “The Growing Pains,” talks about the turbulence a leader experiences when the importance of the human side, timeless principles, and core values lead the way from pain to gain. Like any physical pain, this kind of pain takes just as much focus, perseverance and, yes, tolerance, to overcome. The difference is that it’s psychological and emotional pain, rather than physical pain.

Finally, **Chapter 5**, “Score and Evaluate,” distils down to the right answer, the way the marketing milestones were achieved through reflective thinking. SEWA’s marketing goals were achieved largely ahead of schedule because of the internationally acclaimed “score and evaluate” tools that we employed. It tells the SEWA marketing plan’s success story and the way it satisfied our business requirements. It answers the question, “How did the integration work out?” Finally, it seals the les-

sons learnt and paves the way to address more challenges in the SEWA way.

What follows are the leadership lessons I learned when I was called upon to manage and lead during times of great uncertainties. So, are you ready for the SEWA marketing plan?

Let's get started.



ABOUT THIS BOOK—THE WAY TO GET WHAT YOU WANT FROM IT

Why write a book about SEWA's marketing plan?

Well, first and most importantly, let me clarify. This actually is a business book about the way an organization near death was able not only to survive, but thrive, and make historical achievements in a very short time. Our performance was like a shooting star.

The question is then, "Why choose SEWA for such a book?" I chose it because I was the person behind the transformational turnaround and lived each single moment as a chairman until I made SEWA a role model and an organization that exemplifies every current best practice to achieve customers' delight. SEWA's turnaround is one of the most remarkable stories in UAE business, and it is now a multi-million-dollar company.

Sound easy? Well, it's not. Realizing such a transformation is difficult. It requires a visionary leader, typically someone with an interest and background in marketing. It requires a good deal of investment in time, money, and effort, and it requires the entire organization's acceptance and participation.

In my SEWA marketing plan, I focused on the current landscape of customer experience in today's hyper-connected and hyper-competitive business world. This low-risk, highly acclaimed marketing plan is one that all marketing managers and experts must understand and practice to stave off competitive threats and achieve a competitive edge in today's dynamic economy.

The old marketing tools, techniques, and ways of providing “canned” customer service are failing because the world has changed...a lot. We are living in the age of the digital revolution. Don’t worry, though. There’s good news. We also are living in an era in which human needs, values, and relationships are marketing’s *new* currency.

In this book, I’ve outlined the organizational practices that unintentionally torpedoed the organization’s innovative nerve and shown the way you can overcome those challenges. Intended for marketing leaders seeking marketing strategies for sustained growth, *The SEWA Marketing Plan* provides a logical, organic, and enduring approach to the “new” form of marketing.

So, get started. Read through the chapters and see whether you agree with my claim by the time you reach the end of this book.



What is the SEWA Marketing Plan?

The *SEWA Marketing Plan* will stop you from wasting thousands, perhaps millions of dollars on marketing initiatives. The plan is a straight forward, simple, eight-step plan that you can use to address your problems and opportunities, regardless of their size, whatever your business, and whatever the sector in which you operate.

The *SEWA Marketing Plan* shows the way SEWA has built the customer-focused culture into its operation so well that it is capable of delivering higher-than-industry customer loyalty throughout its network.

The plan gets straight to the “happy meal” and helps you communicate your exciting opportunities in a way that engages people so they want to be involved. It is tried, tested, and proven.

In the *SEWA Marketing Plan*, your inner teacher and true north will help you achieve more goals, more passion, and more satisfaction in your relationships and work.

The *SEWA Marketing Plan* does things differently. If you are curious about what “differently” means and whether it could be relevant to your business, read on.



Chapter 1

THE JOURNEY

The journey of a thousand miles must begin with one ‘hard’ step, a ‘road’ map, and a ‘big smile’.

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

PURPOSE AND DIRECTION

Warren Bennis, University of Southern California professor and leadership expert, made an insightful remark when he said, “Leaders must encourage their organizations to dance to forms of music yet to be heard.” I wrote this excerpt in a state of exhilaration—extreme ecstasy—because I had just overcome the two toughest stages of SEWA’s brand turnaround successfully, i.e., “fight for survival” and “passion to win.” I was able to pass these two challenging stages, and find that the tipping point may be just around the corner. As significant as those stages were, they were only two pieces of the puzzle. Still, the big picture was far from reality.

Finding and integrating the missing pieces required *extraordinary* leadership skills and understanding and taking advantage of technology. When everyone told me that a project was “too difficult, too complex, and too expensive,” I had a typical reply up my sleeve: “Rather than stick my head in the sand, I’ll stay

consistent with my true vision, driven by my 3 Ps philosophy, which are: Be patient, be positive, and be persistent.”

My message was loud and clear: Not only did I intend to achieve the organization’s survival, but I also wanted it to thrive and excel. Hence, I did something unprecedented in SEWA’s history—I clenched my fist on marketing efforts. Marketing was an unfamiliar tune at SEWA. Did I strike the right chord? Or did I face the music? Stay tuned.

Change, when it comes, cracks everything open.

—Dorothy Allison

Marketers are scrambling to deal with the vast changes taking place today in every part of the world. The only thing any of them knows for certain is that the market will continue to change at a rapid pace because the world has become more complex and interdependent.

To understand the way marketing lost its way in creating and keeping customers requires going back to its origins, as envisaged by the pioneer of the modern concept of marketing, Peter Drucker. Nearly 50 years ago in his book, *The Practice of Management*, he stated:

“If we want to know what a business is, we have to start with its purpose. There is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer. It is the customer who determines what a business is. For it is the customer, and he alone, who through being willing to pay for a good or service, converts economic resources into wealth, things into goods. What the business produces is not of first importance—especially not to the future of the business and its success.”

SEWA VISION 2020

Finalizing the system priorities and goals of SEWA's 2020 vision brought some degree of respite. Nevertheless, I declared back in April, 2014 that SEWA was a performance-driven organization and only *tangible* results would make me a successful leader. I knew I would be judged on results. Whether you run a large organization or a small business, ultimately there is no substitute for results. In Bill Gates' words, "Unless you're running all the time, you're gone." That's the measure of success in business: Period.

Did we make our projections? Is revenue where it should be? Are our margins strong and improving? Did we generate enduring profits? Not surprisingly, I was being seen as a mover and shaker with an eye for tangible results—focused on those key performance indicators (KPIs) that had the greatest effect on what they were trying to achieve. I determined what the bottlenecks were and the way to clear them. I had to put some elbow grease into it to see hard-nosed business results.

The problem is that we have created a culture that requires more time and energy than we have to give. We are under great pressure, and sometimes we refer to this as the rat race.

COMMITTED BOLDLY

I believe that "action speaks louder than words." I ordered my marketing executives to have the *8 Pillars of SEWA's Vision 2020* published in the form of a book as soon as possible. The work was urgent...and people needed to see it. We needed to hammer the brand name into people's minds.

Hence, I called for an ad-hoc *bodystorming* meeting at our Knowledge Café. We use bodystorming at SEWA, which is a form of brainstorming with an emphasis on generating ideas through physical experience and interaction. I summoned the team to meet me in three minutes for a “stand-up” meeting. Because they all know how punctual I am, not a soul arrived late. I said, “Guys, roll up your sleeves. Get together and brainstorm some ideas to create the best cover page for the book.” After all, they were emotionally invested in our powerful and inspiring vision statement—their single biggest driver— “...to be among the best authentic organizations in the world.” It was a promise of “authenticity” and “challenge.”

The session turned out to be *brainblossoming* rather than bodystorming, and generated a great many beautiful ideas.

A vision is a promise you make that keeps you awake at night. Most of you remember former US President, Barrack Obama’s, vision. It was the promise of “hope” and “change” for the American people who had elected him as the first African-American to hold the highest office in the land.

FROM INTANGIBLE TO TANGIBLE

The *Vision 2020* book was published within a month following the meeting. Publishing the book breathed new life into SEWA’s intangible system priorities and aspirational “8 Ps” vision pillars, thereby turning them into tangible building blocks of the organizations’ vision statement and ingraining them officially in our day-to-day working life. My top priority was to spread the message inside and outside of SEWA. On the other hand, the marketing team wanted to organize a surprise launch for *Vision 2020*.

Soon enough, they enthusiastically proposed the idea of a book-launch event. In addition to their excitement, I was pleased to see that they all were sailing in the same boat. Although I approved their request immediately, I did ask them to keep it as low-key within the organization as possible before we shared it with the rest of the world.

THE LAUNCH

Shortly after the book's publication, the marketing team organized a celebration at our in-house training dome, SEWA A—SEWA Academy. The training rooms were decorated with roll-ups and banners of *SEWA Vision 2020* pillars—The 8 Ps. With such colorful and positive décor, the academy resembled a mini-carnival somewhat. The marketing team also was in a festive mood, and their enthusiasm was so contagious that the rest of the organization became fascinated about the event. I was pleased to see the employees brimming with zest and zeal, and, as expected, most of them attended the event that day to show their support and passion for SEWA Vision 2020 with the theme “road map toward a brighter future.”

NEW SEWA DREAM

The marketing team had requested that I do the honors of launching the *Vision 2020* book, which was to be followed by a cake-cutting ceremony. The atmosphere was joyous and friendly, almost like a family reunion. “Keep it under your hat—don’t talk much about it with outsiders, especially the media,” I remember cautioning the team. Although we tried to keep and

maintain the celebration low-profile, the local and regional media companies found out about the event somehow and published an interesting news articles about the vision launch.

The following morning, I gathered the team together in my great room and commemorated their commitment.

Soon, the *Vision 2020* book became the talk of the town, and everyone wanted to get a sneak peek at it. From the top executives of multi-national organizations to aspiring leaders, everyone wanted to know about the new SEWA dream. We ran out of the bulk of our stock in a month's time. Still, requests to read the book kept pouring in, and indeed, I was pleased with its success and popularity.

WHAT IS 8Ps ALL ABOUT?

Everyone asked, “What are the 8Ps?” “How are they going to drive SEWA to a brighter future?” “Where can our company fit in?” Figure 1.1 below shows all of the 8Ps.



FIGURE 1.1 SEWA Vision 2020: 8Ps

Allow me to share the 8Ps briefly—the elements of our 2020 vision that keep us strong and move us forward.

Pillar 1: People

SEWA lives and fosters an ownership culture—a culture that encourages every individual in our organization to give his/her best, and SEWA has made great strides in promoting a positive work environment. Employee satisfaction is one of our top priorities because we know that happy employees equate to happy customers, which leads to the organization's success. For SEWA, its people are not only an asset but *also* a competitive advantage.

Pillar 2: Performance

SEWA's goal is to achieve this by catering reliably to the demand for electricity during peak hours and providing a reliable and affordable gas and water supply to Sharjah residents, as well as its industrial and commercial areas. SEWA uses advanced technologies, the services of major international companies, together with sound business practices and highly skilled employees to achieve its customers' satisfaction.

Pillar 3: Planet

SEWA employees are committed to environmental stewardship. When I implemented this mandate, I began with a message that we learned in primary school—the “3Rs” of environmentally conscious choices: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. Practicing the

3Rs helps conserve energy and resources, as well as landfill diversion. You know, sometimes the simplest things are the most effective.

Pillar 4: Projects

At the heart of the SEWA Vision 2020 is the universal triple-helix: People, Planet, and Profit. However, to deliver positive business results consistently and stay ahead of the pack in today's competitive and chaotic global economy, I turned to agile project management. Beginning at the portfolio level, where my strategic vision drove the initial investments and value measures were established, our projects (large or small) were fully consistent with the vision and the converse, and dictated project execution at every level to deliver value at each step.

Pillar 5: Positioning

Positioning requires creating a *unique* impression in consumers' minds so that they associate something specific and desirable with our brand and services. A great brand strategy also helps us communicate with our customers more effectively. At SEWA, we believe in the power of lightning-fast word-of-mouth publicity through social media.

Pillar 6: Partners

We have partnered with the world's greatest companies to ensure the sustainable delivery of water, electricity, and natural gas to meet Sharjah's citizens' needs. Our customers, suppliers,

and partners will attest that we also are committed to fostering trusting relationships. By joining hands with our strategic partners, our goal is to achieve a fundamental and radical change in the entire system.

Pillar 7: Prosperity

Building a successful brand involves creating an identity. We knew that this would set SEWA apart from the crowd, and that a strong identity would allow it to prosper and flourish. Our employees work hard to maintain an excellent standard of service and certain departments stay open 24/7 to cater to any of Sharjah residents' needs.

Pillar 8: Profit

Quite surprisingly, profit is at the bottom of my SEWA 2020 vision pillar list. However, I am aware that this is debatable, because profit should be running the show, right? Wrong! Profit is our result or outcome if the other pillars function seamlessly. If there is a glitch in performance, profit is hit badly. Similarly, if there is a setback in projects, profit also is reduced severely, or if the mark is missed in positioning, profit is affected adversely. Hence, profit depends heavily on the seven pillars above. I was convinced whole-heartedly that these 8Ps would lead us "...to be among the best authentic organizations in the world." SEWA's vision statement was distinctive, both in its simplicity and in what it doesn't talk about. There's no mention of profit or market, no mention of customers, shareholders, or users. It instigates the very "purpose" of existence. This kind of vision

gives individuals' work meaning. Our vision's broad scope allows SEWA to move forward by steering with a compass rather than measuring our achievements with a speedometer.

SEWA VISION 2020

The section below describes some of the striking features of the SEWA Vision 2020 book, which contains the 8Ps that laid the foundation upon which we built our marketing plan.

1. The main cover page

Have you ever heard the expression, "Don't judge a book by its cover?" Contrary to this popular belief, I believe that the cover page is crucial. I insisted that our SEWA Vision 2020 cover page needed to be extremely attractive, using a dotted theme with an underlying meaning of "fun lies in connecting the dots." The dots connected to create an image of an eye, which represented our 2020 vision. Moreover, to illustrate 2020, we used a bigger font type to make it stand out even more. Finally, the cover page was decorative, which supported the book's theme. See Figure 1.2 in the next page.

2. Vision 2020 title page

The cover of the book describes what SEWA Vision 2020 covers, with some of the major points described below:

- The time period the plan covers
- The writers' name

- Contact information, such as website address and various social media accounts

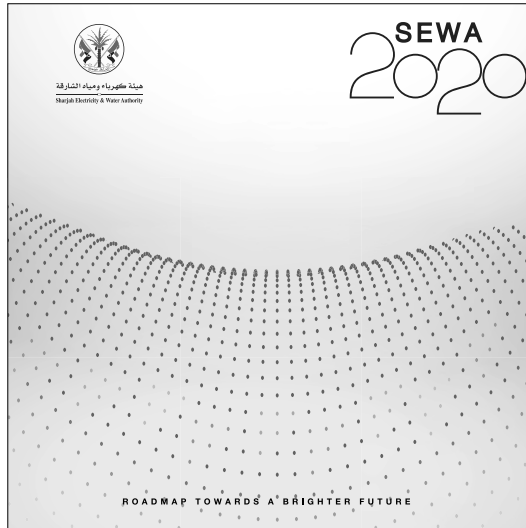


FIGURE 1.2 SEWA Vision 2020 Cover Page

3. Table of contents

The table of contents is a necessary component of most books. It usually takes the form of a list located before the start of the written work and details the chapters and section titles and/or brief descriptions with their commencing page numbers. Positioned after the title page, it provides easy reference to important topics.

I always choose an unconventional table of contents. Even for the book you hold now, I wanted a table of contents with a twist, one that would grab readers' attention immediately and

leave an indelible mark on their minds. Hence, I asked my in-house designer, Kumar, to create a table of contents that was relevant and signified a utility company.

4. The executive summary

Our Vision 2020 begins with “The Executive Summary,” which appears first, but actually was the last thing written. It condenses our entire vision in just three pages. I am proud of my marketing and branding team. They have done a wonderful job because any outsider who doesn’t know our business can understand the entire SEWA vision without any explanation.

The executive summary was written well and detailed the following information:

- The vision’s purpose
- SEWA’s organizational structure
- Financial summary
- Why, when, and how things will happen
- Market overview
- Situational analysis
- Which market segments/customers to target most
- List of the goals/objectives
- Marketing strategies
- Who is responsible for what (roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities)
- Set the main milestones
- Resource requirements

These points helped us lay out an executive summary that was elaborated well. What followed was the awesome ‘Introduction’, which had to be interesting and engaging with a brief story, and cover what the vision is about and why it is relevant to the reader.

5. An impressive introduction

An impressive introduction can attract even non-readers, but of course, not everyone is a voracious reader! However, we wanted most of our target audience to grab a copy of SEWA Vision 2020, and more importantly, read it rather than trash it. However, as we all know, this couldn’t be achieved merely with a colorful cover page and a fancy design depicting the plan’s theme. Instead, it’s the content that lies within that matters, right? Our SEWA Vision 2020 book states the plan’s purpose and importance clearly, and I would like to acknowledge here the wonderful team that created it.

It is worth mentioning that the SEWA Vision 2020 was created exclusively by a team of empowered women. In this way, SEWA nourishes and encourages enfranchising women who will be future leaders. Of course, my gratitude extends as well to Boutheina, Ohood, Rasha, and Syeda for their extraordinary efforts and contributions in compiling and developing the vision plan book.

They knew the importance of time, and hence, they created a brief and crisp introduction that communicated the gist of the plan. In so doing, they demonstrated the importance of making a quick good impression to buy-in the readers.

THE RIGHT TIME HAS COME

The *SEWA Vision 2020* book really struck a chord with the audience. I was thrilled to see its unbiased acceptance in society and the immense interest it created. It felt as if the entire world wanted to know more about SEWA's 2020 vision, especially the 8Ps. What a great feeling it was. Now, I felt that the right time had come to develop a marketing plan that would cover the 8Ps and highlight the what, why, and how we run our business to *regain* our customers' trust.



Chapter 2

RETURN TO REALITY

In solving today's problems we need a pragmatic approach rather than an idealistic one.

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

Déjà vu is a French word that means the feeling that you've been somewhere before, even when you haven't. I love practicing *Vuja dé*—the opposite, which means going to a place you've been many times but seeing it consciously with fresh eyes. If you are in your customer's place, you'll see the frustrations and frictions with which your customers have learned to live and to which they've adjusted. As we continue to advance in the 21st century and pave the way forward with a futurist vision, I practice *Vuja dé*, but I realized that there were some roadblocks to remove to smooth the brand transformation process and focus on marketing.

FACE THE PAIN

The 8Ps of SEWA Vision 2020 are sufficiently strong to fight any barrier. However, several challenges concerning reputation and brand image had to be addressed using a different approach—they needed the mentality of a marketing expert who was

competent in solving problems. The list below presents some of the most bothersome and pressing challenges:

- SEWA still was viewed as a bad debt company
- Customer dissatisfaction and defection
- Many operational problems resulted in higher costs and negative cash flow
- Default of loan covenants
- A negative image in society attributable to regular interruptions and blackouts
- Lenders and vendors were unwilling to deal with the organization because of late payments for goods and services delivered
- Projects lagged behind schedule badly
- Above all, SEWA never had a written marketing plan

In short, SEWA still was managed as if it were stuck in the 1960s, in an era of *impersonal* transactions. Hence, it never believed in marketing as a tool to build a strong brand. It became self-focused rather than customer-focused. To rise to these challenges, I needed to execute large-scale transformations while delivering “quick win” results simultaneously every day. Indeed, it was a very difficult challenge.

At its heart, a brand is a promise to deliver. When a brand experience doesn’t live up to that promise, customers take their business elsewhere. It’s critically important to make a brand consistent internally and find the most effective and pragmatic ways to engage people on the inside so they can deliver the brand promise to people on the outside—the customers.

As I was writing this page, an interesting story came to mind. Several years ago, I came across a great book called *Brand Real* by Laurence Larry Vincent. The book revealed some shocking truths about “real brands.” In the first few pages, the author shared a story about Gap Inc., an American clothing and accessories retailer worldwide. The story is a bit dated, yet I’m sharing it with you because, as they say, “Not everything has changed, the fundamentals remain the same.”

On October 4, 2010, many Gap customers questioned the logic of the change the iconic retailer made to its logo. “Your new logo makes your brand look cheap,” one customer wrote on the company’s Facebook page. Branding experts and identity designers tripped over themselves to explain why the new Gap identity was a “crap logo.”

Gap certainly didn’t see it that way. While the Gap’s managers believed they were simplifying the look and feel, the public thought it was signaling a change in the value it might provide. A few of Gap’s faithful customers viewed the change as tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Despite the intense public outcry about the changes in its brand identity, industry analysts estimated that Gap increased its holiday store sales that year by approximately 5 percent according to the news published on January 8, 2011 in NASDAQ, the world’s leading exchange and business technology provider that supports the global financial industry and corporate clients in all aspects of their business or marketplace.

This story brings an interesting question to mind: *Why did ordinary consumers care so much about the proposed logo change?* The answer to this question is cited in a previous paragraph: It’s critically important to make a brand consistent internally and find the most effective and pragmatic ways to engage people on the inside so they can deliver the brand promise to the people on the outside—the customers.

PRAGMATIC APPROACH

We were facing huge challenges. Deep inside, I knew SEWA's problems needed a pragmatic approach rather than an idealistic one, which means solving problems in a sensible way that suits the conditions that actually exist at the time, rather than obeying fixed theories, ideas, or rules.

I conducted searches on Twitter and Google for reviews of "SEWA Customer Service." I wished I hadn't. Here are a few samples of the remarks SEWA customers posted within just one month:

- "Very bad service, teams are rude, very slow, liar."
- "They served 3 customers in one hour."
- "I wasted 7 hours of my life, just to cancel my tenancy contract, worst service ever, they should increase the staff. Very sad but true."
- "One of the worst government department in the UAE. You pay and pay and pay still you will get electricity very, very, very late, if you get."
- "You should ask, why all the frustration and skepticism about SEWA?"

Whoa! These are actual quotes from different people living in Sharjah, and most alarming, they were being communicated to all corners of the UAE.

Problems are challenges and great leaders love challenges. As Pastor David Jeremiah puts it, "A leader is built for problems. If there were no problems, there would be no need for leaders." I once was quoted as saying, "I love problems because they are high-leverage opportunities for continuous improvement."

Problems serve to shape a leader's character. "Problems," M. Scott Peck said, "call forth our courage and our wisdom. Indeed,

they create our courage and our wisdom. It is only because of problems that we grow, mentally and spiritually.”

Sometimes meeting great minds can help you grow as well. I describe below an exciting event that helped SEWA learn something new.

MEED MEETS SEWA

Sunday, January 6, 2019 was a memorable day for several reasons. A media team from Middle East Business Intelligence (MEED) that included Richard Thompson, editorial director, Florentina Alina Apostu, account director, and Mehak Srivasta, special projects editor, visited SEWA to interview me. It was my first international interview in 2019, and I was excited to share with the world our success story of the past couple of years, particularly in 2018.

Now, as the first work day in the UAE, Sundays undoubtedly are busier than mid-week days. Further, this wasn't any ordinary Sunday; it was the first Sunday of 2019, and I was busy as a beaver and had a lot on my plate. Nonetheless, I asked my executive personal assistant to schedule the meeting on that day because I wanted to begin the year on a positive note. Indeed, the interview went the way I had imagined. Richard was mesmerized with the extraordinarily successful initiatives and creative activities about which I boasted. Clearly, they were smitten and couldn't believe their ears. I enjoyed the interview thoroughly because they asked intelligent and interesting questions and I loved answering them.

Once the interview was over, I asked Boutheina, our marketing manager, to take the media team on a quick tour of SEWA HQ. Today, each and every guest at SEWA is given a tour that entails sharing our brand story with them. This action reinforces

my belief that any person who comes in contact with SEWA should be transformed into a SEWA brand ambassador!

While Boutheina did a great job explaining SEWA's 8Ps of branding cycle to the visitors, she became a little muddled when Richard asked her a tricky question. As he was impressed by the 8Ps cycle, he asked her, "How do you measure your brand's perception?"

I was listening to this conversation from a short distance away. When I heard Richard's question, I rang up my chief knowledge officer, Syeda, to jump into the conversation and tell him about SEWA's philosophies. Do you want to know what happened next?

Syeda said, "Richard, it seems that SEWA's business philosophies have charmed you. I can see you delving deep into the ambience around and soaking up the positivity. Having said that, I'd like to answer your question about measuring our brand perception. We, at SEWA, are very keen on knowing how we are perceived by our customers. We collect these data by conducting customer satisfaction surveys (CSATS), customer effort scores (CES), Net Promoter Scores (NPS), keeping a close eye on Google reviews, and by mapping customer journeys."

Richard said, "Syeda, there's not an iota of doubt in the statement that 'SEWA is undergoing a revolutionary change, not just any change'." He continued, "The tools and techniques that you mentioned are bang-on. I'm sure you are reaping enormous benefits from them. But have you tried Google Alerts?"

"What's that?" Syeda asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Google Alerts is a content change detection and notification service offered. The service sends emails to the user when it finds new results matching the users search item," Richard answered with a smile.

Syeda said excitedly, “Thanks much, Richard. We’re indebted to you. We’ll definitely try Google alerts and see if it works for us or not.”

Now that’s what I call a winning attitude.

WINNING BEFORE YOU BEGIN

The ability to prepare is one of a great leader’s crucial competencies. In his treatise, *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote, “Now the general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple that ere the battle is fought.” What Sun Tzu was saying is that preparation is the key to success. During the preparation process we must find the best ways to minimize future risks. If we plan our worst-case scenario in advance, then when things go wrong, we will know exactly what to do, will display complete confidence and optimism, and be able to pass the challenge and achieve champagne-uncorking success.

MARKETING AS AN IVORY TOWER DEPARTMENT

If this sub-heading surprises you, it shouldn’t, at least, not if you read the first part of this chapter. I was faced with the once-popular watchwords:

- “That’s the way we do things around here.”
- “We have always done it this way.”
- “It’s not broke, so why should we fix it?”
- “It is too radical a change for us.”

The marketing team continued its scattershot approach: “Throw enough crap against the wall, some of it must stick.” It was a sick culture. Everything was self-help, not “please help.” There was too much talk and not enough action, too many promises, too few results. People were irresponsible, reckless, and careless. The marketing department needed to be reengineered and the fat cut out. How then, did I change our business in a charismatic, effective way that instilled enthusiasm and resulted in profits?

Are you ready? Go!

MARKETING CONTROL

Marketing control is the process of measuring and evaluating marketing strategies and plans’ results and taking corrective action to ensure that objectives are achieved. I am aware of the fact that many surprises may occur while marketing plans are being implemented; hence, the SEWA marketing department must practice constant marketing control. Broadly speaking, any marketing control activity involves four steps:

1. Setting marketing goals
2. Measuring the plan’s performance in the marketplace
3. Evaluating the cause of differences between expected and actual performance
4. Finally, taking corrective actions to close the gaps between goals and performance

Any seasoned marketer will agree with me that marketing strategies and programs can become outdated quickly, and each company should reassess its overall approach to the market periodically. An effective tool for such strategic control is a marketing audit.

MARKETING AUDIT

A marketing audit is a comprehensive, systematic, independent, and periodic examination of a company's environment, objectives, strategies, and activities to determine problem areas and opportunities and to recommend a plan of action to improve the company's marketing performance. To improve performance, I first needed to understand our baseline performance. What was our starting point? What were our strengths and weaknesses and how would each promote our ability to achieve? I knew that SEWA had to challenge itself to ask and answer very basic questions such as:

- What do we do? Why?
- Where do we want to be in the coming three years?
- What is the best way SEWA should use to achieve its marketing goals?

I believe knowing where we stand means knowing where to go.

Be sure you put your feet in the right place. Then stand firm.

— Abraham Lincoln

SERVICE LEADER

I am a “get it done” kind of person. I like my work and find it hard not to overcommit. The thrills and sense of accomplishment accompany me on my way to work and on my way home. My name is on the list of the 100 most influential CEOs in the Arab world and garners great respect and admiration on the part of UAE business leaders. Some questions to ask at this point are, do I have what it takes? Are my knowledge, competencies, attitudes and behaviors achieving my marketing goals? Is my marketing team maximizing its potential? I wanted to hire people who wish to make a mark and be a part of something significant that astonishes them. However, I was having a hard time finding people who were willing to work as hard as I was. Being focused on the future is a quality that too few people appreciate fully. I believe that it’s all about relationships, not only with the client, but also with those in the organization, and I believe our everyday interactions actually define the company, and that *one* disgruntled employee will infect those around him with his negativity, and negativity is not a good thing to have in a high-pressure, creative organization. However, some traits, particularly insecurity, just can’t be changed.

PERFECTIONIST

No matter how hard I tried to restructure the people and circumstances around me, I still was frustrated deeply. I felt I had to do everything myself. I couldn’t count on anyone to take on some of the things that needed to be done. I took my work home with me. I am a perfectionist who expects excellence from all the

people who work for me. I love what I'm doing. It is a way of life. Many people, perhaps most, would describe me as a workaholic. It's easy to fill offices with people who want a job. The challenge is finding people who believe in the company's mission and meet the demands of ever-fickle customers.

MY WAY

I have to admit I am a 10X leader who makes everything look effortless by bringing out everyone's best, and helping teams and organizations prosper. In short, it's not my way or the high way—I'm the dream boss. Please don't get me wrong. I'm not a crystal ball leader. I am busy doing! I was living the vision. A vision for the future makes work meaningful and purposeful. It makes work enjoyable. It makes getting out of bed at 5 am and coming home at dinner time "fun." I believe a good vision makes you serve with blood, toil, tears, and sweat. The phrase "blood, toil, tears, and sweat" became famous in a speech Winston Churchill made in the House of Commons of the Parliament of the United Kingdom on 13 May 1940. This statement is so powerful that it still holds true.

BUILDING MY TEAM

I've been forming teams for the last 20 years. It's what I enjoy most in business. I love nothing more than creating an interdependent team, presenting a problem to its members, and then leading a process whereby we attempt to reach solutions.

I believe no leader can mold people effectively from his corner office, regardless of how technologically advanced it is. To

lead one must leave behind the ivory tower of isolated leadership. Further, I view my core cultural value—integrity—as the beacon that helps me attract the right talent. In my work life particularly, the brand *is* the people, so it's critical that I attract and hire high-quality people of like mind. Although I hire people at all levels, I consider that one of my most important duties is to be the keeper of the sacred flame.

As I write this page, I swell with pride to announce that I have published the *SEWA Core Culture Book* recently—It's a little handbook that describes our organization's 11 core cultural values and its given out to our new employees in their induction kit as a part of the onboarding program. Below is the image of the book.

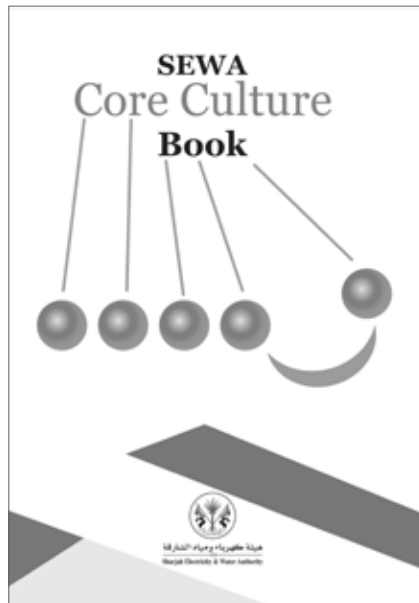


FIGURE 2.1 SEWA Core Culture Book

I consider myself a teammate, not simply a boss. I don't just point the way; I lead the way. Leading to me means being in the trenches with and beside my team, getting my hands dirty and helping dig the ditch. Leadership is not something you do *to* people. It is something you do *for* them.

Wait a minute, you may be thinking, I am a people “pleaser.” This makes me too willing to respond to every request and I find it hard not to overcommit. They drain me. Well, the answer is to make a disciplined choice simply to say no to working seven days a week. This requires commitment to an intentional plan—a day off per week (the same day every week)—Friday is my day off.

UNBEATABLE TEAM

One of the reasons I was so successful was that I surrounded myself with a team of hard-charging managers who shared both my values and work ethic. By surrounding myself with such competent people, I was able to focus on the big picture while others helped with the daily operations. This means I enjoyed the “best of both worlds.” If you hire cookie-cutter employees, you'll create a plain vanilla brand. However, there is an effective formula for hiring: focus on people who share the company's values. They're the ones who not only will fit into the culture, but will strengthen it as well. Andy Lansing, CEO of Levy Restaurants says, “Levy has a non-traditional approach to hiring. I hire for two traits—I hire for nice and I hire for passion...if you give me someone who is nice and passionate, I can teach them everything else...if you give me someone with those two traits, they will, nine out of ten times, be a great success in the company.” I couldn't agree more.

THE NINE CHAMPIONS: THE WINNING TEAM

I once said in an interview, “We hire for attitude, not aptitude.” Personality matters. Once again, I am in the business of “enriching lives.” I constantly am searching for people who have a passion to serve, and in the process, SEWA is enriching the lives of customers and employees alike. By structuring the company this way, I am putting SEWA’s core cultural values front and center. These core values are proving to be a magnet for the “right” employees—those who, in turn, help enrich the organization’s culture. It didn’t surprise me to see Jeff Weiner, the CEO at LinkedIn, leave a post on LinkedIn on October 27, 2018 that declared that the jobs of the future require two major attributes—soft skills and empathy. He argued that Artificial Intelligence (AI) can accomplish everything that humans can do (including coding), albeit ro(bots) can’t equip themselves with team synthesizing qualities or communication skills.

I’m glad I knew about this crisis almost a decade ago, when I formulated my ‘The Nine Champions’ team building fundamentals. Let me share my nuggets of wisdom in this book as well. I want people who dare to be different. They challenge your thinking, fuel your ideas, boost your competitive edge, and make you and your business a winner. I always advise not having more than nine diverse, knowledgeable, skilful, and smart employees who possess “passion to win for the customers.”

One important point here is that you need to include dreamers in your team. I am very fond of Steve Jobs’ famous quote that glorifies the nutty ones: “Here’s to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes...the ones who see things differently—they’re not fond of rules...You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or

vilify them, but the only thing you can't do is ignore them because they change things...they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do."

IT'S A SMALL WORLD TEAM

It's a small world team. When it comes to team building, I live by my definition of a team, which is, "A team is a selected group of people with different abilities, talents, experience, and backgrounds who have come together for a shared purpose. Despite their individual differences, that common goal provides the thread that defines them as a team."

If a team includes too many high status people—"stars" or "A-players," as they are known more commonly—they will compete for social standing and fail to consider others' ideas. To make matters worse, the more status people have, the more they crave it, according to UC Berkeley social psychologist Cameron Anderson. He refers to it as the "drug-like effects" of status, and it's ruinous for collaboration.

There's something alluring—and commonsensical—about the notion that if you have just enough A-players in an organization, you'll succeed. One management theorist called this "the super-chicken model," where you collect as many status-striving, alpha types as possible. While a few A-players can be enormously helpful, it's possible that success is not about out-hiring the competition for these people. It is more about the way you form teams, and then the way people work together as teams. In short, while we need to take race, gender, and other issues into account to create diverse teams, we also need diversity in status.

Success is never achieved totally by leadership alone. Throughout my business life, the maximum number of members I have used on a leadership team is nine, and I love calling them the *nine champions*. A good leader ensures that he is surrounded by the right people whose strengths balance out his weaknesses. Each has a unique role, abilities, accountability, and responsibility to energize SEWA's customer culture. My secret for selecting them is simple. They are hard-working, ambitious, disciplined, and well-educated. Among the nine, I have included people of wisdom who have strong experience working under difficult conditions and overcoming SEWA's old "how-it's-always-done-around-here" culture. Let's get to know the nine champions and their basic roles:

1. The '*sponsor*' provides resources, removes roadblocks, and determines when to disband the team
2. The '*leader*' ensures that the team has clear objectives and that everyone is involved and committed
3. The '*challenger*' questions effectiveness and presses for continuous improvement and results
4. The '*doer*' urges the team to get on with the job in hand and performs practical tasks
5. The '*thinker*' generates carefully considered ideas and weighs and refines others' ideas
6. The '*supporter*' eases tension, helps address personal agendas or conflicts, makes things easier, and maintains harmony
7. The '*organizer*' maintains schedules and ensures that all members stay on the same page
8. The '*advisor*' advises the team about any risks that may come along the way
9. The '*energizer*' provides inspiration, and can view situations and opportunities with innate simplicity

I have never been in a big group that worked well. It's more likely to spark controversy than closeness. Countless studies have shown the benefits of smaller teams. Most teams struggle simply because they are too large. A leadership team should consist of a small group of people who are responsible, *collectively*, for achieving a common objective for their organization. A smaller group really is the best way to become connected on a deeper level with other people on the team. I always have believed in a small team, in which every member stays involved all the way through. It also is easy to transfer your vision to a small team;

1. What do I want them to know?
2. What do I want them to do?

The late American anthropologist, Margaret Mead, once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens, can change the world, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Focus and responsibility are more challenging with too many people—which is the way you end up with folks staring down silently at their smartphones during an entire meeting. A few feel bored, yawn, and try to snatch some sleep. Hence, three conditions are essential for the nine champions to be effective: Trust among members, a sense of identity, and a sense of efficacy.

THE NEW REALITY

Although most of our managers claimed to be customer-focused and market-oriented, they viewed customer satisfaction in a silo, and felt it was the marketing department's responsibility, not something on which the *entire* organization should focus.

There's an ever-growing gap. I addressed this gap in one of my speeches at SEWA's monthly gatherings. These gatherings are crucial because the managers and department heads showcase their monthly achievements to the rest of the organization.

I concluded by saying, "I do understand that most of you are too busy doing your regular jobs and trying to hit your month-end numbers, but that's not enough. We must provide a compelling reason other than price for consumers to buy our products. We can do that by understanding the consumer better than anyone else does and keeping our eyes on after-sales support."

I reminded the team of the Ritz-Carlton's powerful vision for their employees; they are "ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen."

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW CAN HURT YOU

As the old cliché goes, "The devil is in the details." If we don't sweat the small stuff, then the small stuff becomes BIG stuff. Here's my favorite story about how fanatical Steve Jobs was about the details of the customer experience. Jobs once called an executive who worked for an Apple partner and asked, "Are you mad at your customers?" The executive had spoken to Jobs before, so he wasn't surprised that Jobs had called. However, he was taken aback by the question. "We're not mad at our customers at all," he replied. "Then why does your disclosure statement sound so angry?" Jobs asked. "You should be friendlier to your customers at every touchpoint." Jobs had reviewed every line of the "terms and conditions" agreement that most customers check or sign, but never read because it mattered to him.

"But, His Excellency, we are the managers and top executives. We will form the strategy; the customer facing reps need

to execute the strategy. Isn't this the way it is supposed to be?" My chief strategy officer asked, raising his voice.

I smirked and replied, "Do you know that at Hyatt Hotels, the executives become bellhops and waiters one week each year to reach out and touch the customer."

He just shrugged his shoulders.

Managing customers' expectations has long been considered the Holy Grail of marketing. Accordingly, I began to direct the entire business toward the customers, because successful companies do not focus simply on what their customers want, but put them at the center of all they do. Our motto was "The customer should drive the entire business."

What makes organizations derail? A *Business Insider* article penned by Jessica Tyler and dated August 26, 2018, stated that Sears was closing 46 more stores. The full list of closings included 33 Sears stores, as well as 13 K-mart stores (an American big box department store chain headquartered in Hoffman Estates, Illinois, and managed by Sears—the parent organization). Now here's a surprising fact. The company dropped a bombshell when it announced that it would close stores and lay off thousands of people after significant declines in sales. Sears blamed the economy, but retail experts pointed to a severe decline in customer service as the primary culprit in Sear's trouble.

Such shocking and appalling stories remind me that society has made remarkable advances that affect the way we live and operate. Innovations are taking us to Mars and deep into the cells of the human body. Manufacturing is becoming more efficient. However, in contrast, progress has been remarkably flat with respect to improvements in the way people function together and perform—the way leadership is executed.

I didn't want to fall prey to the 'Leadership Lockdown' syndrome. The Neuroleadership Institute hosted a symposium last

year in which leading experts on sleep talked about the Leadership Lockdown Syndrome—when a leader’s brain locks down and cannot process any incoming data efficiently because of overly high threat levels.

Peter Drucker once said that thinking the matter through was better than any methodology. Yet his thinking was systematic, which means one needs to define the problem. You can’t get “there” until you know where “there” is. That’s not one of Peter Drucker’s injunctions; neither is it mine. It was in a book William A. Cohen wrote called *Drucker on Marketing*. Cohen puts it in this way; to solve any problem and come up with a left-brain innovation to solve it, you first must understand exactly what the problem is. That’s the “there” in a problem situation. How did I get “there” then? What happened next? I called for a team meeting in our “rewiring your thinking room,” and gave a little speech.

TAKING PEOPLE WITH YOU

“I am totally disappointed with our marketing approach. What we are doing now is not right, and I’m going to change it. It’s time to stop pruning and start creating new value for our customers and ourselves. Customers are savvier today. They are no longer willing to be “locked in” to suppliers and service providers who don’t value their time and needs. They need authenticity. We can shift our own perspective and see things through their eyes and their patronage. We need to reexamine everything. We need a new way of thinking about marketing. In short, we need to think—and provoke thinking—about the future of marketing and customer decision making. Unfortunately, this is much easier said than done,” I said as I slumped

into the leather chair in the lobby.

I saw crossed arms and blank faces everywhere.

I continued, “Fasten your seatbelts. The turbulence you are going through and experiencing in the market is worse than the 2008 meltdown. Why? Because we’re in the midst of a new revolution, a customer revolution, and there’s a lot happening in it. Before I continue, you need to know one important thing about me. I am a *realistic* optimist—I expect the best, but plan for the worst.” I paused for a moment to make sure that they all were looking me straight in the eye, and then I went on, “Be realistic, and plan realistically. I believe our best days lie ahead. So, I want you all to be optimists, never become the prisoners of your background. The past is just that—the past. Don’t let it limit your future. The British novelist L.P. Hartley said it well: ‘The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there. And the future is yet to come’. As Abraham Lincoln said, ‘The beauty about the future, the best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time’.”

Lots of polite smiles.

“I need better marketing.” I paused for some time and then asked, “By the way, can anyone tell me what I mean by ‘better’ marketing?”

After an initial silence, some of their answers were:

- More advertising
- Brand proliferation
- Bigger marketing budget
- Sleeker website

“I thought you would say that,” I said. “No, it is much more basic and more powerful. Better marketing means reaching the marketing *soul*, unearthing what customers love, what they

hate, to understand what they feel is exceptional and relevant.” They nodded in agreement.

DELIVERING FOR CUSTOMERS

“Perhaps there is a gap between what we know and what we do, between the principles we value and the way we act. This gap may mark the difference between a dysfunctional team and an unbeatable team. Our customer happiness centres shouldn’t just exist for payment/transactional purposes. They should inform, illuminate, and inspire customers. I want my happiness centres to create such a delightful interchange between the employees and customers that the customers will hardly be able to contain their excitement and will spread the word,” I went on.

“Let me share this story with you; it’s about Tesco. Terry Leahy mentioned in the introduction of his book, *Management in Ten Words*, that when he was asked what turned Tesco from a struggling supermarket, the number three retail chain in the United Kingdom, into the third largest retailer in the world, he said:

‘It’s quite simple: we focused relentlessly on delivering for customers.

“So, what are we going to do?” I asked in a rhetorical tone. Then I answered my own question. “We’re going to plan and establish stronger customer service through creative and innovative solutions.”

I wrapped up the meeting by saying, “If we can make our customers feel appreciated, confident, and admired, they’ll reward us with word of mouth publicity.”

“Sir, you’re inspiring. Your talk made a lot of intuitive sense. You make us believers.”

By now, I had realized two interesting facts; first, that only passionate employees who were promoters themselves could ever transform customers into promoters. Second, in these days of rapid social media dissemination, any negative comment receives a megaphone. The moment a nasty comment hits the blogosphere, it is retweeted hundreds of times.

DR. R'S TIPS FOR A WINNING TEAM

A winning team pushes the boundaries to move beyond what is normal or usual. Together they can make a big difference. As the Ethiopian Proverb says, “When spiders’ webs unite, they can tie up a lion.” Now let’s look at my quick tips accumulated all through my experience while building a winning team and making people click and work together in tandem. I am sharing a world of wisdom in nibbles easy to digest. It’s pretty basic.

- Begin using plural pronouns right away. “Our” rather than “my,” “we” rather than “I,” “us” rather than “me”
- Have a winning attitude. Being the best you can be and doing the best you can do
- Stay focused
- Set the bar high so that we can strive to be the best we can be
- Build close relationships based on trust and respect. Avoid blaming others
- Don’t take on too many tasks at once—don’t multi-task
- Listen, look, learn, and adapt
- Set shared tangible goals
- Be resilient, creative, and let go of things that don’t work

- Turn a negative into a positive
- Be a part of something bigger than yourself
- Take pride in one another's accomplishments, and don't be jealous
- Make your work meaningful
- Don't step on each other's toes. It's easier to "do unto others as you would have others do unto you"
- Concentrate on the lessons learnt from mistakes, not on the failures themselves
- We are all important. We are all equal
- Always remain true to your word

RETHINK CUSTOMER SERVICE

Customer service was just beginning to come into vogue as an important subject in SEWA, so I wanted to capitalize on the moment and benchmark my service with today's "market-star" brands, those among today's "best of the best" customer-centric companies and "rock solid" brands, a few of which are:

Apple
Emirates Airline
Amazon.com
Ritz-Carlton
Ace Hardware

You may ask why? In fact, Steve Jobs acknowledged that The Four Seasons inspired the Apple Store. He had refined and improved upon the principles learnt from others. And in turn, some brands like AT&T retail stores adopted and modified the Apple customer service philosophy with direct input from Jobs. Jobs

once said, “Good artists copy; great artists steal.” Let’s steal a page from the *Apple playbook* and have a look at the five steps of service.

Approach customers with a personalized, warm welcome.
Probe politely to understand all the customer’s needs.
Present a solution for the customer to take home today.
Listen for, and resolve, any issues or concerns.
End with a fond farewell and an invitation to return.

Well, to be honest, trying to *copy* organizations like Apple is a mistake, but learning from them leads to success. To be clear, becoming that kind of organization rests upon several factors, such as resilience and an entrepreneurial spirit. To make us stronger, faster, and more agile in the long run, we needed to change and improve by doing the following:

- Define a strategic goal
- Know what skills and resources are required to reach that goal
- Engage in participative management
- Choose the right KPIs to evaluate progress

This is easy to write, but I can tell you from experience that it’s very difficult to do. Managers hate the idea that they can’t perform projects the way they want to. Employees can’t stand being told that they have to follow a certain format. People will disagree with data if they run counter to their intuition and argue that the quality bar doesn’t need to be so high for every goal and objective.

I still recall the day when I discussed the points mentioned above with my marketing team. Here's the dialogue I had with them.

I began by saying, "You belong to a revolutionary organization, and you all are my champions who can accomplish just about any cool thing you could think of. So, rather than copying global brands slavishly, we need to change and improve our relationships with customers in ways that are systematic and sustainable. What is important here is not to take sides in a customer experience debate, but to look at the customer's challenges and work toward a real solution—we've entered a different world."

Glancing at their faces quickly without giving them a chance to speak, I said, "I'm sure the big question is 'how'?"

All I could see in the room were raised eyebrows, frowns, red flushed faces, and steely eyes. It was clear that pressure was building in the room, as the team got the hint that they were heading toward a serious proposition.

"Brace up," I continued, "revolutionary organizations forge their own path, excavate their own milestones, and move ahead toward their own destination. To help you forge your path ahead, you will need a special tool." I added, "Have you heard of a modern concept called, 'enterprise agility'?" I continued, "That's the single best way."

They gasped in unison. I could tell that not many of them were familiar with the terminology. I thought I had jostled them with my clever talk. I knew it would take will and patience. *Did I bewilder them with heavy-weight fancy jargon? I wondered. Will they buy in or relegate it to the trash bin of their memory?* I was committed to transforming my team, and by now you must know that I never settle for mediocrity.

Without giving them any time to dismiss the concept, I continued, “Enterprise agility is the need to *adjust* and *evolve* a strategy to respond to threats and opportunities in the organization’s environment. The result is that strategy becomes a very fluid notion—something flexible and liquid rather than something that’s fixed and rigid. SEWA’s specific strategic goals should evolve continuously as customer demands, market trends, and operational necessities shift.”

A few of them smiled and nodded in agreement, and I could see their clouds of skepticism subsiding and rays of acceptance shining bright.

HANDSHAKE DEAL

I don’t want to be a manager or a rule-happy leader. I want to be an authentic leader—authentic leadership is ongoing, flexible, adjustable, and dynamic. I’ve made a handshake deal with every one of our team members. This handshake agreement is an authentic deal, clean and honest. There are no hidden agendas, nothing behind anyone’s back, no bad mouthing, and no malicious criticism.

I told myself, *That’s a golden handshake.*

CONSUMER-ORIENTED ECONOMY

Back in April, 2018, I spent part of my summer vacation in Los Angeles, where I stayed at the Shore Hotel in Santa Monica. One night, I decided to have dinner in Hollywood and wanted to experience Uber’s service, as the idea was born in the US. I used

the Uber app in my smartphone and in less than five minutes, the type of car I had requested drove up. I got in and found a young American chap driving. We began talking about normal things you can expect from a tourist, and then we talked about the new Uber rating system, which I want to share with my readers here. Uber, the alternative-to-cab car service, is an excellent example of the current success in our consumer-oriented economy. In the past, passengers had no control over what they would find when they got into a taxi. Sometimes they had good experiences, sometimes terrible ones, and they felt they had little recourse but to accept what they got. Then Uber came along with its instant rating system, which lets riders know exactly what other passengers thought of, and experienced with, a particular driver.

PEOPLE WITH THE PASSION TO SERVE

Success in the new marketplace demands integrating the firm's set capabilities into a seamless system with the goal of exemplary customer satisfaction. That cannot be achieved without passionate people. Passion means compassion. It is the deep motive that drives a person's actions. Passion is part of a person's core values and fundamentals that tells us when we need to be empathetic in situations that demand caring.

My point, though, is this: The greatest leaders are servants of all. They subjugate their egos to their business's needs. In the words of Jesus, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

A retired AT&T executive, Robert K. Greenleaf, coined the term servant leader, and in recent years, other experts in the leadership field have adopted and elaborated Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership. The old leadership model of the top-down hierarchy is a *dinosaur*.

Servant leadership is about respecting and trusting employees. Service leadership is about being a strong advocate for the customers as well as employees.

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

THE DIRTY SHOULDERS PRINCIPLE

I learned something called “The Dirty Shoulders Principle.” You can tell servant leaders by looking at their shoulders. Why dirty shoulders? Because a person with figuratively dirty shoulders always is lifting up others and letting them stand tall. A servant leader doesn’t care who gets the glory and recognition. A servant leader thinks we, not me. Michael Jordan said, “I built my talents on the shoulders of someone else’s talent. Without Julius Erving, David Thompson, Walter Davis, and Elgin Baylor, there never would have been a Michael Jordan. I evolved from them.”

In the old top-down, pyramidal leadership model, the leader says, “My people exist to make me successful.” Instead, in the servant leadership model, the servant leader says, “I exist to make my people successful. I lift people up.” Are you wondering then what a manager does without the traditional sticks and carrots? I will explain in Eric Schmidt’s (Executive Chairman of Google from 2001 to 2015) words: “Managers serve the team. The default leadership style at Google is one where a manager focuses not on punishments or rewards but on clearing roadblocks and inspiring her team.”

But how? The good news is that any team can be built around the dirty shoulders principle. I believe strongly in employees’ job functions—which means the primary duties each employee performs. The easiest way to determine the employee’s job

function is to ask, ‘How do you spend most of your day?’ The right answer will lead you to the right skills, specifications, and description of the job. You must determine what training and education the company could offer to help them.

1. What training and skills do they require to perform their jobs?
2. What training areas could SEWA offer that will help them excel in their jobs?

Customers are the sole source of sales revenues. If the firm has customers, it has revenues, and if revenues exceed costs, it makes a profit.

A CHALLENGER BRAND THAT CHALLENGES EVERYTHING

One steamy summer afternoon, I sat in my home office and asked myself, What do we do next? Where is the starting point?

As they say: Even fate picks its favorites; hence, I cherry-picked my immediate focal points. To me, focal points mean thinking and doing the right things at the right place at the right time with the right people to obtain the right results: Period.

The section below showcases the key highlights that will run through the veins of this book. To redeem myself, my first step was to *catapult* SEWA as a brand that challenges everything. First, look at the *take-off* points, and then read on to find out what happened next:

1. Processes' efficiency and effectiveness
2. Data quality and master plan for generation, transmission, distribution, and customer service
3. SEWA Project Management model
4. SEWA Customer-centric Model
5. Governance and controls
6. IT systems enablement
7. Organizational finance and operating modeling
8. Skills and capacity building
9. Creating revenue segments & optimization

Does it sound like I am making a mountain out of a molehill? The bullet points above are deceptive. Don't go by their face value. It's like the iceberg that sank the Titanic. We all know that only the tip of an iceberg can be seen and the rest of it, which is much larger, is invisible beneath the water.

I HAVE THE ANSWERS

In short, SEWA had lost its way and needed a new direction. To alleviate this worrisome situation and achieve long-term profitable growth, I painted a hopeful, yet attainable picture of the future. In tackling the issues aforementioned, delivering returns at any cost and working only with the best could help me secure the resources to help the company grow that I required so urgently. This meant that we had to shift our focus from driving transactions to maximizing customer lifetime value; in turn, this necessitated exercising a different set of muscles and reinventing the marketing department altogether.

AGILE LEADERSHIP

According to the Webster's dictionary, agile means "...the ability to move with an easy grace; having a quick, resourceful, and adaptable character." On June 29, 2018, *Forbes* magazine published an interesting article entitled, "What does it mean to be an agile leader?" The article was an accumulation of a panel of Forbes Coaches Council members' views on what agility means to them as leaders, and why it's such an important quality to cultivate. Their best answers follow:

1. Being present to gain insights
2. Inspiring creativity and innovation in your employees
3. Moving quickly
4. Adapting to any situation as it happens
5. Having the flexibility to take quick but sure actions
6. Being resilient and creative
7. Navigating new waters and charting new successes
8. Continuously learning and embodying a growth mentality
9. Letting go of what doesn't work
10. Listening, learning, and adapting

My personal favorite is # 9, letting go of what doesn't work. I needed to adopt an *agile* leadership approach so that we could be effective and create an organization capable of succeeding in this challenging environment. This involves becoming more agile in the three Ps I would need to manage.

- **Plan** (tasks and timings)
- **People** (keeping them motivated and engaged)
- **Performance** (marketing objectives)

Thus, what was needed was action and implementation that can be met if we engage our people to perform better, and disrupt their thinking process. As we all know, the smartphone era has bred a generation of impatient human beings, and we need to figure out ways to remain relevant constantly.

MY STANCE ON MARKETING

It is worth mentioning a couple of important points. First, I am a marketing linchpin at heart who is willing to do whatever it takes to *delight* his customers. Second, I have the unique ability to translate my customers' needs and wants into business objectives. I always begin my marketing strategy by asking, "What if...?" In an age of sophisticated consumers, marketing presents quite a challenge and many of the old-school marketing techniques are redundant today, a fact with which I have come to terms already, and it's time you accept it too! Marketing has developed words, expressions, and jargon. This doesn't mean that you should allow yourself to be left feeling disenfranchised. You can try doing what I did. Keep reading.

In an attempt to simplify marketing, I found that the key is to ensure that every customer's *touchpoint* exceeds his/her expectations. Therefore, it was vital at SEWA to ensure that all customer touchpoints were positive from the initial phone-in call to the final smile. In so doing, my goal was holistic, consistent, and personalized customer service. That meant that we had to provide an excellent customer experience at every customer touchpoint. This was my approach, although I still wondered, *How can I make that happen?*

A portion of the job was accomplished already because I had created the 2020 Vision for SEWA successfully. However, that

was only one piece of the puzzle. Now I required a robust marketing plan to share the inspiring vision both internally with our employees and externally with our customers and strategic partners. Only when we believe in the “inside” will it show up on the “outside.”

In next to no time, I whipped up a plan to market the SEWA vision, thereby positioning the organization among the most authentic in the world. It was a journey of resilience.

Put simply, considering the business in terms of customer needs and their satisfaction with the value proposition is fundamental to marketing. I summarize marketing this way: “Marketing is a kind of chemistry. Putting together the right mix of marketing methods can make or break a business depending on whether you get the mix right or wrong. Only by changing and adapting your marketing mix continuously will you be able to survive and progress in times of economic turmoil.”

IN SEARCH OF AN EFFECTIVE CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER (CMO)

It took me nearly a year to find the right marketer who would understand the name of the game, someone extremely bright, incisive, and analytical. Finally, I found her in the person of Ms. Boutheina Manai, a humble and sincere woman who used to work for me when I managed Sharjah International Airport Free Zone. A talented marketer, Ms. Manai had the personal traits and characteristics for which I was searching, including:

1. Awareness of the major marketing methods and techniques
2. Effective communication and persuasion skills

3. Excellent at leading, managing, directing, and inspiring the team, as well as improving the staff's skills in research, forecasting, and communication
4. Equipped with strategic leadership qualities to set high standards for planning and implementing marketing
5. Focused on the future and open-minded, aware of the constantly changing markets and able to respond accordingly
6. Flexible attitude
7. Innovative and creative
8. Extremely quick on her feet and accomplished
9. A great communicator who could win the confidence of the entire organization to serve and satisfy the customers
10. Finally, excellent at delivering on my expectations for growth and profitability

Fundamental to it all, though, was Boutheina's ability to see SEWA's repositioning process and keep her eye on the main marketing goals.

GAME CHANGER

Technology's rapid advancement reshapes the landscape of today's marketing world constantly. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube certainly are revolutionary channels of communication. In light of this, you'll never know as much as you need to. If any Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) possesses the attributes mentioned above, s/he is certified to take charge and be a game changer.

A famous cartoon published in *The New Yorker* depicts a dog sitting at a computer with the caption, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” This illustrates the way technology can help make the little guy look like one of the big guys, thus leveling the playing field and helping fight the trust bias against small businesses.

I still remember my first interaction with Ms. Manai, when I said, “Bouthaina, you have come at the right time, in the right phase of our brand turnaround and brand positioning.” As she smiled, I continued, “We need to turn the marketing team around 360 degrees. We need to work hard beginning yesterday. Your first assignment is the marketing plan. Come to me with great ideas and solutions, then I’m all ears.”

“Yes, I’m ready, Mr. Achiever, and I knew you would say so, Mr. Precrastinator,” she replied with immense excitement. “I’ve become part of a legacy. We have to start from ground zero, all the way from scratch. To make our dreams come true, we can’t hesitate to take action. We can’t procrastinate anymore, we need to precrastinate!”

I said, “That’s what I wanted to hear you say.” I also said, “I wanted to see the expression on your face when you said it and I wanted to hear the tone of voice in which you said it.”

I supported her view by saying, “You nailed it, Bouthaina; we can’t afford to procrastinate about procrastination. Let’s trust our intuition and listen to our guts. Let’s make a leap of faith!”

To this, she replied in an upbeat voice, “How about conducting a situation analysis first. I feel that SEWA lost its way because of lots of knee jerk decision making.”

My eyes lit up with enthusiasm. She went on, “Moreover, this is consistent with one of SEWA’s winning principles, to be precise, ‘Principle# 9: ‘Facing the reality of where the organization is now’. So, we have no excuses.” I was amazed to see that we shared the same views.

“Great! Go ahead! Let’s see what happens when we think outside the box and focus on all areas of the organization that touch our customers. Let’s take the time and energy to identify the core 20% that accounts for 80% of the problems,” I replied, delighted with her enthusiasm.

“Sir, you are a masterful conceptualizer and strategist. DD,” she said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Deal done,” she replied with a smile.

As she left the office, I told her, “Boutheina, hang on a minute! I would like to remind you of John C. Maxwell’s quote mentioned in his book, *Thinking for a Change*: ‘The right thought plus the right people in the right environment at the right time for the right reason = the right results’.” I continued by saying, “We have to ensure that the marketing team works in close synchronization as a team despite multiple languages, cultures, and disciplines.”

She thought for one second, and then said, “Got it, I’m ready. There are no excuses. Let’s go.”

“Let’s challenge tomorrow,” I told her.

I was genuinely impressed. I could see her eyes dance with excitement and an ear-to-ear grin on her face. Pretty cool.

MOVING AHEAD

I was crystal clear about what I was supposed to do next. We both knew that change isn’t always welcome. We spent the first few weeks talking with the rest of the marketing team, SEWA senior executives, and a handful of customers. We kept digging, and soon we came to a conclusion—to draft out our marketing plan. We wanted our plan to be a detailed, written document,

as well as a timetable of the objectives and methods to use to achieve our marketing goals. The plan would be set out in a logical sequence and describe a series of activities that would lead to: (1) Setting marketing objectives, and (2) The formulation of plans to achieve them.

MARKETING EXPEDITION

This was the missing piece: A comprehensive marketing plan was the need of the hour. Hence, we embarked on our marketing expedition with a situation analysis. I could see the beginning of the end of SEWA's bad image in society.

Note the common expression, "A journey begins with a single step." Yet what is the right first step? Several weeks after I hired her, Boutheina came to see me at the office. After greeting each other, she told me, "I have done my fast-track assessment of the organization. To assess the gap, the real work must start now by asking a few simple marketing questions, such as who are we? What do we stand for? Where are we now?"

I was impressed with her thought process. "Bravo. Let's get the ball rolling. Let's bring the entire team on this roller coaster ride," I replied.

The team assembled in a jiffy, and I was pleased to see their authentic energy. I said, "Today is your day. It's your opportunity to open up. I want to hear from all of you. I am all ears. I need your answers now. I have a few pressing questions that call for immediate action, and I believe if we can answer those questions, then by the end of 2019, we can earn wings and fly to the sky. We have to do this together!"

DISRUPTION-FREE ZONE

I felt the questions needed to be asked and answered in a calm environment. Hence, I advised my team, “I need you to focus and be uninterrupted, so go grab your coffee mugs and join me in the disruption-free zone. See you there!”

The walls of SEWA’s disruption-free zone read: “If you can find the peace and clarity to accept where you are, then you will soon have the insight to get where you’d like to go.” Mobilizing a team isn’t a one-off activity—it doesn’t stop. You don’t simply send an inspiring email and then you’re done. To put the team in the right frame of mind and mobilize employees, that is, to move them from point A to point Z, one needs to get out of the office, listen to concerns, share ideas, and create joint solutions—week after week, month after month, and year after year.

Let’s look at the way I mobilized my marketing team. First, I announced a workshop with the entire team in our disruption free zone. As the name suggests, this is a quiet, peaceful, and noise-free zone. Cell phones and other potentially distracting equipment are prohibited. The zone’s goal is to provide a space free of disturbances where employees can “zone in” on any critical issues facing them.

THE KEY TRUTHS

While I was standing in the disruption free zone, my thoughts were wavering about the right way to mobilize the team, because, even when a change obviously is necessary, one may not be able to get other people to care enough to support it. Sometimes they’re happy with what they have, the way it is, or they haven’t addressed the “what’s in it for me?” question that sits at

the back of most of people's minds. This meant that I had to start from scratch and have all my ducks in a row.

I said, "Let me begin by sharing the key truths of winning in a changing world."

You could have heard a pin drop in the room. I could hear only the screeching sound of warm wind making its way through the window blinds, where the room was bathed in the first rays of morning sun.

I said, "I like what the American astronaut James Lovell said once: "There are four kinds of people in this world:

'Those who make things happen
Those to whom things happen
Those who watch things happen
Those who don't even know things are happening'

"I also like what Denise McCluggage pointed out, 'Change is the only constant. Hanging on is the only sin'. So, change is happening at a fast pace today and either we change or we will be changed. Change can be great—if we know how to use it to our advantage." I comforted them by saying, "Don't get flustered so easily; I'll help you navigate new waters. I'm your friend, your mentor, your coach, your leader."

This conversation was followed by a terrific story. I call it the "424-Glove story."

424-GLOVE STORY

Have you ever heard this story? John Kotter, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, and one of the leading experts on organizational effectiveness, told the story in his book, *The Heart*

of Change, in which a large organization had an inefficient purchasing process and one mid-level executive believed that money was being wasted constantly as each of the organization's factories handled their own purchases. He thought consolidating the procurement effort could save a tremendous amount. He put together a "business case" for change, but it went nowhere. His boss said that the senior executives didn't feel it truly was a big problem, especially with so many other daily challenges taking up their time.

So, the manager had an idea: he collected the 424 different kinds of work gloves the factories purchased collectively and tagged each one with its different price and supplier. He carted the gloves in and dumped them on the boardroom table during a senior executive team meeting. First, he showed the pile to his boss, who was taken aback by this powerful visual display of the waste inherent in having dozens of different factories negotiate different deals for the items they needed! The boss showed the CEO, who scrapped the meeting agenda to talk about procurement because what he was looking at was so memorable, so compelling, and so real. It galvanized the executives into action, and ultimately, they overhauled their procurement process and saved a great deal of money.

The team members' faces were enflamed with enthusiasm now, and their eyes were bright. They were in the right frame of mind. As they say, strike the rod while it is hot. I thought of pushing my mobilizing effort a bit more, and shared another example.

I told them, "The famous Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus, stated that one can never cross the ocean unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore. So, let's answer these questions and navigate our way into the future."

To this, all of them yelled, “Yeah, we are all in. We are with you on the same boat.”

I replied enthusiastically, “Let’s all be Christopher Columbus then.”

Proud of their enthusiasm. I asked the following questions:

- Where are we now?
- Where are we likely to be at a particular future time?
- What is to be achieved and by when?
- Which way is the “best”?
- How will we get there?

DEBATE AND FEEDBACK

Obviously, the questions above opened doors for further debate and discussion. Answering them wasn’t as easy as they may sound, and hence it took us quite some time to arrive at the right answers. After finally receiving satisfactory answers upon which we all agreed, at the end of the meeting, I said, “Thank you, folks, it was a good workshop. We learned more than we all were expecting. Give yourselves a pat on the back. Please note that I will keep asking you the same questions throughout our journey. Now we start sailing—mapping our strategy. God bless you all.”

At this point, I wanted to take small steps while keeping the end in sight—long-term profitable growth and a strong brand. I knew I couldn’t jump into heavyweight marketing activities unless I first had a well-written marketing plan; therefore, I decided to do some homework. First, I thought of collecting some data, so I asked my team to create a dashboard that showed a cost-benefit analysis of the current marketing budget. This

helped get the team more involved, and they even managed to create one spreadsheet in only a week's time. With those insights, I set about creating SEWA's first-ever marketing plan.

THE MISSION HUNT

By this time, I had chosen the best fit Marketing & Branding manager already, and together we tried to bridge the gap by analyzing the situation and answering the questions mentioned previously. One might say we were standing on the threshold of building an iconic SEWA brand, but what steps did we need to take next? I was forthcoming about SEWA's current reality and knew that it needed a robust and compelling mission first. Because of my infatuation with marketing and branding, my personal library/study was replete with old and new books on the subject. I always am looking for the next best thing in the industry and witnessing how rapidly the industry is evolving never fails to amaze me. For now, I sought to develop a great mission statement for SEWA. I definitely believe in the saying "think globally, act locally."

LOOK OUTSIDE

A mission essentially is a company's message and a cardinal element of any marketing plan. I wanted to have the best mission statement for SEWA, one that revolves around its core cultural values. Being a service-driven organization, I turned my attention to some of the best mission statements of service-oriented and customer-driven organizations—not to duplicate what they did, but rather to benchmark for the right fit.

At that time, I was fascinated by the following statement from McDonald's, which reads: "Our mission is to be the world's best 'quick service restaurant,' which means opening and running great restaurants and providing exceptional service, cleanliness, and value, so that we can make every customer in every restaurant smile."

Another interesting mission statement was Google's, which reads, "To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."

The last mission was that of Facebook, which reads, "To give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected."

DELVING DEEPER

Although these three mission statements all made sense to me, a voice within echoed that they weren't sufficient to attain my dream mission. What's more, they contained a very catchy and global dream, while I wanted something robust that would communicate my point of view and jive well with my personality, as well as resonate with SEWA's character.

At this point, I was reminded of one of the forefathers of business philosophy, Napoleon Hill, who wrote, "It is in the quiet that our best ideas occur to us. Don't make the mistake of believing that by a frantic kind of dashing around you are being your most effective and efficient self. Don't assume that you are wasting time when you take time out for thought. Thought is the foundation upon which all else is built by man."

The quote gave me hope and an answer to my feelings. I needed quiet time to keep going, and thus, I went to my "state of mind" corner where I go usually to disconnect from my

surroundings and seek peace before making tough decisions. Next, I returned to my bookshelf and noticed a book entitled, *The Samsung Way* by Jaeyong Song and Kyungmook Lee. I remembered reading the book on one of my long-haul flights to an international business event last year. Then, it struck me suddenly that the book contained Samsung's mission statement. I grabbed it and began scanning its pages. After some moments, I found their mission statement, which reads, "To devote our talent and technology to creating superior products and services that contribute to a better global society."

A MISSION THAT MATTERS

There's a Chinese proverb that says, "A man without a smiling face must not open a shop." In fact, a smile is the topmost principle in our agenda. As a part of my rebranding effort and to breathe life into the organization, I wanted to develop a bold mission that mattered—a deep-seated mission that is the source of our passion, inspiration, and aspiration. Further, I wanted my people to live the mission. I wanted then to have the passion to serve, so I asked two questions:

- What do we stand for?
- What's important to us?

In my loneliest, quietest moments, I formulated the following mission statement: "To be the region's best utility organization by offering affordable, reliable, and accessible energy and water, and providing a world-class service so that we delight every customer every time."

SEWA's mission is distinctive, because it is a moral rather than a business goal. There is no mention of profit. The broad scope of our mission allows SEWA to move forward by steering with a compass rather than measuring our progress with a speedometer, but we need to say it loud and clear. If we keep it to ourselves, it will remain a figment of the imagination.

Profit is not the legitimate purpose of business. The legitimate purpose of business is to provide a product or service that people need and do it so well that it's profitable.

— James Rouse

STEPS TO GET STARTED

I realized that I had to devote considerable time to explain the new SEWA mission to my employees, as we were keeping our staff abreast of our process. So, we sent an email to all our staff that included our new mission and asked them for their feedback. The process was painful at first. No one knew what the hell I was talking about. Making marketing more relevant, and, more importantly, making employees understand fully the way marketing could drive SEWA's top as well as its bottom line, led to endless debates. However, to build credibility as a marketing leader, I had to open the door for such debates and discussions.

Soon enough, I realized that setting objectives was a major bottleneck. Most employees simply were clueless about the process. Another major issue was the marketing budget. SEWA's marketing team had been adjusting prices almost daily to steer marketing activities to the right audience.

“However, just as Christopher Columbus had his navigation tools, we will need Philip Kotler's (the so-called godfather of

marketing) helping hand—his book entitled, *The Ten Deadly Marketing Sins*,” I told them while lifting the book high so that it was visible to all in the room. I continued, “Let’s set sail by identifying the most glaring marketing deficiencies that handicap companies from succeeding amid the profound changes in the 21st century marketing environment. These sins, if committed, are the turbulent waters/tempests that can drown us.”

I could see fear and apprehension painted all over their faces. Some were jiggling their knees, some were clenching their teeth. I could already see their boats rocking!

To anchor their thoughts, I said, “Don’t worry, this turbulence is the new normal. Good marketing is no accident, but a result of careful planning and execution using the newest sophisticated tools and techniques. Hence, it is both an art and a science that enables marketers to find creative new solutions to often complex challenges. Today, it’s not about solving complexity, it’s about finding simplicity. We believe that simplicity is the ultimate sophistication, so, to simplify our journey, we need to be wary of the ten deadly sins of marketing. Are you all ears?” I asked.

“Yes sir, we want to be prepared to ward off attacks.”

I said, “This is what Kotler calls the ‘10 Deadly Sins of Marketing’.”

1. Your company is not sufficiently market-focused and customer-driven
2. Your company doesn’t fully understand its target customers
3. Your company needs to better define its competitors and monitor them
4. Your company has not properly managed its relationships with stakeholders

5. Your company is not good at finding new opportunities
6. Your company's marketing plans and planning process are deficient
7. Your company's product and service policies need tightening
8. Your company's brand building and communications skills are weak
9. Your company is not well-organized to carry on effective and efficient marketing
10. Your company has not made maximum use of technology

After giving a fair explanation of the ten deadly sins of marketing, we moved together to build our first marketing plan ever written.



Chapter 3

THE SEWA MARKETING PLAN

If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.

—Isaac Newton

Welcome to this chapter. This chapter talks about the “how to” side of SEWA’s Marketing plan. It is not about methodology. Its focus is on encouraging you to look beyond what you think you know, to focus on tomorrow rather than yesterday, and to imagine the impossible.

I was sitting in an airplane one time coming back from an international trip, and the closer I came to Dubai, the more my mind swirled with the SEWA marketing plan to-do list awaiting my return. The plan rejects any theoretical step or stage that my team and I haven’t tried, tested, and proven to be effective. The plan is not intended to be a passive read, but instead, a blueprint for you to achieve deeper customer relationships and profitable business growth.

VISUALIZING THE PLAN

I turned to my book, *Successful Marketing Plan*, which I had written seven years ago, and I thought we could refer to a sizeable amount of knowledge in the book to build our marketing

plan and its many elements. A great deal has changed since I wrote the book! However, surprisingly, much hasn't. A wise man once said, "Fundamentals don't change," and that statement stayed with me. As I think about it today, seven years later, the truth is that fundamentals remain fundamentals. On the other hand, evolution is a cardinal law of survival. My book, too, has adapted and evolved as the years have gone by; however, the principal focus always has been the same. Let me share with you an interesting story that restates my thoughts.

THE ANSWERS HAVE CHANGED

Albert Einstein once was giving an exam to his graduating class. As it happened, it was the exact same exam he had given them the previous year. Alarmed at what he saw, and thinking it was the result of the professor's absentmindedness, his teaching assistant alerted Einstein.

"Excuse me, sir," the shy assistant said, not quite sure how to tell the great man about his blunder.

"Yes?" Einstein asked.

"Um, err, it's about the test you just handed out."

Einstein waited patiently.

"I'm not sure you realize it, but this is the same test you gave last year."

Einstein thought for a moment, and then said, "Yes, it is the same test, but the answers have changed."

Just as the answers in physics change as new discoveries are made, so too do the answers in business and marketing.

Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers.

— Pierre-Marc-Gaston

The biggest difference between my first book and the one you are reading is this: The first was written with my talent and marketing savvy mentality, while this one has the *voice* of a company that was nearing its death, breathing its last, gasping for breath like a fish out of water or like a drowning man trying frantically to clutch upon a straw. In this book, you can feel the agony of an organization that essentially has constrained resources, and in which marketing was *one* of the lifeboats. In the following chapters, I will reveal powerful ways to write a good marketing plan. That's what you've been waiting for now, isn't it?

DEFINITENESS OF PURPOSE

If you have an idea where you are going, then you will know when you get there. Here's an allegory from our childhood days that illuminates the importance of knowing your destination.

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" Alice asked.

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," the Cheshire cat answered.

"I don't much care where..." Alice said.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," the cat replied.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

—Lewis Carroll

Here I would like to share with my readers a favourite line from Jan Struther's poem "Clear"; "It took me forty years on earth to reach this sure conclusion: There is no Heaven but clarity, no Hell except confusion."

As John Lennon wrote in the song “Strawberry Fields Forever,” “living is easy with eyes closed.”

Is it though? The short-term benefits of ambiguous purpose come at enormous long-term cost. Ambiguous purpose leads to substandard performance, as leaders and team members at all levels invest time and effort on priorities that bring no significant benefit. Ambiguous purpose causes people to reach inaccurate conclusions, make faulty decisions, or spin their wheels in nonproductive ways. However, when you begin with clarity of purpose, it’s easier to discriminate between relevance and irrelevance.

There are many paths to the top of the mountain. But the view is always the same.

—Chinese Proverb

LOOK AT YOUR BUSINESS WITH FRESH EYES

You must have believable targets and make your marketing plan something that is very worthwhile for you. I began with a blank page, evaluated the situation from an outsider’s perspective, and asked myself the following questions to identify SEWA’s desired result:

- ✓ What do we want to achieve?
- ✓ What’s our big idea?
- ✓ What will it feel like when we achieve it?

To find the accurate answers to the questions above, like a high-spirited horse, I galloped towards our “Situation Room,”

located in the Imagineering department where my top executives and I meet to monitor and address difficult situations at hand and conduct confidential communications that lead to making tough decisions.

The following is SEWA's desired result, which was derived from the answers to the questions above.

SEWA'S DESIRED RESULT

SEWA is launching its first ever marketing plan with one desired result—to supply energy and water 24/7 to 1.5 million people living in Sharjah with full customer delight.

I was restless, always pushing for more. Thus, SEWA's marketing plan wasn't developed by a sideline player who never really has had skin in the game. I succeeded in harnessing the power of marketing, which I did despite the warnings of those who said it "couldn't be done that way," or "it's impossible this way."

CREATE CONSENSUS AND OBTAIN SUPPORT

I summoned the entire marketing department, the other group of advisors, the SEWA CX Unit, the process improvement executives, as well as the internal quality supervisors. I wanted to rope in the entire organization and elicit different perspectives. Deep within I prayed, *I want to lead the plan without burnout and frustration.*

Two major challenges were to create consensus and obtain the teams' full support, as well as direct their energy to the true, immediate priorities. *What will I achieve?* my critical mind echoed within. *Peace of mind!* my heart replied. *My teams will be more committed to the execution in solving the issue because they will be involved greatly in the process of identifying it and coming up with solutions.*

One of the business philosophies I believe in strongly says, "Failing to plan is planning to fail." That timeless piece of business philosophy helped us succeed in any number of activities, including writing this marketing plan.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

In the following pages, I share the 9 stages of SEWA's marketing plan with you, which are the cardinal elements of its marketing DNA. It is unique and tailor-made quintessentially to suit our marketing needs and activities, ranging from building our iconic brand, to creating compelling experiences for our customers, to enabling the sales of products and services. These 9 stages are the step-wise approach I took at SEWA to achieve my marketing objectives. Some of them may appear to be common sense, but unfortunately, common sense is not always very common. This is the lowdown on the way I implemented the 9 stages of the SEWA marketing plan.

In our plan, we moved beyond the textbook theory and hoopla to provide you with practical "how-tos," coupled with success stories of SEWA, its service champions, and the best-in-class companies who have honed the art of customer-focused quality. That's what you'll find in the following pages: the hands-on why and how from someone who's succeeded by breathing it

and doing it. Have a look at the visual representation below. Don't rush! Tiptoe through each stage gradually. See Figure 3.1 below.

As I love to joke, none of this is business brain surgery. Much of what we will be talking about will seem obvious on the surface, but you'll probably find that what you think differs from what you're going to read. Are you ready to begin acquiring the knowledge you need to remain competitive and profitable in today's business climate?

Now, turn the page and learn something new.

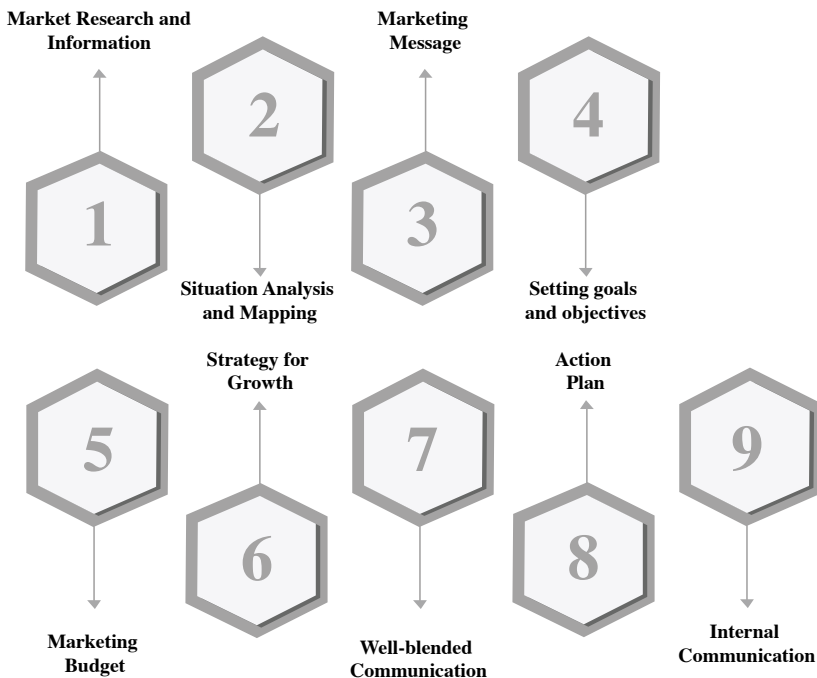


FIGURE 3.1 The SEWA Marketing Plan

Step 1

Market Research & Information**WHERE WE ARE NOW**

There is no doubt that a successful marketing plan begins with thorough market research. This involves gathering and assessing relevant data and other information. We were living in a difficult time, and struggling, with limited time and resources, to measure the efficacy of what we were doing. Data-driven marketing was the first step. Such a plan is defined as a series of activities designed to identify customer needs and wants, and satisfy them while making a reasonable profit on our quality products or services. To construct such a plan, it is necessary to examine the best way to implement it, see what's out there, ask our customers what they need and expect, and engage with them. Our thorough market research made it possible to create a marketing mix that was thought out well and would satisfy our customers and win their loyalty.

HONOR THE CUSTOMER

I once read something good about why it is necessary to love and honor customers.

- Because the customer has a need, we have a job to do

- Because the customer has a choice, we must be the better choice
- Because the customer has sensibilities, we must be considerate
- Because the customer has an urgency, we must be quick
- Because the customer is unique, we must be flexible
- Because the customer has high expectations, we must excel
- Because the customer has influence, we have the hope of more customers
- Because of the customer, we exist

We wanted to learn the way to identify our customers by type rather than through traditional market segmentation. To serve our customers, we needed to:

- Know who they are
- Know what they need and want
- Give them what they want, when they want it, better than anyone else
- Know what is in it for them

We thought that answering those questions would help distinguish us from the competition and make us the preferred service provider and supplier.

TARGET CUSTOMERS

Deep inside, I knew that earning satisfied and loyal customers would be an unmet dream unless we “perked up” SEWA’s brand

image. Marketing can be described as a race without a finish line, as the market research we carried out showed from the outset. I have distilled the most important information we gathered into the following list:

- Behavior: Often, I refer to Sharjah informally as the second UN home. The city is host to nearly 200 different nationalities living in peace and harmony. Imagine how difficult it is to understand the behavior of 200 nationalities!
- Demographics: Age, income, employment
- Psychographics: Habits, such as reading magazines or attending sporting or cultural events
- Residence: Where did our market live? Which was the densest area?
- Social group: Family size
- Activities: What do they like to do?
- Motives or benefits: What are they looking for?
- Past Experience: Their feelings
- Planning frame: How far in advance do people plan ahead when paying their bills and other charges?

The research outcome suggested two challenging questions.

- When is the right time to dig deeper and find more pain points?
- Where do we dig?

Finding the answers to the questions above required my marketers to overcome their blind spots. I think of blind spots as those unseen things that create danger to which we don't react until it is too late. There is nothing that sucks energy out of a team or individual more than thinking that they have met or

exceeded key objectives only to be told that the expectations were much different. It is a bit like playing a game thinking you understand the rules, only to have someone explain at the end that winning is defined differently than you thought. That crushes a team.

SEEING THE SAME THING, MISSING THE SAME THING

I asked the marketers to rate:

1. Which customer segment had the greatest effect in driving revenue?
2. To which part of the customer lifecycle do we dedicate the most resources?
3. With which area do they need the most help?

Not surprisingly, they all had the same answer. This intrigued me, because sometimes “consensus” actually has a downside. Sometimes extremely consistent priorities actually imply a missed opportunity.

I told them, “You all are seeing the same thing, missing the same thing. Very well done!”

SO WHAT INFORMATION IS REQUIRED?

I always believe, “Once you have the data necessary, jump in with both feet.” We spent a lot of time collecting, analyzing, and slicing and dicing the data. The right data are so critical because they can shape our products and services’ value proposition.

GET BAD NEWS QUICKLY

I believe that finding the *truth* is paramount. Most leaders are told a “version” of the truth, but not the truth itself. You may argue that in large and complex organizations, we have something called reports. Can’t I pull out reports from my computer? There’s an inventory report, a financial report, a data center report, all sorts of reports, and I can pull all of them from the system—but here’s what brings me to this point—nearly every single report that I ever could pull out of any computer contains a version of the truth.

Most major problems begin as little ones. Make sure that there is a mechanism in place that allows you as a leader to access good news as well as bad news quickly. How do you steer clear of this labyrinth? Customer surveys are an excellent tool to keep your chin up. However, the surveys that SEWA conducted to measure its customers’ “emotional pressure” manifested some excruciating pain points. The report that I pulled out indicated that customers were unhappy, unsatisfied, and frustrated. There were many data supporting the evidence that customers were in pain. I thought of making a thorough diagnosis to fix this ailment, so I dug deeper and listened to customers’ recorded calls, particularly those that were red flagged.

Never underestimate the importance of listening to the customers. Remember that the “art of listening is indispensable.” Great leaders listen before they act. They like to engage their brains before their mouths.

In any large organization, there is always the need to reach down and know how things are really functioning. You need to know you’re getting the truth, hearing the bad news as well as the good.

—Donald Rumsfeld

Too many companies squander the treasure that is customer feedback. I want the customer's voice to reach me directly, without a filter, without biases. I make the most of my data, and found a solution that collects the customers' voice and integrates it into a culture of continuous systematic feedback. I wanted to make it extremely easy for customers to reach me by email. I laid some ground rules for our employees, including that they must answer emails within 48 hours and telephone calls within four rings. Hence, the *Communicate with SEWA Chairman* portal was born. It's an interface on SEWA's home page, www.sewa.gov.ae, with my picture inviting people to communicate directly with me. The idea was a real hit, as you'll see in the following pages.

Be engaged as a reader: Please visit my website and feel free to leave comments. Thank you in advance.

SEWA 24/7 LISTENING CENTER

One of the great ideas that reached us through the *Communicate with SEWA Chairman* portal was that our customers wanted 24-hour service. The idea was fleshed out immediately and customers were provided a toll-free number, 800 SEWA.

I renamed 800-SEWA, our round-the-clock, toll-free call center, as the Listening Center. Why? Through this call center, SEWA practices "seeing through our ears," which means we not only see the customer's issues superficially, but also comprehend the root cause of the issue. Our customers called the listening center when they needed information or when there was a problem, so the center employees knew more about what was happening in the field than the field employees did. To avoid leaving customers frustrated, the role of the SEWA listening

center is to ensure that each of our customer's wants, needs, and expectations not only is met, but exceeded, and that the customer's voice is heard loud and clear. This is what we mean when we say, "seeing through our ears."

EMPATHIZE WITH CUSTOMERS

Addressing customer complaints is one of my top priorities. We delve deeply into our customers' problems and empathize with them. My chief listening officer and the listening center team empathize by following some simple, clear steps:

1. Interview—have thoughtful conversations with customer(s) and understand them through their stories.
2. Observe—I always suggest that my team should be a fly on the wall around the customer, observing the customer's experience carefully.
3. Immerse—become a customer yourself by experiencing life in the customer's shoes. Immersion allows us to experience first-hand what it's like to be a user. It is an excellent method to identify the user's tacit feelings/needs.

RESPOND WITH H.E.A.R.T

We follow the H.E.A.R.T principles to address any customer complaints. H.E.A.R.T stands for:

- H** – Hear them out, listen attentively.
- E** – Empathize with the guest: “I can hear/see your pain.”
- A** – Apologize: “I am sorry you were disappointed.”
- R** – Respond to the problem: “What can I do to help?”
- T** – Thank them and take action immediately: “Thank you for taking the time to tell me about this.”

CHIEF LISTENING OFFICER

I appointed the chief listening officer, Shareef, to facilitate the information exchange between customers and the field employees, and keep his eye on the average handling time (AHT, the golden standard of the listening center’s efficiency).

We created the listening center as part of SEWA’s customer service pledge, as well as to achieve the center’s objectives and sustain our theme. This allowed us to see through our ears. To ensure that the listening center functions seamlessly day in, day out, Shareef lent a patient ear to all our customers with a resolution mentality. He pays undivided attention to the customer complaints by adhering to ISO 10002:2014 and manages the processes that help us address the complaints more effectively and efficiently. This ensures that more customers are satisfied with the service we provide.

AN ACTIVE LISTENER

A focus on customer service training and the KPIs of key metrics has resulted in a dramatic drop in complaints and calls to the center. My focus was to answer every complaint, every time. You may be wondering whether this level of commitment to

customer service bore fruit or not? I will let the numbers speak here; compared to August 2017, the numbers of complaint calls were slashed by 50%. This was achieved only by focusing on two primary KPIs: Average Handling Time (AHT) and First Call Resolution (FCR).

We created a unique five-step guide to being an active listener that helped us shape our pledge to customer service.

1. Pay Attention—Acknowledge what the customers are saying.
2. Show You're Listening—Use positive body language and friendly gestures.
3. Show You Understand—Validate the customer's concerns/issues.
4. Don't Interrupt—Don't interrupt a customer who is talking with an untimely intrusion.
5. Respond—Be open and honest in your response; treat the other person sensitively and appropriately.

HIGH TECH WITH HIGH TOUCH

I can say proudly that SEWA is the only utility that renamed its call center a “listening center.” By doing so, I was able to balance high tech with a high touch, thereby adding the human element to the monotonous province of the customer experience.

It is entirely possible for a call center to operate efficiently but not effectively. This paradox occurs when organizations attempt only to meet customers' expectations; however, that's just the tip of the iceberg. Real customer delight is achieved when you find the *sweet spot* by striking a balance between the customer's needs, wants, and expectations.

THE THREE MUSKETEERS

If you read my last book, *The SEWA Customer-centric Model*, then you must be acquainted well with my swashbuckling, dapper team, the “SEWA Nine Champions.” They were instrumental in my customer-centric journey and enabled me to *retool* the organization by prioritizing a sharper focus on aspects that mattered most, as well as presenting a realistic baseline at all times that allowed SEWA to compare its customer-centric ambitions and efforts to those of other companies.

In this book, I will introduce you to my “Three Musketeers.” Don’t be misled by the name. I’m not referring to French author Alexandre Dumas’ historical adventure novel, *The Three Musketeers*, written in 1844. I’m referring to the 21st century *Three Musketeers*, who you will find only in SEWA—the Customer Engagement Officer, Customer Touchpoint Officer, and Voice of Customer Officer, all of whom have a clear objective: “Champion superior customer service.” All three are involved heavily with quality improvement. The base of this quality change was a set of three commitments:

1. We are customer-focused
2. We value communication
3. We strive to be the best in what we do

They are fit-for-purpose employees, employees who are filled with fire-in-the-belly enthusiasm for what they do. Their job titles are self-explanatory, but to know more about them, we need to be in exploration mode, and allow their actions to speak for themselves.

WHY MUSKETEERS NOW?

This question probably is floating in your mind. Well, primarily because they showcase the ability to incorporate new ideas and technologies into existing ways of doing things—this separates them from the rest of the pack. Secondly, the mission to bring more humanity back to customer service drives them, and lastly, their purpose and performances are consistent with SEWA's 15 principles. As they say, action speaks louder than words. Throughout the book, I will be narrating their real-time stories with our customer segment.

I still remember the first dialogue with my three musketeers and their supervisor, Syeda. Before setting a few guidelines for them, I wanted to cultivate in them the importance of spotting and analyzing an issue at hand. Looking at the young faces in front of me, I saw myself more than twenty years earlier. I want to tell you my favorite real story. It's about the skills needed to lead effective change, and it teaches a great lesson.

WHAT PROBLEM ARE YOU TRYING TO SOLVE?

I also told my employees this story. I said, "In the late 1990s, Don Kieffer was ready to launch a huge change initiative: Implementing the Toyota production system in one of Harley-Davidson Inc'.s engine plants. He hired a seasoned consultant, Hajime Oba, to help. On the appointed day, Mr. Oba arrived, took a tour of the plant, and then returned to Don's office, where Don began to ask him questions: When do we start? What kind of results should I expect? How much is it going to cost me? However, Mr. Oba wouldn't answer those questions. Instead, he responded repeatedly with one of his own: "Mr. Kieffer, what problem

are you trying to solve?” Don was perplexed. He was ready to spend money and he had one of the world’s experts on the Toyota production system in his office, but the expert (Mr. Oba) wouldn’t tell Don how to get started. The day did not end well. Don grew exasperated with what seemed like a word game, and Mr. Oba, tired of not getting an answer to his question, eventually walked out of Don’s office. However, despite the frustration on both sides, we realized later that Mr. Oba was trying to teach Don one of the foundational skills in leading effective change: formulating a clear problem statement.”

“The story ends here,” I announced. I looked at the team and said, “Answering this question isn’t easy—it requires mastery of a wide range of leadership skills and a healthy appetite for fact finding.” I continued, “It requires thorough market research and in-depth information about our customer base. You all have to find out reliably—and keep finding out—the good, bad, and ever-changing opinions about our organization and its market. In fact, you should listen legitimately to negative buzz or spot moves that may indicate risks, as this will allow us to build resilience in the new customer-driven economy.”

I still remember their eyes brimming with joy and enthusiasm as they absorbed those nuggets of wisdom.

“The good news is that we already have a highly adept marketing and branding team that has unearthed staggering insights about our customer segment, and I’ve seen an uptick in the way our survey respondents have evaluated our company’s offerings.”

They nodded in affirmation.

I wanted my musketeers to meet the SEWA marketing and branding team so that both teams could pick each other’s brains.

A MISTY BREAKFAST

The very next day, I decided to throw a surprise breakfast for both teams. The purpose was to provide an opportunity to break the ice between them and allow them to have a sneak peek into each other's roles and responsibilities.

Let me take you to the scene: it was a misty morning, and the clouds hung low like a soft grey blanket. The October sun infused the mist with a golden glow. We reached the restaurant at around 8 am, when the mist had cleared, but its dampness had penetrated our bones. Only the bright sunshine remained. As I entered the restaurant, I thought this was the right time to warm myself with a cup of tea.

Both the teams sat around a huge breakfast table and placed their orders. I was watching them from a distance and observing their body language. As the employees settled themselves, I could see them greeting each other. However, there was apprehension and a bit of unfamiliarity amongst them, so I decided to get the ball rolling by addressing them with a welcoming speech.

I began by saying, "Customer experience is now the 5th Marketing 'P' according to a *Forbes* article published on July 13, 2013. The pendulum is beginning to swing already. People are moving away from traditional, broad scale marketing initiatives to targeted efforts aimed at individuals and their preferences."

"Syeda, why don't you share your views?" I asked my chief knowledge officer.

She replied jovially, "Since the time you curated the SEWA customer-centric model, we have been seeing the SEWA brand as something to be managed across every single touch point. For example, one of the greatest outcomes of our social listening has come through:

- customer.engagement@sewa.gov.ae
- customer.touchpoint@sewa.gov.ae
- customervoice@sewa.gov.ae

This initiative actually changed our model for consumer service. We had a very traditional SEWA-800 type of model, yet the vast majority of our feedback from consumers now is coming in indirectly through social channels and that is where we needed to address it. And yet we want to have the same high quality, intimate connection and feeling in that social relationship that we do when we have someone on the phone.”

I stopped her and said, “Therefore, let’s be focusing single-mindedly on customer value and on improving the total customer experience.”

My chief branding officer, Boutheina added, “Marketing should play a cardinal role in developing the customer experience strategy, and the way the brand is experienced at every touch-point.”

I loved the way the meeting had taken a positive tone. We had enough food for thought, and the discussion made us hungrier, so we all were happy when our breakfast arrived soon.

The team already had become involved in an interesting conversation. However, I interrupted by saying, “Guys, the food is laid out. Munch on and we will resume the conversation soon.”

There was something special about them—an aura of determination and a somber sense of a higher purpose in life. I was convinced that both the teams would achieve an historical milestone in SEWA’s history.

Obviously, I wanted my three musketeers to excel. I wanted them to learn and adopt the same approach as that of SEWA’s marketing team. On the one hand, I secretly wanted them to extract the maximum value from the marketing team, but on the

other hand, I wanted them to retain their unique attributes as well.

I wanted SEWA to reach new limits, and I knew this was the team that would do so. I put them to the task right away, and asked, “What would you do if you were in my position?”

Did I leave them alone in the middle of the battleground? Clearly, no. I gave them my two best pieces of advice ever: I said,

“First, refuse to accept today’s binary thinking that says companies have only two choices: innovate small or innovate big. There always is a third way! Don’t try to innovate for the future, innovate for the present. Second, never panic. Look up the ‘Team Focus’ model in *The McKinsey Mind* by Ethan Rasiel and Paul N. Friga.”

One of the three musketeers asked, “Sir, sorry, but what is the McKinsey Model? I’ve never heard about it before, and I’m sure some of my colleagues in the room haven’t either,” she said.

I turned my head towards the rest of the team in the room. Most of them were nodding their heads in agreement with her.

“Worry not. I will explain the McKinsey Model to you all,” I said in a reassuring tone, “but before I illustrate the model, listen to the story behind the way I bumped into the book.”

I continued, “Recently I visited Singapore to attend the Forbes Global CEO conference as a VIP guest. On my way back home, I (most predictably) visited the Changi airport bookstore. This is the place I like to hang out best when waiting for the flight announcements/calls. Every time, I enter the store with the hope of finding some new knowledge, and I must confess, I am disappointed rarely. As *The knowledge Ambassador of UAE*, I have a challenging task at hand. My country sees and expects me to be the most updated version of the most knowledgeable person on the face of the planet. So, I have to stay abreast of the newer

versions of anything and everything, regardless of whether it's in my areas of expertise or not. Deep down, I love this feeling, because it compels me to do what I enjoy doing most—reading business/management books.

This time, I chanced upon another amazing book entitled, *The McKinsey Mind*. The book explains skillfully, step-by-step, the way to use McKinsey tools, techniques, and strategies to solve an array of core business problems and to make any business venture more successful. As I ran my finger through the book, an interesting infograph captured my attention (by now, you may know that I am quite visual). It was the Team Focus model. *That's a Godsend*, I said to myself. I updated my mind's checklist quickly for the tools and techniques for my three musketeers. *This model can work well with other SEWA management philosophies, I thought, but I have to redeploy this ingenious solution intelligently to serve my musketeers best.*

So, I want to share a trouble-and-pain-free, fool-proof process to optimize your potential as a team,” I reiterated.

“Are you about to mention your 9 champions?” one of them inquired.

“No, I'm going to tell you what *made* the 9 champions, champions. Okay, everybody, listen up. I'm going to tell you about this sophisticated technique that will help you overcome any major hurdle—a formidable formula—the ‘McKinsey Team Focus Model’,” I continued.

I could see that I'd captured everyone's attention. They looked hypnotized, as if I had cast a magic spell. To hold their interest, I asked them to connect their phones to an available Wi-Fi-network and search for “McKinsey Team Focus Model” on their official website. They still seemed to be in a trance. All of them typed in the key words on Google's search engine. “Load it in your mind, drag-and-drop it to your mental hard disk, tape it up

on the walls in your house, make a wall-paper out of it, stick it to your bed side table—or just cram it,” I said aloud, “but whatever you do, make it run in your blood.”

To optimize this moment of truth, I asked the team members to read the model’s key factors out loud.

For ease of reading, I have summarized the model below. However, before you jump to the explanation, take a moment and ponder the graph below: As the Chinese proverb says, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

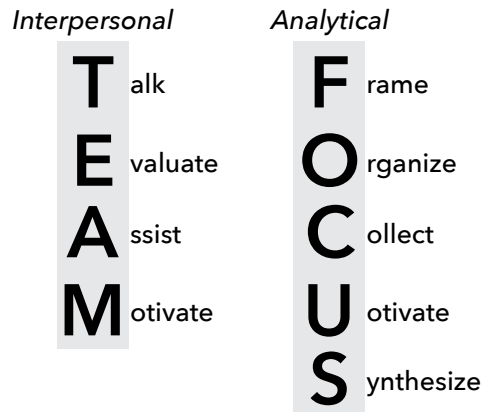


FIGURE 3.2 The Team Focus Model

I fell in love with it the first time I saw it. I thought it was a masterpiece. I loved the fact that it was simple and easy to “put into action” immediately. It ticked all the boxes for me!

Let’s come back to the scene of action. I could see that I’d whet my employees’ appetite for the McKinsey model. You must be hungry to know about it as well! The first component

covers four key elements of the interpersonal interactions that affect project management and team problem solving; thus, the key word TEAM:

Talk—One of the most important elements of high-quality team problem solving is establishing very clear channels of communication. This chapter discusses special communication tools and provides guidance concerning best-process communication, including important constituents outside of the core team and tips on managing interpersonal dialogue. The chapter also features a special section about listening.

Evaluate—Teamwork is a dynamic process, and the most successful teams are those that are able to assess their current level of performance and adapt accordingly. The starting point for good evaluation is an open dialogue about expectations, group norms, specific work processes, and tools to monitor progress. Implicit in the team evaluation process is a personalized plan that allows each team member to grow and develop continuously. We all have strengths and weaknesses, and evaluation is the only way in which we can identify adequately where to focus our energy for the Evaluate phase, which identifies team members' particular strengths that can be used for the good of the team. Strategic use of unique capabilities is an underlying component of all "special forces" organizations and is just common sense.

Assist—While the evaluation process continues, the team members must hold one another accountable for their assigned responsibilities. They need to take advantage of each other's expertise and keep each other accountable for the single objective. Finally, direct, honest feedback will ensure that the process is operating correctly, so the teammates must provide timely feedback. They also need to ask themselves the following questions regularly:

- What are the key tasks that need to be performed?
- Who is responsible for completing specific tasks?
- What can others do to help with respect to team task completion?

Motivate—The last element of the model’s interpersonal component involves very specific motivation strategies. One of the most important considerations is the realization that different factors motivate each team member. Accordingly, engaging in informal, candid conversations at the beginning of the project about what those unique motivators are and paying close attention to individuals’ motivations will go a long way. Similarly, the best teams are those that provide positive recognition of individual contributions and take adequate time to celebrate as a group (many of us seem to do less and less of this the older we get). The second component of the model relates to the core analytical elements of successful project management.

“Not quite had your fill of breakfast just yet?” I said jokingly to both the teams. In front of us lay a full English breakfast—beans, sausages, bacon, eggs, mushrooms, hash browns, and toast. Further, we had fresh bread, a variety of hard and soft cheeses, fresh juice, olives, jam and butter, and olive oil to drizzle. It was enough to make one salivate!

The customer touchpoint officer replied, almost drooling, “It’s mouth-watering. I love to eat breakfast; it’s the best meal of the day as far as I’m concerned. Healthy breakfasts, greasy breakfasts, I’m not fussy. Now, my only trouble is what to choose...”

“Exactly, making the right choice requires the power of focus.” I said carefully, “and sometimes, choices can exasperate you.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” the PR officer interrupted, “There’s too many options on the table now, and I’ve almost lost my appetite.”

“It’s the same scenario at work. When you don’t focus on your priorities as a team, you lose your appetite to work—you lose your appetite to win.” I said it aloud, thinking I had nailed it.

Clearly, the teams felt thrown for a loop. Catching my train of thought, my buzz marketing officer said, “Let’s skip the starters; why not go to the main course directly? He paused for a moment and then said, “Sir, please tell us exactly what point you want us to take home.”

I said, “When you see geese heading south for the winter, have you noticed their V formation? By flying in V-formation, the flock has a 70 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own. We can learn some useful truths from geese. Wildlife scientists have conducted extensive studies to determine why geese and other migratory birds always fly in a distinctive V-formation, and they made some fascinating discoveries. Let me tell you what they are:

1. Get to your destination with less effort

People who share a common direction and a sense of community can get where they are going more quickly and easily, because they travel on one another’s thrust. Each team member must be committed to the same direction if they are to reach their destination efficiently. When people work together harmoniously on teams, sharing common values and a common destination, they all arrive at the destination more quickly and easily, because the others’ energy and enthusiasm lift them up.

2. Stay on Course

When a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone—and returns to the formation quickly to take advantage of the lifting power that comes

from flying together. Sometimes people playing on teams will drop out of the group and try to accomplish goals on their own. However, like the geese, they usually discover that they miss the synergy and energy that comes when they are an active part of a cohesive team moving toward a common destination, and want to return to the group.

3. Be a team player and be ready to switch roles

Geese rotate leadership. The goose flying in the front of the formation has to expend the most energy because it is the first to break up the flow of air that provides the additional lift for all of the geese who follow behind the leader. Consequently, when the lead goose gets tired, it drops out of the front position and moves to the rear, where the resistance is least, and another goose moves to the leadership position. Consequently, on good teams, everyone has the opportunity to serve as a leader as well as a follower.

4. Geese honk at each other

They also frequently make loud honking sounds as they fly together. Scientists speculate that this honking is their way of communicating with each other during their long flight. Similarly, when working on teams, it is exceedingly important for each team member to communicate regularly with all the other members. Teams fall apart frequently because of inadequate communication among the various members of the team.”

LISTEN TO THE CUSTOMER’S VOICE

Later that day, I shared with them the first milestone to be achieved in our quest for market research and information—

listen to customers by using our channels of communication and welcome all feedback. “Today’s customers engage with companies proactively. They simply raise their hands via phone, email, social media, and more,” I told them.

I continued, “Be committed not just to answering the phone or replying to tweets, but rather to refining the customer experience and customer service expectations fundamentally. I want my customers not simply to be helped, but to be heard as well. Do you want to know the way IBM lends its ears to its customers?” I asked.

“This sounds interesting,” the VOC officer replied.

I told them, “IBM is a classic example. Listen to this. As the first computer giant, IBM lost its way for a few years but is quickly returning to a position of great power. One way it accomplished its turnaround was by listening to its customers. Today, groups of 20 customers known as “Customer Advisory Councils” meet regularly with Big Blue. Their input helps shape IBM’s current product lines and future plans. The computer maker also taps into customer knowledge on the telephone. Employees in the manufacturing arena are given temporary three-month assignments during which they phone recent buyers. Customers not only are asked what they like about their new purchase, but more importantly, what they don’t like. Customers don’t just consume service; they also participate in creating it. We must answer the customer’s question, ‘What does it do for me?’”

HUG YOUR HATERS

There’s something about *vocalizing* your complaints that brings out the best in each of us. This voice mail left for the Jimmy Dean sausage company is a particularly fine example. This is an

interesting example in a great book that I'm reading currently, *Hug your Haters*, by Jay Baer. There is a paragraph in the book that really moved me, and I'm sure it will leave an impression on you too as well:

'This is Randy Taylor. I don't know where you people come from. I don't know if you test your products, your quality of products. Your products are delicious. I've loved your sausage for thirty-something years, but I can't take and feed a family of five on a little twelve-ounce roll of sausage. I don't mind paying you more money for your sixteen-ounce roll of sausage, but you don't have it anymore. You've got a twelve-ounce roll, and you've got three men that weigh over two hundred pounds apiece, a woman that's a little plump Scotch girl, and a daughter who is thirteen, and you're going to try to take twelve-ounce roll of sausage and a couple of dozen eggs and feed that? It ain't going to work and I'm not going to purchase your product anymore or ever again. And as far as your sixteen-ounce maple and sage sausage? I don't eat them. I'm not from the North. I'm a Texas man. Jimmy Dean sausage is for Southern people to eat with their breakfast, with their fried eggs and their T-bone steaks. And I can't feed a twelve-ounce package to four, five, six people. And I'm not going to buy two of those twelve-ounce packages just because you want to downsize and charge the same (bleeping) price. I'd surely like a reply'."

Right after sharing this story with them, I instructed my techie team, *The Deep Divers*, to equip our telephone services with voicemail recording.

We created guidelines for our service:

- Be accessible when the customer wants to reach us
- Deliver superior service when the customer wants it
- Be the customer's choice

WHAT SHOULD A BUSINESS'S PURPOSE BE?

I must confess that Drucker's view of the purpose of a business inspired me immensely. According to him, there is only one valid purpose for a business, and that is to create a customer. This is because, as he wrote, "The customer is the foundation of a business and keeps it in existence. He alone gives employment. To supply the wants and needs of a consumer, society entrusts wealth-producing resources to the business enterprise."

What has this to do with you or me or marketing? Regardless of our organization, and whether it is a for-profit or not-for-profit, Drucker's truth holds. If we want our organization to be successful, we have to remember that, while profit is essential to support innovation and marketing actions, profit maximization should not be a business's primary purpose. In my words, profit is like oxygen for the human body. Oxygen ensures that the body lives, survives, and grows. Without it, the body dies. However, the body needs the right amount of oxygen; too much can damage cells. Like too much oxygen, too much profit—profit maximization without consideration of other elements in the business's equation—can cause problems just as too little profit can. In short, if the focus is on profit maximization alone, the customer can be ignored or given secondary consideration. This can prove hazardous to the organization. And this should never happen at any cost: Period!

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR)

My beliefs and ideologies about "What should a business's purpose be?" were given voice in 2017, when the UAE declared

2017 the “Year of Giving” and made Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) mandatory for all companies. A leading Middle East newspaper, *Khaleej Times*, reported that Sultan Bin Saeed Al Mansouri, Minister of Economy, said: “Ever since the country declared 2017 as the Year of Giving, national efforts have started to contribute to the development of an integrated framework that will spread the culture of giving across the country.”

I was glad that the country resonated with what I was doing in my organization. In fact, I remember reading some of the ministry’s initiatives, such as: launch of the “National Corporate Social Responsibility Index” that will list the ranking of companies involved in philanthropy, and the “Social Responsibility Passport” that will be granted to the top five performing companies in social responsibility. I fell in love with these initiatives immediately.

I said to myself, *Although a lot of money is given in donations annually, most of this is cash and does not necessarily support the brand or the company best. Other approaches, such as staff engaging in community volunteering, secondment programs that would provide my employees with the unique opportunity to give back to society by sharing their business skills and knowledge with our NGO partner organizations in long-term assignments, gifts in kind, and setting up cause-related marketing, can be more productive for both the CSR cause and for the company than donating money.*

However, it is difficult for any company to get started with CSR initiatives. I thought my employees might feel that they lack imagination or resources. There also are opponents of CSR. Charlotte Denny of *The Guardian* said: “The real horror is that firms will burden themselves with unnecessary costs which reduce their competitiveness.”

Knowing well that it was going to be an enormous task, I made the leap of faith, rolled up my sleeves, and took up the cudgel to inject the spirit of CSR in SEWA. I told my employees, “Corporate social responsibility gives all of an organization’s employees a chance to contribute to society, the environment, country, and so on. We all live for ourselves, but trust me, living for others and doing something for them is a different feeling altogether. It is indeed high time that we also start thinking about people around us who are less privileged and fortunate than us.”

The chief SEngineering officer stood up and said, “I completely agree with you. Plus, when companies exhibit philanthropic behavior, they are more likely to provide employees with a positive workplace.”

The market research expert said, “Also, I would like to add that corporate social responsibility goes a long way in creating positive word of mouth for the organization on the whole.”

These are areas where research and evaluation have roles to play. Proving that your CSR program is supporting your brand actively, maintaining and raising your profile, motivating your staff and other stakeholders, and having an effect on profitability, all ensure that you can demonstrate that the expenditure is worthwhile.

SEWA’S DOSE OF HELP

I believe wholeheartedly that we all can make a difference. When each of us combines our small efforts together, we can have a huge effect on the environment and the lives of the poor and needy. I grew up seeing my parents showering good-heartedness on the underprivileged and needy. They instilled in me the seeds

of giving. Furthermore, my early career as a volunteer director general at Sharjah Charity International brought me closer to the lives of the needy in 20 countries. Hence, with time, the roots of “giving back” grew deeper and deeper. I am moved by the inspiring quote of Jamsetji Tata, founder of the Tata group, “In a free enterprise, the community is not just another stakeholder in business, but is in fact the very purpose of its existence.”

At SEWA, my charitable heart blossomed fully. Being a chairman of the largest service provider in Sharjah, I served a huge customer segment and touched millions of customers’ lives. As a matter of fact, I ensured that SEWA employees participate actively in charitable events and initiatives by stating that participating in such events would affect their annual performance appraisal overall.

SEWA collaborated with Emirates Red Crescent for the noble cause of collecting medicines that would have stayed in our homes otherwise, expired, and been sent to landfills. In one effort, we reduced the amount of waste while helping the poor. By putting up posters and donation boxes at commercial and residential buildings, visiting medical clinics and pharmacies and spreading the word on social media, we were able to collect medicines for thousands of purposes needed.

IT PAYS OFF

Sustainability is at the core of SEWA’s decision making process. We are playing an important role in de-carbonization of the UAE economy by switching to cleaner fuels, adopting renewable energy, and promoting electric vehicles. We have embarked on a journey toward a Green economy and will continue to pave our way to a sustainable future.

We were pleased to participate in the Arabia CSR Awards 2018, which is the Gulf region's most prestigious and recognized sustainability event. It promised to present an impressive list of VIPs and leaders from government and private institutions from across the Arab World and beyond. In fact, we received a certificate of appreciation from the Awards for being the second runner up in the public sector category in its 2018 11th Cycle.



Step 2

Situation Analysis and Mapping

SHAPING FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

It was 9 a.m. Saturday, July 28, 2018. The previous night, the UAE had witnessed the longest lunar eclipse of this century—The Blood Moon night. The earth’s shadow eclipsed the moon for three hours and 55 minutes, beginning on Friday night and continuing into the early hours of Saturday morning, and it was eclipsed fully for one hour, 42 minutes, and 57 seconds. It nearly was the longest lunar eclipse theoretically possible, and was the longest eclipse between the years of 2001 and 2100. With the so-called “blood moon,” the moon changed hue from bright white to dark blood red as the sun’s rays were reflected through the earth’s atmosphere. The next lunar eclipse of a similar length is not due until 2123.

According to quantum physics, everything in the Universe—stars, planets, satellites, and even the moon, has an operating frequency. The frequency the moon emanates affects the frequency of the mind that exerts control over our feelings, emotions, and desires. Perhaps the blood moon played havoc on my mood that day, as well, because on the following morning, I was in a “good but not great” mood. My lukewarm outlook was a result of complex and far-reaching changes in the organization. *There are no quick solutions, I reassured myself. I have to re-think how to market ourselves to the world. I have to face a long and tough road ahead, but it is a path I must take, or risk being left behind.*

RUN TO DAYLIGHT

At that point, I remembered the conversation I had with a great friend and successful businessman. As he put it, “Not only do I lack the right answers, my team and I can’t even figure out the right questions! So, I needed to manage my thinking like a chess game, keep my mind on the next step.”

While I was still catching up with my train of thought, Sulu, customer touchpoint officer, showed up. She remarked, “His Excellency, we need to seek emotional connection and know what people are saying about our products and services. Are people satisfied with how it is delivered? What are the threats to the SEWA brand? What should our brand messaging be? What do customers want more of?”

No magic solutions, it all comes down to a lot of hard work and commitment. At this stage, don’t get into debates about pros and cons, ifs and buts; just focus and get the ideas flowing until they are discussed at a later point. I murmured to myself.

“Well, you know where you’ll find the answers, don’t you? I said in a rhetorical tone.

THE SECRECY ROOM

She replied confidently, “By all means, it’s the Secrecy Room, indeed!”

“That’s a straight answer,” I replied, “Go and assemble the whole team right away. I’ll catch up with you there.”

The SEWA secrecy room is a dedicated, contemporary office space with SEWA Secrecy Room scribbled on the soundproofed walls, which provide a canvas for shared note-taking, and act as long-term storage for works in progress. It’s a room reserved for

most important high-level projects, discussions, and debates, and always helps us do better work. Anything that's low-key is thought out and discussed here.

TEAMS ARE KEY

Imagine this: the team members sat opposite each other. I preferred to stand. As a matter of fact, I have steered away from keeping a chair for myself, for a multitude of reasons; first and foremost, when the rest of the team sits and I stand, they have no other option but to tilt their heads to face a 6 foot tall boss. The tilted heads also open up their airways, enabling them to breathe in more oxygen and relax their minds, and secondly, we need to keep our discussion as crisp and quick as possible.

I asked the customer touch point officer to stand up and write the following questions on the flip chart.

- What are people saying about our products and services?
- Are people satisfied with the way they are delivered?
- What are the threats to the SEWA brand?
- What should our brand messaging be?
- What do customers want more of?

Before uttering a word, I drew the four quadrants of a SWOT analysis on the wall's canvas-like whiteboard, and asked my market analyst officer to conduct a SWOT analysis to identify and prioritize the SEWA marketing plan process with the team.

"Should we use another results-oriented strategic planning tool?" The Voice of Customer (VoC) officer interrogated.

I held the view that conducting a situation analysis helped us identify clearly our capabilities, the nature of our customers

and the business environment, and the effect they might have on our organization. It also can help identify strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats to our organization (SWOT). This analysis was eye-opening, as it told us what really was going on within our organization and helped us determine the next steps we needed to take within the marketplace. While conducting a situation analysis, we took into account SEWA's vision, mission, and cultural core values.

"No, not a new tool; just a fresh view of new directions and implementation of the SWOT analysis will do the magic. Further, we can think of other strategic planning tools that can be combined with SWOT," I advised the VoC officer.

Picking up my marker pen, I said, "To give a head-start, let's tweak the process of a typical SWOT Analysis."

Their eyes almost popped out. It reminded me of Jim Carrey's iconic wolf howling, eye popping scene from "The Mask" movie.

Read on to gain insight into what followed next.

FROM SWOT TO TOWS

To conjure up a quick marketing plan, I reversed the order of the SWOT analysis. Rather than beginning with strengths and weaknesses and moving down to opportunities and threats, I worked my way up from the bottom, and began by analyzing the competitive **T**hreats and **O**pportunities first, and then drilling down to SEWA's **W**eaknesses and **S**trengths. At this time, I wanted to turn weaknesses or threats into some quick wins. I reminded myself to ask a few questions, such as, how do I...

- make the most of our strengths?

- circumvent our weaknesses?
- capitalize on our opportunities?
- manage our threats?

The rationale of a TOWS analysis is to help you get a better understanding of the strategic choices available and what options you can pursue. You can lay out the options you do have to maximize strengths to capitalize on opportunities, while minimizing weaknesses to avoid threats (See Figure 3.3 below).

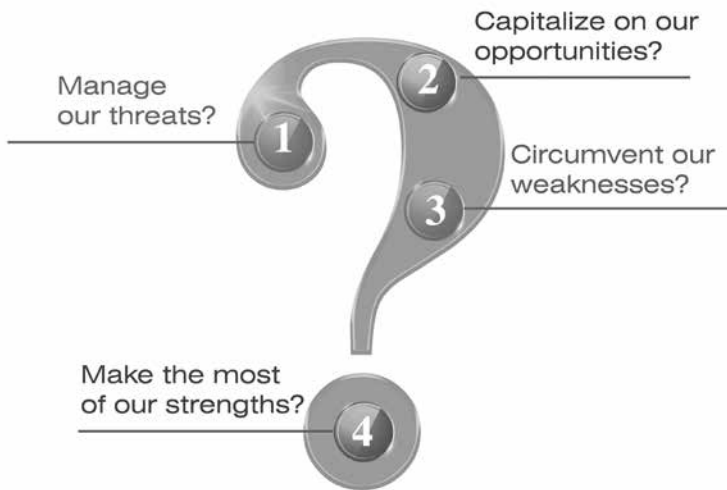


FIGURE 3.3 SEWA TOWS Analysis

This helped me think about the options that I could pursue. I was amazed at the improvement in the value of the TOWS process. It helped me identify a much clearer set of objectives.

“What do you think, musketeers?” I asked with a smug smile.

“Sir, the key success factors in our industry are shifting and as you mentioned already, we need to combine TWOS with another robust tool,” the Customer touchpoint officer said confidently.

“Yes, organizations’ roles and responsibilities in a turbulent, interconnected, and increasingly transparent world also are changing. Hence, we need to consider a few cardinal factors, such as economic trends, social attitudes, technological developments, etc.”

By now I’d whet my marketing team’s appetite and encouraged the three musketeers to look beyond the ordinary and general tools and techniques of situation analysis and mapping.

PESTEL

There is no doubt that situation analysis and TOWS brought me closer to mapping my marketing plan; however, I felt I needed to get off to a smooth start, and while in that state of mind, I remembered a tool used commonly called PESTEL. In this exercise, I found out that TOWS alone wasn’t enough, so I had to carry out a PESTEL analysis with it. In fact, if you are in a corporate turnaround expedition, you’ll find yourself juggling between the two frequently.

I looked into their eyes and said, “Let’s do a quick exercise. A quick Google search will show a list of umpteen numbers of the latest business tools and techniques. Each one of you do a separate search on PESTEL, and come back to me with your findings in 15 minutes.”

They nodded in assent.

“Remember, you all have only 15 minutes and I don’t want you to discuss it among yourselves. We will discuss the results together, and the tool/technique that gets the most votes will be put to the test,” I concluded.

They hurried towards their cabins. I was proud to see their enthusiasm and zeal.

I thought I'd use the 15 minutes to collect my thoughts, and so I retired to my "State of mind" office space. 15 minutes passed by quite rapidly, and the team reassembled in the room with their laptops in hand.

"So, did I give you all a tough time?" I asked sheepishly.

"Well, your challenge was worth the hassle," one of the team members said.

"We'll see soon. Show me what you found," I said.

"Compared to TOWS analysis, businesses use PESTEL widely," the customer touchpoint officer said.

Listening to her statement, the other two concurred, "We recommend PESTEL too."

I smiled and replied, "Bravo!"

I was pleased with my team's proactive approach. Looking at their enthusiasm, I thought of elaborating more about the tool. I cleared my throat, and told them, "The term PESTEL refers to the domains it considers: the **P**olitical, **E**conomic, **S**ocial, **T**echnological, **E**nvironmental, and **L**egal effects on a company. There are people who will roll their eyes and believe that a PESTEL analysis is just another exercise. It isn't. What the analysis is intended to do is give us an understanding of changes that may be occurring within the market we serve. These can influence the marketing and branding efforts that we are working hard to develop strongly."

The team listened to me as if they were mesmerized. I could tell that my words were music to their ears.

A few minutes later, the chief marketing and branding officer raised her hand, and said, "Sir, I remember reading in your book, *A Successful Marketing plan*, about Michael Porters Five Forces tool."

"Aha, Bravo!" I said excitedly, "There you are. Please share with your colleagues what you learnt from the tool and the way it works."

FIVE FORCES

She stood up and described Porter's five forces tool, which is a business analysis model that helps explain why different industries are able to sustain different levels of profitability. The model was published originally in 1980 in Porter's book, *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*.

Porter identified five undeniable forces that play a part in shaping every market and industry in the world. The forces are used frequently to measure competition intensity, attractiveness, and an industry or market's profitability. They are:

1. Competitive Rivalry
2. Threat of New Entrants
3. Threat of Substitution
4. Supplier Power
5. Buyer Power

HOW THE FIVE FORCES WORK

1. Competitive Rivalry

Clearly, competitive rivalry will be a key factor in competitive intensity. So what do marketers need to consider?

- Are you being innovative to give yourself the competitive advantage?
- Do your competitors have more advertising resources?
- Are yours, or their customers loyal?

2. Threat of New Entrants

The largest companies that have something of a monopoly over the industry can reduce or even eliminate the threat of new entrants. Marketers need to consider:

- Are there many entry barriers?
- Do you have customer loyalty?
- Do you have special knowledge that can be used to differentiate you?
- Is there any Government policy in place either encourage or discourage new entrants?

3. Threat of Substitution

Customers may choose to substitute your product or service for another. This is not the same as switching to a different company to obtain the same product, but involves switching products entirely. How can marketers confront this?

- Is there a perceived level of differentiation?
- Is there a cost to the buyer for switching?
- How easy is it for the buyer to switch?

4. Supplier Power

The fewer suppliers there are, the more power they have over you and the prices they charge. Marketers should consider:

- How many suppliers are available to you?
- What are their sizes?

5. Buyer Power

When the buyers themselves have power, they can apply pressure to companies, pressure to lower their prices in particular.

If the buyer has many choices of products and companies, then their power is great. How many buyers do you have?

- How price sensitive are your buyers?
- What information about your buyers is available to you?
- What differentiates you from your competitors?

“So, you can see the way this tool may prove useful for SE-WA’s marketers and strategy team. It allows us to see our current strategic position and plan for the future by acting on our strengths and addressing our weaknesses,” I said. “In fact, the balance of these forces,” I continued, “sets out the competitive landscape, and while all the forces ultimately will affect marketing and the business, three are of particular interest to marketers: customers, competitors, and substitutes and alternatives.”

The five forces model helped us greatly as we shaped our marketing plan process. At the end of the day, we had business tools that helped us move to the next phase of the plan. Please read on!



Step 3

Marketing Message

Every business sends a message in its marketing mix, such as:

- “Connecting People” [Nokia]
- “Think Different” [Apple]
- “The World’s Local Bank” [HSBC]
- “Invent” [HP]
- “Be the first to know” [CNN]
- “A crown of every achievement” [Rolex]

You need to deliver a core message through as many vehicles as possible. I always believed in short marketing messages that stick in the customers’ minds. One of the non-profit organizations I have been leading for almost a decade now, called Alleem Business Congress, has a very inspiring and catchy marketing message: “Where leaders make decisions.”

ELEMENTS WORTH CONSIDERING

After completing the TOWS process and answering the PESTEL questions successfully, we moved on to creating our own marketing message. At this point, I held a meeting with the SEWA Marketing & Branding team about the following elements of SEWA’s marketing message. We decided that we could present our message in the following order:

Message Content. The unique selling proposition (USP), which is the advantage and should be at the heart of our message.

- **Message Approach.** This is not about what we wanted to say, but the way we wanted to say it.
- **Message style.** This is where we added our creative input. We looked at the signals we could use to get our target customer's attention and interest.

What followed next? A great many meetings! Yes, lots of strategic meetings, some of which were ad-hoc, some pre-planned. Some were held outdoors, while others took place in the corridor. I ensured that we dedicated a great deal of time and energy to this because I trusted that the result would be phenomenal—and I was right. The end result—the SEWA marketing message—was “Conserve now,” and was nothing short of a sensation in Sharjah city.

WHY “CONSERVE NOW”?

The scarcity of natural resources has motivated the UN to include them in its 17 Global Goals list. Goal # 6 talks about clean water and sanitation programs, while Goal # 7 talks about affordable and clean energy.

FROM A LIMITED TO A BROAD FOCUS

After conducting a detailed analysis of SEWA's business priorities, we finally had distilled them to create a catchy and

compelling marketing message that can be summarized in the following acronym that is identical to that of the company:

Sustainable development through
Energy optimization,
Water rationalization, and
Advancing society and culture.

Once the message's tone was set appropriately, we moved on to "test drive" it. Asking the following questions helped us run the trial.

1. What were the message's intermediate and action objectives and were they clear?
2. What reasons were we providing customers to change their behavior or attitudes? What was the benefit advantage?
3. Was the message's approach effective in the situation given?
4. Was the message's style attracting attention? Moreover, was it understandable and memorable?
5. Was the brand name mentioned?

SPARTAN

Trust me, this is not simply a box-ticking exercise; in a very real sense, these questions are milestones on the journey to capturing the masses' minds. Aha! Now I've caught your attention. Capturing the masses' minds is just the beginning of the game. If you want to stay in the game, you have to stay in their minds, which is a far more difficult task! With customers'

shorter memory spans attributable to the distractions that bombard them, one needs to be a Spartan to win the game. The Spartans were an ancient Greek community focused completely on military training and excellence. Given their military pre-eminence, the Spartans were recognized as the leaders of the combined Greek forces overall.

How do you delight your customers and create an experience for them that will transform them into “social mavens” on your behalf?

Don’t become hung up on the word “leader” as a title or position. With respect to communicating with your customers, everyone, regardless of titles or responsibility, can be a leader. I like what John C. Maxwell said about leadership, which fits with our theme here: “Leadership is not about title, position, or flowcharts. It is about one life influencing another.”

SAY IT 10 TIMES OVER

Educate the customer. Say it 10 times. This philosophy revolves around the practice of expressing a simple message and repeating it over and over and over again, to the point that suspicions about the product’s integrity and its ability to perform as promised are replaced by a desire to buy!

GE’s former CEO, A.G. Lafley, once mentioned that human beings “...don’t want to stay focused.” About his role, he stated, “My job is to get them to focus their creativity around the focus; focus their productivity around the focus; focus their efficiency or effectiveness around the focus.” When our energy is focused and concentrated in a single direction, like a laser beam, we have the power to cut through any kind of obstacle. Although this is a leadership philosophy, with which I experimented and

implemented ultimately in SEWA's marketing effort, I found it fascinating the way that, if repeated, learning a simple message can cause a butterfly effect.

WHISPERERS

I knew deep inside that I couldn't do it with my small team alone. I called them to face this challenge, and shared my feelings and the challenge by saying, "So far so good. I like the way we have achieved the marketing message milestone." I continued, "I felt that our marketing message was quite effective, yet I wanted it to reach the 'whisperers'."

"Sir, what do you mean by whisperers?" one of the team members asked.

I looked at him and replied, "Whisperers' or customer evangelists, as I love to call them, demonstrate their emotional connection to your brand, so they become your marketing department. They are the people who launch and spread the word of mouth and make the message viral. These people are the experts who tell all their colleagues and friends about a new product or service they know well. You only need to ring a bell in their ears."

WHISPERERS CAN HELP YOU EARN WINGS

This is what a life-long whisperer said after visiting SEWA's premises:

"Missed the chance to say hello to you as you were in a meeting. I want to tell you that I felt in the ideal work environment that I strive to spread across all my clients: 'building value-driven

individuals and value-driven organization,’ I am thankful to see that at least someone makes me believe that it is not a far-fetched dream. I am boosted now to be persistent. I will start using SEWA as a case study in my interventions about challenging the status quo!”

WHISPERERS CAN BACKFIRE

Addressing the team, I said, “I want to share two stories with you, one sad and one happy. Let me begin with the sad one. Whisperers are a double-edged sword. You have to be very careful dealing with them. Let me share the following sad story from Bangladesh.”

I told them, “Here is an example that proves that we need to be ultra-cautious with the whisperers. When the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh collapsed in 2013, killing over 1100 people and injuring over 2500, the Western corporations that purchase the goods manufactured there were put under a microscope immediately. The outcry around the world through social and traditional media was intense, implicating not just the factory, but its clients in the West who turned a blind eye to the conditions in the building. The public knew immediately which brands were involved, where to focus their anger, and what brands to boycott. Companies in the age of social media have learned that their operations and ethics are visible components to their brands.

Now let me tell you a good/happy story.

The Brandix Group is a Sri Lankan clothing manufacturer with more than forty plants in Sri Lanka and substantial operations in India and Bangladesh. Ishan Dantanarayana, chief people officer of the Group, says that their goal is ‘...inspiring a

large female workforce’ by telling employees to ‘...come as you are and harness your full potential’. In addition to making their CEO and board accessible to all employees, they provide pregnant women with supplemental food and medicine, offer a diploma program that allows employees to learn as they work, and even train them to be entrepreneurs and start their own businesses; they appoint worker councils in all plants to help every employee influence the business, offer scholarships for employees’ children, and more. They also give back to the community, for example through their Water & Women program, which builds wells in employees’ villages. They say that, ‘This elevates the stature of our employees in the community, and they are then privy to clean water, which is scarce’.

All of these efforts have made them Sri Lanka’s second-largest exporter and the recipient of numerous awards for their employment conditions, community involvement, and environmental practices. Ishan explained the way this happens: ‘When employees trust the leadership, they become brand ambassadors. The return on investment to business is automatic, with greater productivity, business growth, and inspired customers’—This explains the power of whisperers exactly.”

I finished with the take home lesson: “The Brandix group contrasts completely with the apparel companies in the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh. Hence, whisperers can bring you vastly different outcomes.”



Step 4

Setting Goals and Objectives

MIND'S EYE

“Das Auge sieht weit, der Verstand noch weiter” is a German proverb that means, “The eye looks, but it is the mind that sees.” I feel this quote reflects marketing greatly, as well.

In October 1847, Werner von Siemens saw potential that others had not yet envisioned. His small workshop was the starting point for a vision of invention that would affect people on every continent. The German organization, now called Siemens AG, is recognized worldwide as the pioneer in electrical engineering and electronics. Its principal founder, von Siemens, did more than imagine ways to revolutionize the use of electricity. He executed his vision. The corollary to the *mind that sees* must be expressed as the *hands that act*. This is when vision becomes reality.

This chapter will show you the way we articulated our goals, determined what we wanted to do, and shaped the way we did it with minimal difficulty.

SET HIGH TARGETS

Research has shown that those leaders who ask for more get more. Particularly in turbulent times, you can't afford to take your eye off the key goal. Organizations fail to execute the key

goals when (1) there are too many goals, or (2) there are no defined goals. To create a competitive advantage, leaders need to plan, prioritize, and execute what the mind alone can see. I wanted my team not simply to work, but work together toward something, create something, and execute the SEWA vision. Therefore, I focused squarely on our marketing plan's primary and secondary objectives. Let me explain in more detail:

1. Primary objectives refer primarily to “Financial Objectives,” such as profits, sales revenues, and return on capital. Financial goals are expressed as incremental revenue improvements and profits expected at the end of the year.

2. Secondary objectives refer primarily to “non-financial objectives,” such as branding, improving an organization's tarnished brand image, and generating awareness about its products and services. Branding is one of the most unique aspects of marketing, because it is all about customer perception. The value of a brand is difficult to quantify in hard dollars.

Along the way, I noticed something startling. We needed to achieve both objectives: money and image. We had no other options. But we needed to choose the right performance metrics to evaluate our progress.

BRAIN TETHERING

I summoned the team to the recently inaugurated IT business support office, aka SEWA Deep Divers. This office has an interesting meeting room, referred to very cleverly as “the brain-tethering room.”

The team arrived. A quick glance at them gave me a sense of their excitement. They looked fresh and brimming over with joy, so I thought I would keep the meeting light and lively.

“Have you heard of the myth that we humans use only 10 per cent of our brains? Recently, scientists have revealed that we actually use all of it. In fact, we’re using more than 10 percent even when we sleep,” I told them.

Their faces lit up with curiosity. It was evident they wanted me to tell them more about such brain trivia.

I said in a light-hearted matter, “It’s time to jostle your brains now. Thanks to the way our brain works, we have a very strong tendency to see what we want to see and expect to see. This has huge implications when studying our customers, markets, competitors, and other data that influence key business decisions,” I continued. “Let’s test our mental acuity with a few brainteasers. I’ve a few tricky questions; shall we see whose brain outweighs the rest of the brains in the room?”

“Wow this meeting reminds me of my school days. I was so sharp and witty during those days,” one of the team members replied immediately.

“The human brain is at its best at our foundational stage. It can encapsulate a world of information.” I continued, “As we grow, our minds dull. But don’t be disheartened, we can still train them.”

“That’s great news! Bring on the questions, sir, I want to test my mettle,” one of the team members commented.

“Alright, I’ll begin with the easiest one; Johnny’s mother had three children. The first child was named April. The second child was named May. What was the third child’s name?” I asked.

As expected, most of them answered, “June.”

“Wrong! The right answer is Johnny,” I said. “Our brain doesn’t like information gaps, so we tend to jump at the first answer that looks good rather than taking the time to examine all

of the data,” I told them. “Here’s another one. This one is a bit tricky; before Mt. Everest was discovered, what was the highest mountain in the world?”

The team named almost all the mountains in the world.

“It’s just Mt. Everest! Mt. Everest always has been the highest, it simply hadn’t been discovered,” I said. “Get in the habit of teasing your brain. You’ll be amazed at what you end up seeing that you didn’t see before. Now, your brain has been prepped for some serious brain tethering. Here are two questions that I need to ask you; what can we do better to achieve our marketing goals? and what tools do we need to become more successful on the job?” I was amazed at the quick responses that I received. I have summarized below the two tools that we distilled during our brain tethering meeting that day.

A multitude of tools are used to evaluate the best option to use to set goals. The following three are my favorites:

TOOL # 1: V-SAFE

A simple approach, such as the generic V-SAFE screening process, can identify the best route forward:

V=Value. Does the option deliver tangible benefits, and specifically, how likely is it to meet current goals?

S=Suitable. Is it consistent with the strategy and status quo?

A=Acceptable. Will stakeholders support it and is it an acceptable approach in the external environment?

F=Feasible. Are there sufficient resources and time?

E=Enduring. Will the idea deliver value in both the long and the short terms?

TOOL # 2: THE GROW MODEL-THE BIG PICTURE

Many leaders/managers consider GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, What next?) a fundamental model for setting goals and solving problems that is easy to use and communicate. Sir John Whitmore and his colleagues developed the Grow Model in the 1980s. I have summarized the model in the following graph.

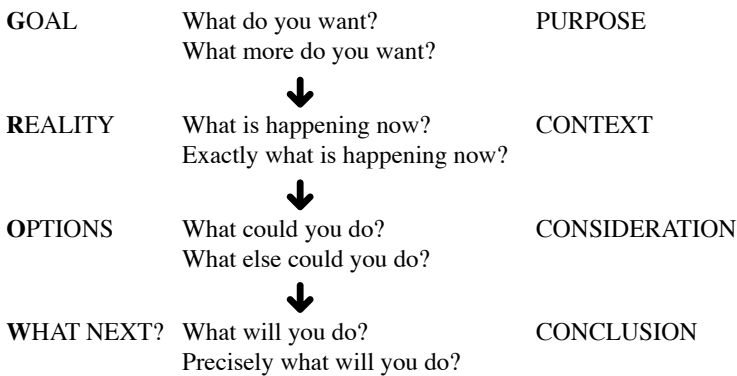


FIGURE 3.4 The GROW Model

To make our GROW sessions effective, we set **S.M.A.R.T.E.R** goals. Without a goal, there is nothing to reach for.

Without a goal, it's difficult to score.
—Donald Rumsfeld

The acronym S.M.A.R.T.E.R has many variations, including this:

S—Specific, significant, stretching.
M—Measurable, meaningful, motivational.
A—Attainable, action-oriented, agreed upon.
R—Realistic, relevant, result-oriented.
T—Timely, tangible, traceable.
E—Explicit, encouraging.
R—Resolving, radical.

So, you can see that marketing is much broader and more strategic.

We will look at this in more detail in the next step.



Step 5

Marketing Budget

Let's pick up right where we left off in step 4, beginning with a detailed explanation of the marketing budget. However, before I dive in, first I need to share with you something I always say and believe in:

Marketing is a guaranteed investment in your future business.

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

So, that said, let's dive in.

HOW MUCH?

As we were dedicated to our marketing & branding plan's success, we needed money to support the marketing process. However, because our finances were constrained considerably, we had a cash-starved budget, which demanded that we out-think rather than out-spend. After all, we had no choice. You get the point, right? Approving hundreds of thousands of dollars in the blink of an eye wasn't an option.

We then benchmarked with the best utility companies around the world to see the way they managed and spent their marketing budgets and what lessons we could draw and learn from them. We wanted to adopt the best practices in the return on

marketing investment. Finally, I decided to use a “smart” marketing budget, which includes two elements:

1. A fixed monthly amount to meet ongoing, monthly marketing expenses
2. A contingency budget to help us meet unexpected marketing needs.

IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN VIA THE MARKETING MIX

In searching for ways to gain the increasingly important competitive edge, and armed with an understanding of SEWA’s internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as the external opportunities and threats, combined with an overview of SEWA’s marketing budget, I wrote down a few immediate “next steps” to be accomplished in order to analyze different groups of SEWA customers’ different needs:

The 80/20 Principle—Try to put most of our efforts into the 20 percent of our customers who provide 80 percent of profits.

The 64/4 Rule—To identify a more rigorous and effective approach, we needed to apply the 80/20 rule to, well, the 80/20 rule *itself*. Consider that if 20% of your actions generate 80% of your results, then 20% *of that* 20% produces 80% of 80% of your results. Which means, four percent of our effort (the 20% of our 20%) generates 64% of our results. Well, yeah, that takes a little back-of-the-envelope math.

INCREASE VALUE

I never wanted to use cost cutting to reach financial targets. Long-term success requires that we focus on increasing the value that SEWA delivers to customers. Managing exclusively according to financial results fails to create real value. We must manage by means. We monitor, fix, and improve our operational process in real time. Rather than waiting to see the downstream financial consequences of a problem in the process, we can see it crop up in real time and can institute countermeasures before it has a financial effect.

AM I COST OR REVENUE?

I wrote the question above in the marketing meeting room to remind the team and challenge them to come up with an answer. My personal belief is that as long as marketing delivers both financial returns and increases customer loyalty, it is considered an investment in which you obtain both revenue and customer loyalty. Thus, as long as we perform well, and get both, then we are never cost.

ACHIEVE MORE WITH LESS

Of course, we were trying to do more with less by finding ways to magnify every marketing dollar, and stretch and multiply marketing dollars by following the out-of-the-box route called more with less. Achieving more with less is all about delivering more value to more customers more quickly. This approach helped us realize substantial improvement across many dimensions at

once—from productivity to quality, from customer experience to work environment. Increasingly, I saw this path as the best one to reinvigorate SEWA's business performance in customer-facing channels, back-office centers, and support functions. I can say without question that the experience truly has been transformational, and has led to a stronger, more resilient, and more responsive operating culture.

The real question though was, "More of what? Shouldn't it be more revenue and fewer expenses in marketing activity? We had a tight budget, so I knew I had to spend it wisely. However, as the saying goes, "If you've got the will, you'll find the way."

The saying couldn't be truer. Soon my dedication and uncompromising willpower showed me the path. During the very same week, I happened to visit the IKEA store in the Dubai Festival City Mall for two special reasons. First, my personal office was undergoing a make-over and I wanted to make some space for my books. Hence, I chose IKEA to find some creative bookshelves around my office walls. What was the second reason? Read on.

As I was making my way into the store, the scrumptious fragrance of IKEA's highly-acclaimed restaurant stimulated my olfactory senses. Like many others, I couldn't help but be swayed by the restaurant ambience. By the way, this wasn't the first time I had been in the restaurant. I had been there many times and read many books over their signature salmon fillet and meatballs. This time, though, it was a little different. How?

Last night, I happened to read *The IKEA Edge*, by Anders Dahlvig, the company's former CEO, and I was enthralled by its restaurant concept. This is what Dahlvig had to say:

"The Ikea restaurant has grown to a business of \$1.5 billion in sales. However, at Ikea, the restaurants are viewed as part of the communication mix rather than as a profit center. This is one

of the secrets to the very low prices in the restaurants and food shops. The restaurants are there to sell more home furnishings by encouraging people to remain in the store for a longer time. The Ikea Food Service (IFS) supports the price image with the low prices, and it helps keep the customers in the store longer. People with full stomachs are inclined to stay longer at the store.”

When I read this paragraph, I made up my mind to visit the Ikea restaurant the next day, and see it with a fresh pair of eyes to understand their smart communication mix. I did and the visit was worthwhile.

1- GUERRILLA MARKETING

I assembled my team and told them, “As creative thinkers we have to think of new and exciting ways to capture people’s attention every day. Guerrilla marketing is the best fit for us at this time in the plan. I am sure most of you are wondering what it is all about. It is an advertising strategy that focuses on inexpensive, unconventional marketing tactics that yield maximum results.”

Hence, we resorted to guerilla marketing. Put simply, guerrilla marketing is marketing on a small budget, and is intended to get maximum results from minimal resources. It relies on time, energy, and imagination rather than a large budget. Guerrilla marketing works outside of the mainstream, making a disruptive impression that attracts attention to a brand or business, and in the current period of economic downturn, that becomes even more important. That’s why guerrilla marketing is more relevant than ever—finding a cost-effective way to stand out from the crowd is what it is all about.

Guerrilla marketing also incorporates unusual approaches, such as street giveaways of products or graffiti walls. Creative use of stickers is another great guerrilla marketing tactic that can be very successful when implemented well. At the same time that the economy has taken a nosedive, social media use has exploded. People are on social networks and their relationships are becoming integrated more and more into everyday life. Guerrilla social media tactics can be targeted, inexpensive, and very personalized.

I advised, “Guerrilla marketing has always delivered at a lower price-point than traditional advertising and marketing efforts, and that makes it an even more critical element of SEWA’s marketing plan now, when we need to stretch our dollar. The era of ‘Mad Men’ is long past. Guerrilla is the new frontier for influence” (Mad Men is an American period drama television set primarily in the 1960s that depicts the lives of people working in an advertising agency on Madison Avenue in New York City; According to the show’s pilot, the phrase “Mad men” was a slang term Madison Avenue advertisers coined in the 1960s to refer to themselves).

By now, my super-active marketing and branding team and the three musketeers had developed a great relationship with a number of leading print and online media houses. Hence, we received hundreds of free-of-charge publications both in print and online—the Guerrilla marketing way!

DO LESS, BUT BIGGER

I keep telling my team that throwing one big stone in the water always makes the biggest splash, rather than throwing lots of small ones. At this point, my creative brain went into action full

tilt and we began to use one of the most powerful weapons of thrifty marketing—vehicles covered with the SEWA brand message. We began with our own fleet of nearly 1500 cars, trucks, and vehicles, which we then decorated with our marketing message and theme. After our efforts, I could see my message in all of Sharjah city around the clock. Wow, what a feeling!

Secondly, we had the email addresses of over 2 million customers, partners, vendors, and suppliers that served as a robust database to distribute e-newsletters, personalized emails, and various other online marketing and promotional communications.

In addition, we have more than 10,000 street light posts spread throughout Sharjah on which we used and installed creative images that carry our message.

We also created “service stories” in which customers bragged about the service they received; hence, they would become spokespersons for SEWA. They would tell others, which would have a ripple effect, because we had generated enough interest about our brand for people to talk about.

Here’s a story of a fan who later turned into a spokesperson. Stefaan Bazijn, CEO of P&I, Belgium’s dynamic solution provider for all electrical projects, visited SEWA on April 19, 2018 to discuss a prospective business alliance. Accompanied by his team members, they happened to reach the headquarters a bit earlier than the appointment time. Upon meeting them, they greeted me and said, “Your Excellency, we are already your fans. We are so excited to see the images of your management business philosophies that we couldn’t stop ourselves from taking a few photographs, even before we met you,” he said, which made me smile with pride and enthusiasm. He continued, “The SEWA business models are so universal that they could work wonders for any global company in any nook and cranny of the world.”

2- BUZZ MARKETING

I wanted to combine both traditional and non-traditional media. What I mean by non-traditional is the extreme marketing tool in which you invest sufficiently in marketing dollars and non-traditional media. This is buzz marketing, which entails spending the fewest marketing dollars by using such basic tools as interpersonal influence and word-of-mouth promotion. The best definition of the term buzz marketing can be found in Mark Hughes' book of the same name. Hughes wrote that buzz marketing captures consumers and the media's attention to such an extent that talking about your brand or company becomes entertaining, fascinating, and newsworthy.

EDITORIAL AND ADVERTORIAL

To make contact with the most appropriate media representatives and develop favorable coverage, I began by placing a focus on editorials and advertorials. *Editorials* are newsworthy stories that usually are brief articles editors write that express a newspaper's or publishing house's own views and policies on a current issue and typically are free-of-charge. On the other hand, an *advertorial* is an advertisement with editorial content. Advertorials differ from traditional advertisements in that they are designed to look like articles that appear in a publication. The tone of an advertorial usually is more similar to that of a press release than an objective news story. Most advertorials are paid, although if you are not charged, there is a hidden catch, as demonstrated by the following quote: "There's no such thing that comes for free in this world, if it's free, then YOU are the PRODUCT."



FIGURE 3.5 SEWA Editorial and Advertorial



Step 6

Strategy for Growth

The world is changing more rapidly than ever before. As a result, companies that don't have marketing strategies are often left behind. The dynamics of the future aren't what they used to be."

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

MARKET STRATEGY

To speak candidly, the word strategy has become a catchall term used to mean whatever one wants it to mean. It is one of the most abused and misunderstood words in the management vocabulary and it is important. It is not surprising that strategy seems to mean different things to different people at different times. However, as a strategist, my simplest definition always has been the same—a strategy is a well-written plan to produce specific business outcomes at a specific time. I know that any business must have a single, unified strategy first and then it must have the necessary parts. But what are those parts? This simple question sent shivers down my spine. Why? Because most strategies fail to deliver their promised results. The problem usually does not rest in the strategy itself; instead, it rests in the execution. I always say: there is big difference between knowing and doing.

Robert Kaplan and David Norton, authors of *The Balanced Scorecard: Translating Strategy into Action* said, “Ninety percent of corporate strategies fail,” and according to Bain & Company, “All companies must grow to survive, but only 1 in 5 corporate growth strategies succeeds.”

Clearly, businesses today require new perspectives on strategies as well as customers. It requires a level of *flexibility* that is considered a weakness in some organizations, but not in SEWA!

SET A COURSE

When married with purpose—“why”—and vision—“what,” strategy becomes the “how to” and the “when.” Mastering the agenda and making key operational decisions requires setting a course to True North. The tools that I touched on in step five were quite useful in attracting attention. In fact, they were powerful threads in my marketing planning process. However, what was missing was a stronger, more integrated, overarching guidance/concept that would help me achieve the products of these tools. I needed a tool that would prevent my results from becoming a potpourri of disjointed, feeble initiatives.

Now, what can convince me? *Perhaps another strategic move*, I thought to myself. No, SEWA needs not just a strategic move, but a sound strategic move. *It’s about asking whether we know our strategic goals and the way we are going to accomplish them*, I assured myself.

IN THE STRATEGY ROOM

I summoned my marketing team, nine champions, and the three musketeers to the strategy room. In an exhausting marathon of strategy sessions, I asked my team the same question repeatedly to get the best answer. “Isn’t there another way? We need to have a deep strategic *rethink* before we start down a costly road that might simply lead to another dead end.”

“Do you want us to calibrate our strategy?” the “supporter” asked.

“Before answering your question, let me tell you what I can see SEWA doing in the future. It produces perfect quality products and delights its customers with superior service. Now, I’m glad you asked your interesting question. In fact, this is the reason I have found biases.”

What I received in return were some very confused looks.

“There has to be another way,” I said.

“Anything else, Sir?” the organizer asked.

“Yes, I’ve never asked for an aggressive growth plan, and I see a lot of hockey stick plans in our 100-page document. Please be realistic, be simple, and yet take calculated risks.”

WINNING IS EVERYTHING

“We have before us many, many months of challenges. Let’s face it. You ask, what is our goal? I can answer with one word: Success—success at all costs. There is no substitute for success. Let this sink deep down into your heart, mind, and soul: We will not fail, we will not falter, we will win, yes, win. But what does winning look like at the end of our marketing journey? Simple: You win when your vision is realized.”

WHO DO YOU WANT IN THE BOAT?

“I was very brutal when I interviewed you all,” I said empathetically, “but that’s my way of testing people to find the special few—those who are brilliant in their area of expertise, eager to work hard, passionate enough to make personal sacrifices, and willing to fight for what they believe in.” I began again, “I want to run a functional organization.”

“In many ways,” the ‘leader’ replied, “working with you, Sir, has been a liberating experience for all of us.” He continued, “You have created an environment in which everyone can be bold and creative, and your vision is ever-present, whether it shows up as high-level guidance or a perfectionist’s eye for detail. You have every right to be disappointed if we *don’t* spread our wings.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m not yelling at you, I’m yelling at the situation,” I said rhetorically. I continued, “The important point is that motivation matters.”

In the heat of the moment, I was reminded of reading about Steve Jobs’ hiring philosophy and the way he used to interact with his managers. The following is one of my favorite paragraphs that has stuck in my mind for months.

Steve would start every new project by asking, “Who do I want in the boat with me on this one? If I’m in a crisis and I need help rowing the boat, who would I pick?” So, he was very good at figuring out “who’s in.”

I told them, “I am good at cherry-picking the people who fit best like you all. Each one of you has the ability to self-regulate. You have created a strong culture that tends to drive away people who don’t belong to the boat.”

DANCING WITH THE UNICORNS

“I know that our lives are full of coffee-fueled late nights in front of the whiteboard and light-bulb moments in the shower. However, before you get caught up in the whirlwind of creating the next great plan for our organization with visions of unicorns (the legendary mythical creatures that inspire us and bring a little more happiness, fun, and magic into our lives) dancing in your head, it’s wise to take a look at our plan from the outside in. Once we’ve vetted our business idea fully from several different perspectives, we’ll be much more prepared to launch the next success story,” I said confidently.

OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE

The challenger replied, “But sir, I’m so thrilled we’ve come up with a great plan that you can envision skyrocketing to success. Why do we need others’ point of views?”

“I want out-of-the-room views to shape the plan. Let’s start with consulting colleagues and business leaders outside the organization.”

“That’s a novel thought,” The leader replied. He continued, “I’ve a list of some our brand evangelist organizations—companies who are our extended family. They would share their points of view with us willingly.”

The energizer pointed out immediately, “I have a dichotomy of thought here; if we take into account the opinions of our evangelists, we may end up getting only a rosy picture of our company.”

“What do you mean? I asked.

“Sir, I mean that we need to take into account some of the

sour grapes as well, as only then will we know the taste of the sweetest grapes.”

At that moment, I felt like I had just tasted a coke without the fizz.

That seemed to end the banter. I thanked everyone for their contributions and enriching the discussion. Then I said, “See you tomorrow morning at 8 sharp for further discussion.”

BUILDING STRATEGIC CLARITY

I couldn’t control my thoughts after that long meeting. Although it had ended, my thoughts were spiraling over one another. Something was teasing my mind. *Maybe there’s a missing link*, I told myself. I thought it was time to dig into my management books’ stockpile—maybe I would find a hidden jewel there. That very day, I arrived home earlier than normal thanks to the unusually clear roads (jammed typically with school buses and bumper-to-bumper SUVs). After my lunch, I headed straight to my library and took out a couple of books on strategy, business frameworks, business model planning, etc. We’re so stressed these days because we believe everything needs to happen right now, and we forget that everything happens at the perfect time.

STRATEGY DIAMOND

I screened through the table of contents microscopically in the hope of finding a gem. “Here, you are!” I shouted in excitement. Quite literally, I had found a diamond referred to as Hambrick and Fredrickson’s Strategy Diamond.

I wanted to test the diamond’s credibility, or rather, its purity.

How did I do that? Well, whenever I am in doubt about a business model, a strategic framework, or any management concept, I prefer to refer to www.proventools.com, which is a one-stop hub for all the classic and latest resources one needs related to leadership and management. I logged onto the website immediately, and to my surprise, I found that global and contemporary organizations, such as IKEA and Starbucks, use the strategy diamond. This confirmed that I had to give it a try as well.

I picked up the management book that had Hambrick and Fredrickson's framework for strategy design and sifted through the pages mindfully. This framework argues that a strategy has five elements that provide answers to five questions:

1. Arenas: Where will we be active?
2. Vehicles: How will we get there?
3. Differentiators: How will we win in the marketplace?
4. Staging: What will the speed and sequence of our moves be?
5. Economic logic: How will we obtain our returns?

Please spend a few moments studying the graph below carefully.

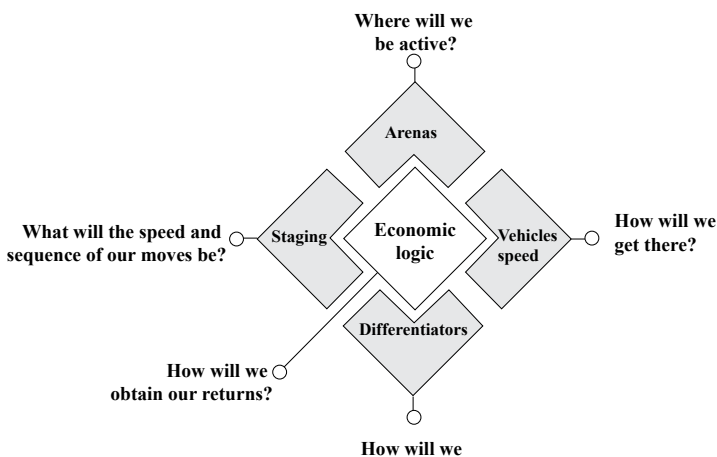


FIGURE 3.6 Strategy Diamond Model

Once I extracted the most powerful central message of the questions above, several key criteria emerged that helped me test the quality of the marketing strategy proposed. My strategy focused on six disciplines: (1) Simplicity; (2) Innovation; (3) Efficiency; (4) Customer; (5) Networking; and (6) Strategic Alliances.

MINDFULNESS ROOM

It was a gloomy week with variable weather in the city that continued to prevail in the UAE, bringing dust and haze, rain and fog, or mist to various parts of the country. We experienced all four seasons in a week. Much of the city skyline and many skyscrapers had disappeared into the haze. I moved to my mindfulness room, which literally is where I bring my meditation practice into the workplace where I need it the most! Mindfulness originated in Buddhism, and as such, it's part of a much wider set of beliefs and behaviours. However, in recent years, the concept has shifted gradually from the religious context to a more secular one. Mindfulness is a way of learning to live with yourself and with the world in which you find yourself. In fact, the phrase "comfortable in your own skin" pretty well sums up what mindfulness is about.

Work burnout is one of the greatest problems in business. Hence, SEWA's mindfulness room is a meeting space away from the busy work zone where we escape the hustle and bustle of the daily routine. In fact, this room is used primarily when we need a break to do anything pleasurable, like stretching, daydreaming, or anything we enjoy. There's one message on the wall that reads:

“Unwind and clear your mind,
Your brain uses 25% of all your calories.”

The National Institutes of Health and the World Health Organization state that stress is the number one disease in the world. We've all heard how important it is to get our bodies in shape, but are we aware that getting our brain in shape is just as important—maybe more? Think about that. This relatively small organ is burning a quarter of all our calories—which means it's working harder than any other part of our bodies. When we get our brain in tip top shape, our entire body works well, stress reduces greatly, and our ability to create and connect with others takes a quantum leap! What's more, when the brain is functioning optimally, we are much more productive and able to start and complete the things that matter most.

SPIRITUAL COMPASS

Through a unique combination of relaxation, mindfulness, and intuition, something remarkable happens: negative feelings and thoughts are transformed into optimism. Your motivation and innovation increase, your decision-making skills are enhanced. Compassion increases, self-love soars, and a new voice can be heard, one that will guide you toward greater awareness and success.

THE MINDFULNESS CLOCK IS TICKING

I literally have recommended that all of my employees download a mindfulness clock onto their computer or phone and set the bell to ring 2-3 times every two hours. "When you hear it, take 10 seconds to stretch or yawn slowly," I advised. "Meditate for a minute. Indulge in imagination games. Run errands that

you enjoy, or just disconnect from the world and connect and reflect on a deeper inner value. Then throw yourself back into work.”

Most of the employees loved the idea and downloaded the mindfulness clock immediately. The results? It made their daily routines more meaningful and valuable. They experienced more joy even when they were performing a difficult or boring task. Ultimately, it reduced their stress and enhanced their productivity.

Henceforth, whenever someone’s bell rings, his or her colleagues say aloud, “The mindfulness clock is ticking. It’s time to unwind!”—this has become a catchphrase for most of us.

Our strategy must contain the four Ps of marketing.

THE TIME-HONORED “FOUR Ps OF MARKETING”

The strategy step completes the ‘How we will do it’ stage. The question was: How will we make the strategy a reality? After we identified the target customers, the marketing plan addressed them through the marketing mix, also known as the 4 Ps of marketing. Since the early 1960s, marketers have been using the four Ps—product, price, placement, and promotion—as a model for the marketing mix, and it continues to be a valuable thought process. Below is a brief explanation.

1. Product. What are we offering our customers?

The product is the centerpiece of the marketing mix. The product is SEWA’s offer to our customers. We opened a commercial section to introduce global brands of genuine products, and ensure that there are no counterfeit or fake products in the electrical market in Sharjah. We adapted *ecomagination* principles

as an important element in our projects. By adhering to these principles, we can ensure that our projects are environmentally friendly.

2. Price. In a competitive environment, pricing is both critical and challenging. We established a standard fixed price for our products—no hidden charges—and a justification of the pricing decisions to be transparent with our customers.

3. Placement. This refers to the point of sale and the way in which we delivered our products and services to our customers by opening more than 10 happiness centers. We also introduced smart online payment methods for our customers' convenience.

4. Promotion. The way we plan to promote our products and services through advertising, publicity, sales promotion, public relations strategies, media schedules, and so forth.

PLEASE STOP

Promotion, the fourth element in the marketing mix, is the most difficult to describe. Why? The main reason is that, via promotion, our goal is to create a favorable impression about our products and services in our consumers' minds and actually make them take out their wallets and make a transaction in good faith and be satisfied fully with our services.

The Promotion umbrella encompasses a plethora of activities, such as advertising, catalogs, public relations, and personal selling. These categories branch off to TV, radio, print ads, billboards, customer-loyalty programs, telemarketing, and door-to-door sales. You also may add online marketing, social marketing, and word-of-mouth, among many others that we highlighted in step # 5.

One of the most recent and notable promotions in SEWA was the introduction of an easy installment plan of up to three years with zero interest for a service connection charge. Moreover, we began to give a 10% discount on service connection charges for new houses, villas, and flats.

Here in the UAE, we have bestowed the title, “people of determination” on anyone who is physically challenged or has any sort of special needs. We no longer refer to them as disabled. They accept and live life to the fullest. Thus, it needs special mention here that we also offer a special 25% concession to “people of determination.”

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONS

Life has thrown me into tricky situations numerous times. What has helped me overcome such difficult circumstances is my attitude to challenge conventions, challenge the status quo. In my view, a leader must do unusual things to reach unthinkable heights. As I write this page, I recall a recent difficult decision that I had to make regarding Zulal Water Factory, our subsidiary company. Principally, it was about the company’s competitive pricing strategy. It’s not surprising that there’s *fierce* competition among bottled drinking water companies in this region. Given the geographical and climatic conditions here, pure bottled drinking water is in high demand.

As you may have learnt by now, fierce competition leads most companies to slash their products’ prices, which compromises quality and service delivery ultimately. While others either were slashing every penny or reducing quality, I raised the price of Zulal drinking water instead. I did so because I believed that consumers would not mind paying an extra dollar because we

provide them with high quality products. I believe in growing by going in the opposite direction.

I was so focused on building and reinforcing the Zulal brand that I opposed any idea that would splinter it. Some critics long argued with me that Zulal's drinking water business would stagnate without a low-cost option. However, I see Zulal as a premium brand that appeals to those who believe that a high-quality product is worth a premium price. If Zulal were to produce "cheap" or "low-cost" drinking water, it might well increase its market share, but it also would dilute its brand. I believe strongly that a great brand is—literally and figuratively—money in the bank and loyal customers in the company's account. Thanks to my entrepreneurial instinct, Zulal is now competitive with the regional drinking water giants.

LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT

Hence, I made the decision to raise Zulal water's price. I knew that anything less would fail to turn the company around financially. Have a look at the dialogue I had with my Zulal team's sales managers:

"Dear team, I have an announcement for you all." I continued, "After giving it deep thought, and benchmarking with the top regional water company's prices as well as after-sales service offerings, I have decided to raise the price of our Zulal water. It's high time I hear our cash register ringing. Love it or leave it," I announced.

I knew this tough decision will be a massive game-changer for Zulal and SEWA and would boost our profitability significantly. I continued, "I know that there's a deep-seated fear that if we raise our prices, customers will abandon us in droves, our

company will collapse, and we'll be destined to a life of pan-handling."

The chief sales manager replied, "Sir, we have identified all the four P's—product, price, place, and promotion. We have investigated it all! Raising the price of our product is not at all feasible right now." He continued in the same breath, "My field guys reported the price comparison study with other competitors, and they painted a sorrowful picture. People aren't ready to pay that extra dollar. Sir, please try to understand."

He said all of this while he was looking at me, expecting my facial muscles to become stern. Instead, I was poker faced—love it or leave it.

DON'T RUSH TO JUDGMENT

I listened to him patiently. I could hear the pain in his voice, and I knew the large water companies focus on low, low pricing as one of their major aggressive strategies. Here's the reality. Consumers become extremely price sensitive. Hence, I thought of considering his plea and reinvestigating Zulal's product pricing. I delved deeper and found that there are nearly 600 bottled water companies in the UAE that can be categorized broadly according to the following product pricing strategies:

- **Premium Pricing.** Suitable for unique products.
- **Penetration Pricing.** Offer at low prices to attract customers.
- **Skimming Pricing.** Setting the price high during the introductory phase, then reducing the price gradually.
- **Economy Pricing.** Lower pricing associated with decreased production cost.

- **Psychology Pricing.** For example, pricing 199 rather than 200.
- **Bundle Pricing.** Selling multiple products together at a lower rate than that if purchased individually.

After some moments of silence, I replied, “I understand your agony. We’re are not just raising prices blatantly—we are raising prices with the promise of focusing on delivering more value than our competitors.”

Now I could see heads beginning to nod in agreement.

I continued, “This will enable us to charge a premium while increasing demand. At the same time, it will help communicate the value of what we are offering beyond a shadow of a doubt. Higher prices will lead us to better customers who have a better understanding of our offer’s true value.”

The statement worked as an eye-opener.

“Premiumization—that’s the trendsetter. Let me explain. According to the *Nielson report* published in 2017, consumers around the world aren’t simply trading up on big-ticket purchases; they’re also going premium on everyday items. The personal care, beauty, home care and various food and beverage categories are experiencing strong sales growth, and most importantly, consumers buy premium products for both rational and emotional reasons. So, we need to push all the right buttons.”

“As Stéphane Baschiera, President and Chief Executive Officer at Moët & Chandon, the world’s largest champagne producer, and the co-owner of Louis Vuitton, says, ‘To create something new that still maintains the heritage of Moët & Chandon, while justifying a higher price point with quality, is truly a science’. I agree with him. It’s truly an analytical science.”

I said, “I want to make sure that it’s crystal clear to you and everyone in your department that while price certainly is a part

of it, it's only a piece of the equation. Don't panic! Zulal offers competitive pricing, but typically doesn't offer customers the lowest price possible. As the saying goes, 'If you want to make your numbers, you need to execute strategy at the point of customer contact. There is a better way—a much, much, much better way. Differentiate your product in ways that are meaningful to your customers'. I believe strongly in my water's excellent quality, and that we're going to be much more successful if we look at our business and brand from the perspective of health and purity that will offer a refreshing feeling of happiness in customers' minds, bodies, and souls, than if we just look at it as a beverage category. You win on people. Go ahead, admit it. Remember, act quickly and decisively. If you don't, a competitor will." I continued in the same breath, "It's time we practice 'co-opetition'-collaboration between business competitors, in the hope of mutually beneficial results. This is the prime reason that I have decided to add a new job responsibility called the chief co-opetition officer. It all begins with transforming your business from a transactional to a relationship-oriented marketing model.

Then, I shared a story of the Austrian firm Swarovski—makers of fine crystal. One of its divisions makes the fine lead crystals mounted on chandeliers. Its crystals are the highest quality and cost the most. However, a European competitor emerged who charged 20 percent less than Swarovski, and subsequently, an Egyptian competitor emerged who charged 50 percent less! What did Swarovski do? The easy way out was to lower its prices, but that would eat into its profits greatly. Instead, it took advantage of its brand power to get hotels and homes that buy chandeliers to insist on Swarovski crystal. The company showed chandelier makers or hotels how they could save money or time using Swarovski crystal because they don't have to be

cleaned as often or they can be mounted quickly with a special Swarovski patented process.

So what do we learn from this story?" I asked. I continued in the same tone, "The best answer is, we need to look at our brand through the prism of brand experience. How do we want our customers to perceive us? As a company that just sells bottled drinking water or as a company that makes their lives healthier and happier by providing high quality pure drinking water? Trust me, the day we bridge this gap, customers will queue up to buy our water; they will become our fans and de facto marketing department."

I switched gears. "Have you ever tried one of Chipotle's burgers?"

"Yes, sir, sure, it's one of the tastiest burgers in town," chief sales officer replied immediately.

"Great, but isn't it the most expensive burger in town as well?" I retorted.

"Yes sir, but its taste is distinctive and worth that high price," he replied.

"Aha, there you are. Our Zulal water's taste also is distinctive, and our consumers are looking for a taste of the good life. Let's be the one and only in the market to give them just that."

I could see them brimming with enthusiasm.

"Listen to me carefully. Let me tell you one more story," I said, and then I told them an interesting story, also about Chipotle.

THE CHIPOTLE STORY

"This is a similar story in which quality won over price: Despite its higher wages, Chipotle still manages to spend more on ingredients than it does on payroll, the exact reverse of the fast food

formula for success. In the years when other restaurants of all kinds were cutting prices in a race to the bottom, Chipotle either held fast or raised its prices. For instance, when Steve Ells, Chipotle's founder, was unhappy with the taste of his shredded pork burrito, he went out and sourced a higher grade of pork and raised the burrito's price by a dollar, after which its sales reportedly doubled to a full 8 percent of the company's revenue."

After listening to the story, my chief sales manager seemed quite convinced, and went back to work promising to believe that our Zulal water sales would increase.

A MONTH AND A HALF

It was one of the busiest days of the month, when I was juggling between finance meetings and visits from the Royal family. My agenda for the day looked jam-packed, and I knew I wouldn't be able to squeeze out any time for my brunch as well. Then, to add to my dismay, my sales manager came running and yelling, almost tearing out his hair.

He gasped, "Sir, we are losing ground, there's a price war going on. Our competitor, MyWater (name changed) has slashed its price to the minimum and its promotion is in full swing. Even in this scorching heat, nobody is buying our water. What do we do now?" His question rang in my ear.

I was about to erupt like a dormant volcano, but then my eyes fell on my *Little Book of Comfort* by Ruskin Bond, and spotted a magical quote by Rumi, "Raise your words, not voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder."

In that frenzied situation, the quote pacified me, or rather saved the team from my wrath. I summoned him along with his team to my meeting room and told them the following story. "There is a saying in architecture: 'If you can't hide it, make it a feature.'"

I went on, “This means that anything that is visible to the customer needs to be meaningful, and everything else needs to disappear completely. The same can be said for advertising; Highlight your USP (Unique Selling Point) and downplay or eliminate the shortcomings.”

Then I described another example that focuses on efficiency, and is about Chipotle as well.

“Efficiency in the fast food industry depends largely upon limiting spoilage and minimizing labor costs by cooking frozen meat patties and French fries, but Chipotle restaurants don’t even have freezers. All of their ingredients are delivered fresh. After the company bought hundreds of labor-saving onion-slicing machines, Ells ordered them to revert to cutting onions by hand because he felt that it made them taste better, as machine cutting left the onions a little dried out.”

The team looked at me with clouds of fog around their heads. Probably, they had expected a bulleted summary or a dashboard. Instead, they were hearing real life stories.

The sales manager said finally, “We are so blessed to have a boss like you. You shift our mentalities by sharing successes and not problems. We really appreciate hearing good news for a change. We love the fact that you always kick off the agenda with a success story.”

“Yes, that’s a great observation, Ali,” I replied spontaneously. “I do this so that the resulting energy will set the tone for the rest of the meeting. And today, I have one more story that I’ve saved for the end. That way we all will leave the meeting with a great buzz!”

Their faces lit up with smiles.

“This story is a bit different,” I said, “because it’s a personal one. It dates back almost a decade, but its lesson has withstood the test of time. It still resonates with people because it’s about valuing people.”

I continued, “A decade ago, when I was the Director General of Sharjah Department of Seaports and Customs and Sharjah free zones Authorities (Hamriyah free zone Authority, Sharjah Airport International free zone Authority), a small firm approached me for approval and certification to set up a process improvement manufacturing company. As they had ambitious goals to expand the company and ship their products world-wide, they were looking for a yard with a waterfront facility.” I continued, “I understood their aspirations and long-term plans, assessed the company’s needs, and realized that getting the key site was paramount to their success. Finally, I approved and certified their proposal and allotted them a waterfront yard.”

“Today, almost a decade later, they have grown into a highly reputable company and even take “turn-key” projects, having worked with international oil companies such as Shell, BP, Chevron, etc. They also have supplied their equipment world-wide to countries like the US, UK, Poland, Russia, India, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and others.”

“What’s the name of the company, sir? We would like to know,” Ali inquired.

“It’s called Quality International,” I replied, “and every time I bump into its CEO, Shashi, he always thanks me for approving and allotting him that key waterfront site.”

I wrapped up the meeting by saying, “The lesson that we can extract from this story is that knowing and understanding customer needs is at the centre of every successful business. There is no substitute for it. Satisfying the customer really means satisfying many customers. This additional complexity can make it difficult to understand which customers’ needs are most relevant, and, consequently, where to deploy your limited resources to gather the customer’s voice. But you need well-blended communications to pin down their real needs.”

I imagine you are eager to know what happened next. Did I reduce the price to get the Zulal bottles flying off the shelves? The answer is in my book *Zulal-A Story of Resilience*. I've been writing the book simultaneously with this one, but the latter will be finished first. For now, I can say that, faced with the challenge of battling with the giant competitors, Zulal built a brand around one simple concept: "Sustainable purity." This became the backbone of our marketing effort, and it grew quickly to become a major player equally as competitive as the regional brands. In short, in a highly competitive marketplace, Zulal drinking water personified sustainable purity clearly and that's what made a real difference.

In the next few pages, I will explain how to win in well-blended communications and influence your market.



Step 7

Well-blended Communications

If you study the brands that do well, such as Zappos, Disney, Apple, Emirates, and others, you will discover that everything comes down to communication: the way you talk to your employees and the way they, in turn, talk to your customers.

ADVERTISEMENT

Before proceeding further with a discussion of advertisement, I would like to share my personal belief that advertisement doesn't build a brand. However, although it *cannot* build a brand, it *can* tell people about an existing brand's ability to do a job well. As the saying goes; "it is better to be admired than ad mired." Of all the promotional activities mentioned earlier, advertising suited SEWA's marketing landscape best because it helped create a clear position in our customers' minds. I knew it would hit the bull's eye! Thus, in the rest of this section, I will highlight several advertisement strategies.

David Ogilvy put it correctly, "It takes a big idea to attract the attention of consumers and get them to buy your product. Unless your advertising contains a big idea, it will pass like a ship in the night. I doubt if more than one campaign in a hundred contains a big idea."

Advertising is a form of communication intended to persuade an audience (viewers, readers, or listeners) to purchase or take

some action with respect to certain products or services. I believe in advertising strongly because it is the foremost pillar of a promotional strategy. In an interview the local media conducted, I was quoted as stating, “The world is changing more rapidly than ever before! Companies that don’t have advertising strategies and wisdom are often left behind! Cheer up! The future is made by the present. Advertise now!”

The marketing message reaches the customer through media. There are two types of media platforms:

- **Traditional:** Newspapers, Magazines, Television, Radio, Outdoor/ Direct mail, Websites, Text messages
- **Nontraditional:** Trade Shows, Events, Sponsorship, Product placements

Furthermore, advertising also falls into two types:

- **Digital Advertising:** e.g., Television, Music, Radio, Online, Product placements
- **Physical Advertising:** e.g., Press, Mobile billboards, In-store advertising, Celebrity branding

I decided to assemble my marketing & branding team, the nine champions, and the three musketeers in the “Digital Thinkers Room.” Don’t be misled by this name. This room is not for Digital projects alone. I believe that you can work in any field, and approach your project in a digital way by embracing this mentality to define challenges, develop ideas, and roll them out. Our “Digital Thinkers” room is where we develop ideas in a different way.

I said, “Team, we will talk over espresso. Go grab your cups of energy from the “Byte corner” (a small dry pantry area in the

room) and let's think about what our next big step in executing our marketing plan might be."

"Advertisement for sure," one of the musketeers prompted.

This alarmed me a bit. I said, "I agree that advertisement is one of the pillars of media communication, but some brands have thrived without it. I am a strong believer in advertisement, as well. However, you'll be surprised to discover that some of the great, enduring organizations have never spent a single dime on advertisement."

I could see that this statement bewildered them.

I continued, "I'm not saying that I'm cutting out the advertisement budget. There is a popular saying at Harley Davidson: 'If you want to change something, measure it'. Let's apply this thinking to our marketing plan. That's the reason why you are all here in this particular room. We live in a digital world. Let's find a way to measure the ROI of our advertisement spending. However, before we do that, let me share with you some striking examples of A-list organizations that have thrived in the competitive era without advertising. "Are you all ears?" I asked.

"Yes sir, we are all excited to learn about such organizations," the creative designer answered.

SOME BRANDS THRIVE WITHOUT ADVERTISING

"The fact is that most of the great brands of today have thrived simply on *buzz* generated by word-of-mouth," I said. "For these companies, consumers' experiences with their products or services have been more valuable in establishing their place in people's hearts. In this age of information, it might seem strange that companies with virtually no advertising can manage to make a name for themselves quietly among a wide audience of dedicated fans."

I continued, “The three remarkable examples I can recall are Disney, Google, and Krispy Kreme. All of these brands developed a reputation and engagement before spending a single dollar on advertising. For example, Krispy Kreme has more than doubled its store locations since 1997 because of its enthusiastic audience. At every grand opening of a new shop, hordes of cult followers line up outside well before the store opens. Stan Parker, senior vice-president of marketing said, “Some passionate Krispy Kreme customers might be disappointed if we did [advertise].”

As soon as I finished, the officer said, “Wow, that’s a really good story.”

“Now, let’s turn the page, and pay attention to this interesting story about a situation in which overspending created more opportunities to fail.”

One of the nine champions replied, “I agree sir, nothing ever goes as smoothly as you hope it will.”

I answered with a smile, “Yes, if you don’t take any risk, then you run into unknowable losses. However, spending or allocating an over the top marketing budget is equal to taking a dumb risk rather than a smart one.” I continued, “The next story that I will share will convince you even more.”

SPEND, SPEND, SPEND

“For the sensational European launch of the state-of-the-art fashion e-tailer, boo.com, crippling marketing and advertising costs in excess of \$50 million attracted customers who simply did not spend enough, and the \$100 million company crashed spectacularly within two years of start-up.”

“That’s an incredibly high loss,” the marketing analyst moaned.

I replied, “It’s not *disneyfication*, it’s a fact. Log onto boo.com and read about it.” I continued, “Alright team, now I’ve a question for you, and whoever answers it correctly will receive a bravo card from me right away.”

“Wow, a quiz!” one of the team members said excitedly.

“Yes, let’s go back to school,” I joked.

Then I said, “Pay attention to this. I won’t repeat it. What is SEWA’s core culture value # 11?”

The chief innovation officer replied immediately, “It’s every idea counts.”

“Well done!” I said, and signed a bravo card for her.

I continued, “SEWA has a robust Idea Management System—I’m creative. We all know that it’s the best platform to share your ideas and see them culminate into reality. I always say: Do share ideas among yourselves. I am ready to listen to you.”

They were all smiles.

I continued, “See, we all are here not only to reach consensus on what changes need to be made, but also to relieve skepticism and doubt.” I said, “Let me share with you one more interesting, but somewhat lengthy story.”

Deep down, I was convinced that while there would be some starts and stops—I would obtain consensus.

I began to narrate IKEA’s story. “When IKEA began its US operations, it shipped low-priced, moderate quality, metric-sized beds and bedding to all of its US stores. It advertised how wonderful the beds were—especially because they were two full two meters in length! IKEA expected the same great success in the US that it had enjoyed in Europe. Unfortunately, sales did not go well. What was IKEA’s response? It increased its advertising. Maybe people didn’t know what great metric-sized beds IKEA had to offer. More advertising surely would bring customers into the stores and send merchandise flying off the showroom floor.

How did beds and bedding sell in the US after that? They quickly became category failures that filled entire warehouses. Local store and regional managers tried to communicate to corporate headquarters in Sweden that metric-sized beds and bedding would not sell in the US—despite the fact that they were priced lower than the king, queen, full, and twin-sized bedding found in competitors’ furniture stores.

How did IKEA’s senior managers, who were seven time zones away at corporate headquarters, respond to this local dilemma? ‘Be more creative. Pull the customers into your store. Any good retailer can sell metric-sized bedding; that’s the solution to your inventory problems’. Anders Dahlvig, CEO of IKEA, is quoted as saying. ‘Whether we are in China, Russia, Manhattan, or London, people buy the same things. We don’t adapt to local markets’. Accordingly, despite local and regional US managers’ constant attempts to convince headquarters otherwise, their bosses in Sweden clung to their strategic map for over two years. Finally, the bursting warehouses won, and metric-sized beds and bedding were discontinued in the US market reluctantly when management declared that metric was *not* king: king was king; queen was king, and twin was king in the US market.

The take home lesson here is that advertisement is *not* always the surefire solution to draw customers into your stores. IKEA missed the mark widely. Even an all-time great brand such as this fell into the trap. I simply am glad that the senior management listened to the store managers before they suffered any long-term damage.”

PHYGITAL ADVERTISING

Next, I introduced the team to the novel term *phygital*, which refers to integrating the digital with the physical to give the customer

the best of both and cross-pollinate ideas from one channel to another to create a better experience. The digital doesn't replace the physical—it just makes it better. The customer's needs and expectations must drive a phygital approach to connecting with them, followed by a search for better opportunities to meet their expectations. Technology definitely plays a cardinal role in this, but the most important aspect is the way the business faces the customer, not the technology that makes it happen—it's necessary to strike an online-offline balance.

Looking at my team I declared, “So, my great team, technology always has been the force that moves business ahead. Yet, the answer is not to move to ‘all things digital’ but to ensure a consistent, high-quality experience for consumers across channels. Consumers are relying increasingly on their ‘channel of choice,’ whether digital or physical, and expect the best levels of service across them. Accordingly, companies must make the *phygital experience* seamless so it is easier for their consumers, and position themselves to reap the rewards through better up-selling and cross-selling opportunities.”

CHIEF PHYGITAL ADVERTISING OFFICER

One morning sometime after that, I told my team, “I have good news today. I have promoted Priya as Chief Phygital Advertising Officer for her recent performance during SEWA's brand turnaround and her full commitment to our marketing plan project.”

Everyone cheered with excitement, as Priya is the most beloved of the team members. Thus, the team was overcome with joy and camaraderie.

However, I had created the role for this position, so it was untried and untested. It also is quite interesting and challenging

too. Mini had to create her own team, action points, agendas, and plans. She has more time now to rethink SEWA's entire approach to the marketplace.

Still, I could see that the result of the meeting was nothing short of amazing. There was just one last, but critical, aspect; coming face to face with our own abilities. It was high time my team got a taste of what they already own.

I said in a flamboyant tone, "First things first, let's begin by saying 'no' to consultants. What do you think of that?"

"It's a questionable question," The new chief phygital advertising officer replied.

"Well, you'll find all your answers in the story that I am going to share next, which is one of my favorites."

WEALTH IS IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

I related, "A classic speech in Russell Conwell's book, *Acres of Diamonds* concerns a man, Ali Hafed, who wanted to find diamonds so badly that he sold his farm, left his family, and went off on a search that took him all over the world. However, his search was futile and ultimately led to nothing but his own demise. Meanwhile, the new owner of his farm discovered '...the most magnificent diamond mine in all the history of mankind' right there on the farm that he had purchased from Ali Hafed. The moral of the story is, 'dig first on your own property when seeking treasure'. So, do you agree with me now when I say no to consultants?" I asked.

"I couldn't agree more," Priya said while nodding her head.

Because of all these stories, my marketing philosophy revolves sometimes around the mantra, "No ads necessary." However,

SEWA needed to advertise effectively to form a firm foothold as we were targeting a mass market, not a niche market.

SEWA's advertising objectives were developed and focused on five broad themes:

- **Awareness.** Our goal was to increase our brand name's recognition.
- **Knowledge.** We outlined what our products and services do by demarcating each clearly.
- **Liking.** Will our service/products' quality meet our customers' needs?
- **Preference.** Will the above meet our customers' needs?
- **Conviction.** Finally, we wanted assurance that the customers would take positive action.

Next, I gathered the team to bring them into agreement with my current thought process(es). As both a storyteller and an avid reader, I wanted to remind them of the importance of finding the right time and opportunity to hit the mass target.

"I'm very proud of you all. Each one of you has met my expectations, and I am glad that I chose you for this mission," I congratulated them.

"Sir, we are humbled to get this compliment from you. It means a lot to us," my marketing strategist replied.

I punctuated his sentence, "Yet we have a long way to go. Now we need to capitalize on the right time and opportunity to capture the masses' minds. It's tricky, but we can learn from some of the industry leaders and see how they did it." Then I continued to narrate the following story.

THE VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE STORY

“Do you remember the original Volkswagen Beetle? It wasn’t an immediate hit when it was introduced to the public. In fact, it sold poorly until some brilliant advertising worked wonders for the brand. Because it had such an effective TV and print ad campaign, the Beetle was profitable in the US for more than 15 years. The story of the original Beetle and the way remarkable advertising made it successful is a perfect illustration of the power of the TV-industrial complex. Such examples strengthen my belief in advertising campaigns. One may argue that advertising’s influence is fading fast, which I agree with in part. I accept that ads aren’t as effective as they used to be. However, they do work—they do attract attention and generate sales. SEWA caters to the mass market. So, we are looking for ads as if we are tornadoes, swirling around a landscape of consumers and touching everyone in the same way and along the same touch points.”

My market segment officer was listening to me quite carefully. He said, “Sir, allow me to share a story of wrongly assessing the customer segment needs; Ford launched its new Mustang automobile intending to appeal to young sports-minded drivers, only to find that many young people were not so interested and instead, many older people rushed to buy the car.”

“Exactly, many crises come out of the clear blue,” I said. “We don’t necessarily know what a worst-case scenario even looks like. The global economic climate moves so quickly that we have to be smart and agile in designing our corporate culture and systems so they can weather any reputational tempest. Now, because you all are primed and excited, I will make you acquainted with a wildly successful company that does it the smart and agile way. Are you ready to listen?”

SMART AND AGILE

“The Everything Store” campaign is a very recent example of genius mass marketing. On February 7, 2016, an average of 111.9 million people watched the live televised coverage of the Denver Broncos’ 24-10 victory over the Carolina Panthers at Super Bowl 50, making it the third most-watched program in US television history. They also witnessed a world first—Amazon’s advertisement during the Super Bowl promoting its new voice-controlled home device, Echo. Amazon was smart and agile enough to air its advert on prime time. They did this by judging the program’s Television Rating Point (TRP), which gave them an index of the people’s popular choice and also the particular channel’s popularity. So, there you are; you just learnt the way VW targeted the mass market and the way Amazon hit the bull’s eye. So, can anyone tell what we need to do?” I asked.

No one attempted to answer my question.

“Alright, can anyone tell me the 4 Ps that we have discussed so far?” I asked again.

My marketing data analyst had the right answer. He said with a big smile as he was beaming with joy, “The time honored 4 Ps of the marketing mix, Product, price, placement, and promotion.”

Proud of his attempt, I congratulated him and asked the team a different question, “Do you know that there is a fifth one that marketers are talking about? Has anyone heard about it?”

Gritting their teeth, they replied, “No, sir, we are clueless.”

I went on to explain the fifth P, which stands for Precision.

PRECISION—THE FIFTH P

“The 4 Ps are the classic components of any marketing mix. However, I was fascinated with the “fifth P” introduced in Rick Kash and David Calhoun’s book entitled, *How Companies Win*. The authors state that the world around us has become much more precise, and hence, the new P is Precision, and I couldn’t agree more with their opinion. Thanks to the tech revolution, customers and consumers are increasingly impatient with inaccuracies, delays, and imprecision. Precision has become the leit-motif of their lives, and if we fail to match that precision, those failings will seem to be amplified even more. To me, branding essentially is a customer’s perception of my product or service; and, as we all know, dealing with perception is a challenging and delicate task. It’s a collection of the experiences, emotions, feelings, and expectations one has about a product or an organization. Dealing with human perception is challenging, as it can either work for you (brand asset) or against you (brand liability). There’s no middle ground!

Therefore, I decided to add precision as the fifth P in our marketing mix. Precision ensures that each of the first four Ps operates at its maximum efficiency and lowest cost. By being precise, we create more rigorous approaches that increase quality and reduce costs and cycle time.

Management and marketing books are filled with more Ps, especially for service marketing, and because we are a service-driven organization, we needed to extend the five Ps to 8:

People. Our employees have the right training and skills.

Process. We offer a consistent service that keeps our customers informed 24/7.

Physical evidence. Our employees and premise’s appearance can affect the way customers see our service.

The team was listening to me attentively.

“So, do you think, that’s the end of the list?” I asked them suddenly.

“Well. Only you can say,” one of the three musketeers replied.

“The list goes on and on and on. If marketing were a simple process, every company would be profitable. However, marketing is a sophisticated and enigmatic discipline that changes its course all the time,” I replied. “Recently, I encountered the 20 Ps of Marketing. Want to know more?” I asked.

“Sure sir. Please don’t stop.”

20 PS OF MARKETING

“Recently, I was invited to deliver a keynote speech immediately after the Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand in SETA (Sustainable Energy Technology Asia). After the event, while I was strolling in the Siam Paragon mall, I nipped into Kinokuniya book store, a Japanese-based retailer, to see some of the latest publications. An interesting book called *The 20 Ps of Marketing*, by David Pearson, caught my attention. Before proceeding further, let me say that SEWA can end up with 30 Ps because of one thing. Do you know what that one thing is?

There was silence in the room.

I said, “Compassion for customers.” It’s one of our core cultural values. Listen, nothing helps us build our perspective more than developing compassion for our customers. To me, and it must be the same for you too, compassion is a sympathetic feeling. It’s about our willingness to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes and imagine what it’s like to be in someone else’s

predicament—to feel love for that person. It requires opening our hearts to their problems, their pain, and frustrations, every bit as if they are our own.”



Step 8

Action Plan

GETTING DOWN TO THE NITTY-GRITTY

What Thomas Edison said once fits well here: “Vision without execution is hallucination.” SEWA’s executives finalized an ambitious strategy to reignite growth, but I had my doubts about their ability to execute it.

“Plan your work, and work your plan.” Who, what, where, why, and how? These are the five fundamental questions every marketer asks and uses. They form the backbone of our action plan. Answering these fundamental questions helped us gather information and problem-solve.

I wanted to have a quick chat with my executive team to test their mettle and expertise, so I assembled them in my library.

I began by saying, “All that matters is a robust, fool-proof action plan. That is any good marketer’s nirvana, so let’s pull up our socks and define a savvy action plan to meet our marketing objectives,” I said.

Then I thought I’d throw them a curve ball.

“Do you remember the big design of the infographic pinned up on the wall in our secrecy room? What does it read?” I inquired.

Almost everyone said, “How can we forget that graph with the big smiling pencil face? It’s the 5Ws and the H approach.”

“Bravo, team; I’m proud of you. Now, can anyone tell me what the H stands for?”

“Definitely, the H stands for ‘how’,” The market analyst responded.

I could sense that the team was determined to break down all barriers.

“I have identified the top priorities for the action plan; now you need to roll out the plan and apply the 5Ws and the H model to assign the roles and responsibilities and identify the who, what, and why.”

Then, I narrated what was at the top of my mind. Our typical action plan included the following:

- Times and places of specific promotions
- Trade shows to be attended
- Advertising campaigns to be launched
- Publicity releases to be distributed
- A budget for each type of promotion

Below is a quick summary of the 5Ws and the H approach.

5WS AND THE H QUESTION GUIDE FOR BRAINSTORMING

Below is a list of the questions and some possibilities for each. The questions provided are as general as possible to provide a guide that you might use for any topic. For that reason, they may seem a little strange unless you have a specific topic in mind.

Who

- Who is involved?
- Who is affected?

- Who will benefit?
- Who will be harmed?

What

- What is your topic, narrowed down to a simple phrase/sentence?
- What does your topic involve? (i.e., What are its different parts?)
- What is it similar to/different from?
- What might your topic affect/change?

When

- When does this take place? When did this take place?
- When will it take place? When should it take place?

Where

- Where does this take place? (Where did it...Where will it...Where should it...?)
- Does it matter where it takes place? Does location affect it?

Why

- Why is this topic important? Why does it matter?
- Why do certain things happen? (What are some causes and effects within the topic?)

Let's move to the 'H'?

How

- How does this topic work? How does it function? How does it do what it does?
- How did it come to be?
- How are those involved affected?



FIGURE 3.7 5Ws and the H

WHAT IF TECHNIQUE

There is another question that I will throw in here: “*What if?*” What if is not a question a reporter would use typically, not in the lead paragraph anyway, but it’s often an excellent question to ask for other types of situations.

- What if everything worked as it should?
- What if everything didn’t work as it should?
- What if this topic didn’t exist?”

LET’S SKIM OFF

The 5Ws and the H session met my expectations. However, I wanted my team to stretch their boundaries and exceed my expectations. I said, “When the game gets tough, change the game. Our business,” I paused, chuckled, and then continued, “needs to be bolstered and accelerated. Can anyone volunteer to think ‘how we might’ change the game?” I asked. I said this while picking up one of my favourite books by Napoleon Hill, *The Law of Success in Sixteen Principles*, from the shelf to my left.

Directly ahead of me, two of the team members were talking with tight lips. I kept the book in front of them and asked, “Turn to page 188, and glance through it quickly.”

“What do you understand? What message does the author want to convey here?” I asked again.

“Sir, what catches our attention on this page is the ‘WWWWH’ principle. This looks interesting. Is this different from the 5W and the H principle?”

I replied, “The latter is a far cry from the former. The WWWWH formula is all about achieving your burning desire.”

WWWWH FORMULA—NAPOLEON HILL

“Hill wrote in his book, ‘Know what to do, when to do it, where to do it, why to do it, and how to do it’. This is known to psychology teachers and students as the WWWWH formula—‘what, when, where, why, and how’.

The excerpt from the book explains the gist of it; also, keep in mind the unvarying truth that you’ll get nowhere if you start nowhere. If your goal in life is vague, your achievements also will be vague, and it might well be added, very meager.”

DEVELOP 360-DEGREE MARKETING COMMUNICATION

I continued, “A 360-degree approach begins with the problem—the brand challenge—and then ‘finds the media and messages that best answers that problem’. This means bringing a brand to life using all possible contact points and depends on establishing a series of collaborative partnerships for the brand.

Recently, the 360-degree communications discipline has made a big promise: to build a more cost-effectively by integrating the activities of all communications disciplines into a single brand voice. The central premise of 360-degree communications is that all brand contacts matter and should be considered holistically when spending marketing money.”

BRAND VOICE

The outcome of all the marketing communication tools I have been mentioning were that we discovered our brand voice. Just

as in human beings, a brand voice is the unique way a brand communicates with everyone with which it interacts. If I could describe SEWA's brand voice in three words, I would use the following: reliable, efficient, and sustainable. This was a great milestone achieved, and my team and I were head over heels! However, at this point, you might ask yourself, why does brand voice matter? Well, let me familiarize you with the risks of not having a consistent brand voice in the first place. Among others, scattered messaging, a confusing brand presence, lack of differentiation, and ultimately, missed business opportunities, are a few risks that can arise if you don't have a consistent brand voice.

Hence, discovering, and eventually establishing, our consistent brand voice encouraged us to beat the odds and continue the journey.



Step 9

Internal Communication

MASTERFUL COMMUNICATOR

Great leaders understand that they must be great communicators. This was an important ingredient in our case, because internal marketing is the key to successful external marketing. Internal marketing can be defined as promoting the organization and its products and services to its employees, as was the case in our high-contact business services. High-contact businesses are those in which there is considerable interaction between the service provider and the customer, such as banks, insurance companies, airlines, supermarkets, and restaurant chains. Hence, you may say that internal marketing is important to all industries, but that it is extremely important to the service industry. Federal Express, APPLE, and Emirates Airlines are excellent examples of this.

SEWA is no different from other service-driven, high-contact brands. Clear internal communications with all the “troops” is essential to ensure success.

WILL YOU MAKE A SUCCESSFUL MARKETER?

I remember a long time ago when I read a book about marketing plans. I can’t remember the book’s title or author, but I do remember the 5Cs of what makes a successful marketer, and I

also remember the way I can win to teach each employee. Here is a summary of the 5Cs:

- 1. Customer.** The customer truly is a king or queen. Without customers, there is no business.
- 2. Continuous.** Marketing must drive the business continuously.
- 3. Coordination.** This is particularly important for the sales department.
- 4. Creative.** Marketing must seek continuously for new ways to maintain awareness and differentiate from the competition.
- 5. Culture.** There must be a marketing culture throughout the organization.

What ensures that the 5Cs mentioned above are functioning seamlessly? SEWA's core cultural value # 7: Trust. I trust and believe in my employees. This helps me make active decisions as close to the customers' expectations to make them happy. Inculcating trust in any organization is like walking on a tightrope. It requires extreme care and precision. It entails navigating a situation that allows very little or no error. Hence, trust is a double-edged sword. If an organization doesn't have trust running in its veins, then it collapses and bites the dust. Ann Radcliffe said it well, "I never trust people's assertions, I always judge them by their actions."

This reminds me of meeting Ms. Maha Zaatari, the managing director of *Great Place to Work*, on August 6, 2018, at the SEWA head office. She was wowed by SEWA's cultural transformation and the high-performing cultural spirit it reflects. She was kind enough to share her organization's TRUST model with SEWA and mentioned that "...it is a fundamental element—one of the

building blocks of great workplaces.” She put it this way, “I can feel the positive energy frequency the organization vibrates on. Every nook and cranny, every wall, every room oozes out positivity and speaks of trust among the employees.”

I said, “Let’s join hands and co-create new history for SEWA.”

Hence, that day I added a sixth element to my 5Cs list of being a successful marketer—I have my own sixth C, which is Co-creation. I like to define co-creation as the practice of developing systems, products, or services through collaboration with customers, managers, employees, and other company stakeholders as well as shareholders.

DO IT BEFORE YOU DO IT

I took the pre-final approval draft of my marketing plan into SEWA’s Happiness and Positivity Room to read it more. This space is an ideal place to relax and rejuvenate our tired minds. The lush green plants, sunlit windows, colorful interior, and cozy furnishings provide a serene environment where one can unwind and feel at home. Most of our “watercooler conversations” take place here, and the room also has a billiard table that doubles as a meeting desk.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

As I was halfway through the draft and trying to figure out the integration of the marketing plan’s elements, I wondered how I could knit them together to generate the kind of synergy that makes $1+1=11$. It is not about a marketing plan alone, it’s about thinking outside the box—imagination. Albert Einstein once

said, “I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.” However, true as this may be, imagination cannot substitute for knowledge. Although impressed by his quote, I agree with him only in part, and posit that knowledge is power if applied and shared. Imagination complements knowledge and does not compete with it.

I felt divided in two, with one half telling me to move from “what if” to “what could be,” and not to become bogged down with doubts and apprehension. Just trust your gut. Would everything come together? I was quite confident things would work out. *Go ahead*, my inner voice said. *You have the right people around the table. You won’t regret it.* The other half stopped me by reminding me of a lovely quote by Stephen Amell, “You have to relax when you’re shooting an arrow. You can’t be tense. And that just helps in your day-to-day life.”

While still immersed in my split personality, I called Boutheina to join me in the room. Seeing me engrossed completely in the pile of papers, she became anxious. Biting her nails, she asked, “Are you skeptical about the plan?” I looked at her and in a hopeful voice, I said, “The concept is right, the facts are right, the plan is fool-proof, but what if the majority of employees simply doesn’t buy in?” We needed to devise a way to capture the conscious and unconscious minds of almost 5000 employees before we launched our marketing plan. Only then would all of us write history together. Remember: Regardless of how visionary or brilliant, a great idea isn’t worth much if no one buys it.”

I remember leaving work that day feeling hopeful. I wanted to escape the hubbub of Sharjah’s big city life, so I headed up to Ajman, a neighboring city, for a more laid-back vibe. The

city has something of an old-school charm and some of my favorite cafés and restaurants in which to refuel. I had decided to drive up on the Emirates Highway, which has gorgeous dunes surrounding it. I told myself, *Driving can be a relaxing time for me. It could be the only time of day in which I have my thoughts all to myself.*

I turned on the radio to my favorite radio station, and to my surprise, ‘Yes I’m stuck in the middle with you, And I’m wondering what it is I should do,’ lyrics from the Stealers Wheel, a Scottish folk rock/rock band formed in 1972, fell on my ears, and felt like music to my ears metaphorically as well. The song came at just the right moment. It seemed the universe had converged to surprise me with this song, and encourage me to forge ahead. I turned up the volume. The song continued and reached my favorite part, ‘Well you started out with nothing, and you’re proud that you’re a self-made man,’ which made an even greater impression on me. I felt like I was in a trance. That long drive cleared a lot of clutter from my mind. I was driving one-handed, singing the song aloud and smiling, the breezy air touching my face and sending a chill down my spine.

The very next day, I was clear that I wanted the plan to be as simple as possible, a streamlined process that creates messages everyone can understand easily, and that is implemented internally by leaders at all levels.

FOCUSING QUESTIONS

I asked myself several questions, some of which I had already at the beginning of my turnaround assignment.

- Why do I need to do this in the first place?

- Where do I want SEWA to be and by when?
- Do I have the right leadership and culture within SEWA to undertake this challenge?

At the outset, the answers to the questions above helped me make informed and appropriate decisions. I knew deep within that to succeed with this undertaking, a sustained culture needed to be created from both the top-down and bottom-up. It's a known fact that internal acceptance is critical to any marketing strategy's success. In fact, success with my external customers will not meet expectations if my internal customers (SEWA employees) fail to jump onboard. Hence, my next step was to convince them to join hands with me in the rebranding endeavor.

While I was occupied with my thoughts, a message ringtone burst my thought bubble. It was a "whatsapp" message from my chief simplicity officer in which he sent the recent update of a particular project on which he was working. He wanted to pick my brain personally about quite a number of key points. I rang him up immediately, and asked him to meet me at my office ASAP. Within the bat of an eyelid, he was in the room and I showed him the marketing plan draft.

"You specialize in simplifying processes. Here's an initial draft of the SEWA marketing plan," I said as I handed it to him. "I believe in this plan, but I have jumbled thoughts about gauging whether the rest of the organization will swallow it well or not." I continued, "Can you simplify my mind's chaos?"

THE BIG PICTURE

To improve the plan, I wanted to find a time-trusted and validated tool that had worked wonders in the service industry. On the other hand, I wanted my plan to be 99.999998 percent good. To

reach this quality level, the processes had to be improved. However, process and quality improvements were not my ultimate goal—marketing and branding improvements were the goal. Are you wondering what I pulled out from my bag of tricks, or what I call my bag of “feel good” tricks?

He replied, “Surely Sir, being the chief simplicity officer, I work on one primary principle which happens to be a lovely quote by Letitia Baldridge, ‘When in doubt, look at what everyone else is doing’. I benchmark and adapt the best practices that other corporations are using. For example, you may refer to the six sigma principles here.”

“Bingo! My confusing thoughts were having a fire drill in my mind. You extinguished them all. Thanks a lot.”

The chief simplicity officer finally had quelled the storm in my mind. He smiled and said, “Wishing you all the luck. I’ll bid you goodbye right now and leave you with your thoughts.”

DRIVING OUT FEAR

Employees always are afraid that any new plan may fail. They are afraid that they will be accused of mistakes during the year-end performance evaluation. They are afraid of being attacked for errors and failures, even if they are committed to improving the plan.

In his book *Out of the Crisis*, First name Deming offered 14 key principles for management to follow that will improve any organization’s effectiveness significantly. Principle number eight is “drive out fear.” As he explained, “Cease to blame employees for problems of the system. People need to feel secure to make suggestions. Management must follow through on suggestions. People on the job cannot work effectively if they dare

not enquire into the purpose of the work that they do, and dare not offer suggestions for simplification and improvement of the system.”

Can we have a six sigma marketing plan? I asked myself. To foster full, free, two-way information flow, I wanted my team to participate in open exchanges of information, because that way there are fewer gaps. When gaps exist, they often are filled with misconceptions and inaccurate information. By now I had turned my marketing team members into a unified, productive team with a clear roadmap in place that showed how and when people would be engaged and decisions would be made.

Let me give you just a bit of a sneak peek into the history of the six sigma model: Six sigma took root first at Motorola. In 1987, Motorola began to focus on quality improvement to penetrate the global market and confront heavy Japanese competition. The engineers there decided that the normative number of defects per 1000 units they were using no longer was appropriate. Therefore, they decided to measure the defects per million and since then, the firm has realized huge benefits by saving billions of dollars whilst improving customer satisfaction simultaneously.

The six sigma includes five steps: **d**efine, **m**easure, **a**nalyze, **i**mprove and **c**ontrol (commonly known as DMAIC). Let's take a closer look at DMAIC.

Define—First, the processes that must be improved have to be selected, and the goals for improvement must be defined according to the SMART formula—specific, measurable, acceptable, realistic, and time-specific.

Measure—After the definition phase, data are collected to evaluate the current process's performance for future comparison.

Analyze—The difference between the current state and the state desired is determined in this phase.

Improve—Subsequently the process is optimized based on the analysis.

Control—The new improved processes should be controlled and formalized.

To derive the best from six sigma, you need to balance the hard and soft techniques. The harder ones include applying the DMAIC methodology and project management techniques. The softer ones include people management, creativity, and motivation for improvement.

PLAN PROCESS ARCHITECTURE

This is the “get organized” phase of the project. The basic plan architecture begins with the Launching Phase, which is compressed into three months that proceeds from clarifying the plan’s purpose to the strategic vision and marketing objectives. The Launch Phase ends with the transition to the Engagement Phase, which engages the full organization rapidly and enables managers and employees at all levels to translate the marketing goals and vision into individual commitments. By the time the Engagement phase is completed, everyone in the organization is involved and committed. The Engagement Phase is followed by the Execution Phase, which puts monthly leadership performance milestones and check points in place to hold people accountable, share learning and best practices with all departments, and make agile adjustments when needed. Execution is everything. One thing that should be mentioned is the importance of speed during the execution phase. It is not the kind of

speed that is achieved by omitting or skipping over steps and activities that are critical on the process's path. Rather, it's the kind of speed that is based on minimizing the steps and key events in a simple and compressed way.

Finally, the Evaluation Phase at the end of the process is designed to look at the actual achievements and associated knowledge.

The best way to avoid procrastination in the planning process is to move fast and compress the first three phases into no more than a three-month cycle, leaving only a few weeks between major milestones, important way points, and working sessions. Further, time needs to be managed well, as if more time is allowed at the beginning, it will begin to weaken the team spirit and undermine the sense of urgency. Figure 3.8 illustrates the process.

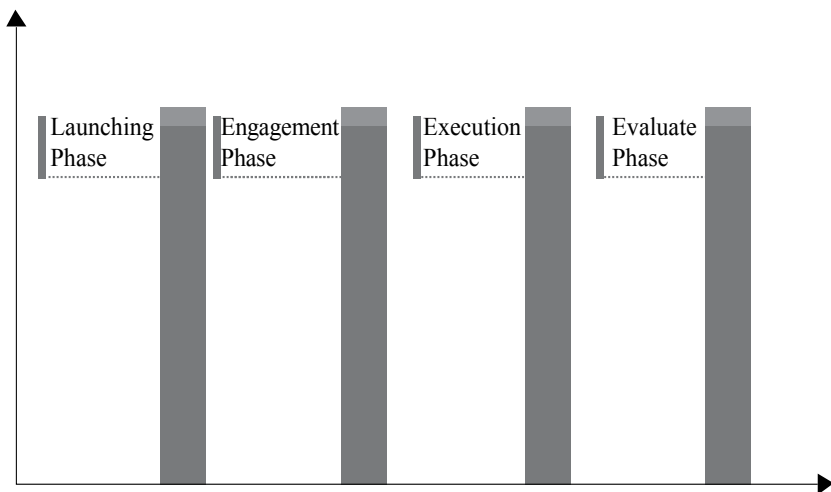


FIGURE 3.8 SEWA Plan Process Architecture

NOT EVERYONE IS UP FOR THE CHALLENGE

Here, I must admit that some of the enthusiastic employees might be positive about the marketing plan while some others may be doubtful, and may need more clarification and communication to engage them. They usually ask such things as, “OK. Just tell me, what do you want me to do now?” Some might be engaged in “window shopping” (looking at goods displayed in shop windows, especially without intending to buy anything), and others might be “energy vampires” who are just waiting to kill the idea—even if the top management wants it!

I remember asking my chief branding officer the same question, “Just tell me; what do you want me to do now?” She ran her hands through her hair and replied, “Sir, you are the one who gives hope, an engaging idea, and some kind of higher purpose to the employees.”

Her comment made me ponder, and I told myself, *The trick is to view confusion as work in progress.*

GO FOR IT!

I was convinced that I had to begin the dialogue with the rest of the organization. However, I decided to adopt a unique approach to communication: The NLP (Neuro-linguistic Programming) method. This is the most powerful approach I’ve found for communication, change, and excellent performance. There is a well-known saying in the NLP community: “The conscious mind is the goal setter, and the unconscious mind is the goal getter.” It is an attitude and methodology of knowing the way to achieve goals and get results. The next step was to recruit experts in

NLP, many of whom are located in Dubai and are internationally-accredited trainers. I did two things simultaneously: approving and sending the plan to everyone involved and asking HR to begin conducting a crash course on NLP to support my decision.



Chapter 4

GROWING PAINS

Successful people are not people without problems—they are people who respond quickly and positively to their problems. In essence, their problems are not stumbling blocks, but rather stepping stones to personal growth and success.

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

WITHSTAND CRITICISM

Criticism is part of a leader's job. Leaders are visible, and inevitably, the person most visible is a target. I love what Edward Hubbard wrote once, "To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing." Malicious criticism is one of the most painful, yet inevitable, tests of leadership, because it is designed to hurt you, and is totally different from constructive suggestions.

GOOD VERSUS EVIL

Late one morning in early July 2017, while sending the marketing plan to everyone, I had to make a difficult decision about collecting customers' project connection fees upfront to improve our cash flow. A very close friend called me to inform me that my decision had reached His Highness's attention, and he wasn't happy about it. Below is the conversation that followed next.

“Dear Rashid, you’ve pushed things off the edge of the table. His Highness may not be happy with your decision. Do you have any idea of the repercussions you may see later?” His heavy tone became more serious. He paused, cleared his throat, and continued. “You always stick your neck out. I am afraid this must be one of your rushed decisions. Think about it, you are His Highness’s blue-eyed boy—you’ve well-earned that place in his heart, so don’t upset him with a whimsical decision of yours.” He continued, saying that a good number of people were trying to beat me out, and that others considered me someone who works beyond the limits of the government. “O-Oh, nooo,” I muttered. *I don’t believe this!* I thought, with increasing frustration. “Aren’t you scared?” he asked in a grumpy tone.

“Sure. Nearly everyone’s motivated by fear in some form,” I replied. “It is easy to become jaded, skeptical, and even cynical toward anyone who claims to be telling the truth.” He kept repeating the same thing over and over again. I listened to him patiently, with a smile on my face. I said, “Remember what Franklin D. Roosevelt said once; ‘A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor’. I actually didn’t have much to say to him because I was too absorbed in my thoughts. I knew if I live my life just trying to please people, I will not be able to fulfill my Almighty God-given destiny.

“Dear, I have to hang up now,” I said.

“You’re in a challenging situation,” he replied.

“Yes, I am,” I answered.

“Rashid, remember you are a persistent man. You never give up, despite setbacks, despite disappointments. Peace be with you, and may you have success,” he told me.

“You bet, good bye for now.” I replied.

PRACTICING YOUR VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

I felt bad, and sensed victory slipping away. I felt I was going to a gunfight carrying only a knife. I was flooded with disappointment and ambivalence. Undesirable thoughts and feelings filled my mind, and it teetered. I felt terrible and hopeless, as if nothing ever was going to work out. We live in a traditional culture that tends to favor relationships more than achievements. Such a culture is consistent with the Japanese saying, “The nail that sticks out quickly gets hammered down.”

One nagging voice in my head asked, *What the hell have I gotten myself into?* I criticized myself silently. Another told me to be flexible and change my decision or risk neglecting people’s demands. This mental tug-of-war continued for some time, and I found myself being drawn to deeper issues. However, I have to live my integrity. I needed to be confident and dampen down any negativity bubbling up inside me. I drove for hours listening to soft rock music.

*Free thinkers will always seem crazy to
those who can't see beyond conventions.
Never apologize for evolving beyond
people's comfort zone.*

FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTABLE

We all have to deal with difficult people and situations, and we all have to learn how to balance our professional and personal lives. “In matters of style, swim with the current,” Thomas Jefferson once said, “and in matters of principles, stand like a rock.” That is, learn to be flexible and adaptable when the situation demands. I decided to stand like a rock.

FINDING A LIGHT IN THE DARK

I was alone; no one gave me a passing thought. No one cared a bit what happened to me. I prayed, “Oh Lord, hear my cry, for I am very low. Protect me from my own careless thoughts, words, and actions. You are my place of refuge.”

Things go wrong, and toxic people and energy vampires upset us from time to time. Negative emotions are a necessary component of emotional health. To deny that negativity is to perpetuate problems rather than solve them. It goes against basic biology. All human beings have an inner stream of thoughts and feelings that include criticism and fear. In saying this, I certainly do not ignore or minimize the hardships and disappointments, but neither do I allow them to dominate my thoughts. I knew I should never press the panic button. Indeed, to be poised is the ability to remain calm, cool, and focused under pressure.

EMOTIONAL AGILITY

Emotional agility is not about ignoring or avoiding your negative thoughts and feelings. It’s about acknowledging them instead. It’s about giving yourself room to pay attention and respond to your emotions. That will help you examine the reality of the situation and disengage yourself from your difficult thoughts and emotions so that you can make decisions that are consistent with your values and timeless principles. Indeed, you find meaning in terrible times. You become resilient. Clearly, this is an area worthy of debate.

Back at the end of November, 2018, I had the experience of being on the receiving end of emotional agility. My dreams were almost deflated. It was the onset of winter here in the UAE, and

plunging temperatures, foggy mornings, and breezy evenings had begun to become a norm. If you are like me, it's the best time of the year to be in the emirates. The days are cold, short, and dark. If you've ever visited the UAE, you'll agree with me that winter is not simply a backdrop to our lives. Instead, winter in the UAE defines our experiences and is infused deeply into our activities, thoughts, and moods. A major part of our cultural activities takes place in winter, particularly the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF), the most anticipated event in Dubai that shoppers worldwide await. Everyone in the emirates experiences winter, and everyone has to respond and adjust to it.

Coming back to that day at the end of November, it was around 8:00 am, and our workday had just begun. I was sitting in my "digital thinkers room," where I'd been pondering the "deeper issues" mentioned earlier in this chapter. On my way to work that day, I had picked up a mug of perfectly chocolaty, deliciously rich and creamy cocoa. As I took the first sip, I said to myself, *Ahh, it has just the right amount of sweetness. A staple recipe!* The scent of hot cocoa made me nostalgic for my university days. While I was still thinking about my heyday, Syeda, my chief knowledge officer, knocked on the glass door of the room and asked hesitantly as she peeped into the room, "Sir, can I have a minute of your time?"

I lifted my head, and looked straight at her, and then looked back at the paper.

"Just a single moment, please," she reiterated, sticking her head around the door.

I dumped the paper on the table. I knew she would have something extraordinary to share with me. I nodded at her and waved her in. She entered the room on soft cat paws.

"Sir, have you ever heard about the emotional first aid?" she asked smilingly.

“You never fail to astonish me with creative terms and catchy jargon,” I replied, looking straight into her eyes. “What’s this new stuff?” I asked her.

“Sir, do you remember a couple of weeks ago, you advised me to subscribe to www.ted.com, a media organization that posts talks online for free distribution under the slogan ‘ideas worth spreading’?”

“Yes, I remember saying that. What happened?” I replied.

“Exactly, so as part of my subscription, I receive interesting articles from time to time, but what I’ve received today is unique.”

“Come on now. Don’t beat around the bush. Spill the beans. Tell me, what have you got? I asked bluntly.

“I received an article that centres around the synopsis of a best selling book by a renowned psychologist and author called Guy Winch. He lays out seven useful ways to reboot our emotional health...starting right now.”

“Sounds interesting; tell me more,” I said excitedly.

She related the following:

- 1. Pay attention to emotional pain—recognize it when it happens and work to treat it before it feels all-encompassing.** The body evolved the sensation of physical pain to alert us that something is wrong and we need to address it. The same is true for emotional pain. If a rejection, failure, or bad mood is not getting better, it means you’ve sustained a psychological wound and you need to treat it.
- 2. Redirect your gut reaction when you fail.** The nature of psychological wounds makes it easy for one to lead to another. Failure often can drive you to focus on

what you can't do rather than on what you can. Then, that can make you less likely to perform at your best, which will make you even more focused on your shortcomings, and on the cycle goes. To stop this sort of emotional spiral, learn to ignore the post-failure "gut" reaction of feeling helpless and demoralized, and make a list of factors that you can control were you to try again.

3. Monitor and protect your self-esteem. When you feel like putting yourself down, take a moment to be compassionate to yourself.

Self-esteem is like an emotional immune system that buffers you from emotional pain and strengthens your emotional resilience. As such, it is very important to monitor it and avoid putting yourself down, particularly when you are hurting already. One way to "heal" damaged self-esteem is to practice self-compassion.

4. When negative thoughts are taking over, disrupt them with positive distraction.

When you replay distressing events in your mind without seeking new insight or trying to solve a problem, you're just brooding, and that, especially when it becomes habitual, can lead to deeper psychological pain.

5. Find meaning in loss.

Loss is a part of life, but it can scar us and keep us from moving forward if we don't treat the emotional wounds it creates. If sufficient time has passed and you're still struggling to move forward after a loss, you need to introduce a new way of thinking about it. Specifically, the most important thing you can do to ease your pain and recover is to find meaning in the loss and derive purpose from it.

- 6. Don't let excessive guilt linger.** Guilt can be useful. In small doses, it motivates you to take action to solve a problem in your relationship with another person. However, excessive guilt is toxic, in that it wastes your emotional and intellectual energies, distracts you from other tasks, and prevents you from enjoying life. One of the best ways to resolve lingering guilt is to offer an effective apology.
- 7. Learn what treatments for emotional wounds work for you.** Pay attention to yourself and learn how you, personally, deal with common emotional wounds. For instance, do you shrug them off, get really upset, but recover quickly, get upset and recover slowly, squelch your feelings, or...? Use this analysis to help you understand which emotional first aid treatments work best for you in various situations (just as you would identify which of the many pain relievers on the shelves works best for you).

I thought, *Then that's the best cure for me right now.*

PHILOSOPHICAL MENTALITY

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a philosophical mentality is defined as having a calm attitude about a difficult or unpleasant situation. Ultimately, practicing a philosophical mentality helps leaders find the right course of action during the most difficult times. When your mind says, "The situation is so hard to change," take mental control, fix it, and tell your mind, *I do not*

choose you; it is much easier for me. Keep repeating this positive conversation and affirmation several times so the mind will acknowledge that you, not it, are in control.

TAKING A STAND

The authentic leader within me said, *Rashid, stand firm by your decision. Don't back off. Go ahead.* On the other hand, the curmudgeon within me muttered, *Well, nobody is perfect, right? You don't want to upset His Highness and the community you serve, right? Stop. Don't do it. Just take back your decision.*

The following morning, His Highness called me, asking for more clarification and telling me that he was leaving Sharjah Chamber of Commerce & Industry and *everyone* over there was opposed to my decision.

STATE OF MIND

You can't be at your best as a leader if your mind, heart, and body are not at their best. I knew this stress could cause physical, emotional, and behavioral disorders. To settle this storm in my mind, I ran to my "State of Mind" corner in my office. Are you wondering, what's that? It's an area in my personal office that was designed originally to serve as a prayer corner. I went to the state of mind corner in my office to reduce my stress and anxiety, as well as improve my flexibility and concentration. "If God is for us, who can be against us." This peaceful corner disconnects me from the chaos of the world and unites me with the Almighty. This is where I remove myself from the world and plug into the arena of omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God Almighty.

Remember what the Holy Bible tells us: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Keep pressing forward, and do not become weighed down by the distractions and disappointments in life; keep stretching to the next level, reaching for your high potential; if you do that, your best days are ahead of you

5:1 POSITIVITY RATIO

Brain-scan research has shown that even seeing the word “no” for less than a half second releases dozens of stress chemicals into our body and brain. Barbara Fredrickson, a distinguished American professor of Psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, explained in her 2009 book, *Positivity*, that you have to generate at least three positive thoughts for every negative thought and feeling, which means that an approximate 3 to 1 ratio of positivity is ideal in high functioning teams, relationships, and marriages, and also leads people to achieve optimal levels of well-being and resilience.

This philosophy of the 3:1 positivity ratio came to my rescue to win my mind’s tug-of-war. As you know, it is a sport that pits two teams against each other in a test of strength: To win the game, all your team has to do is prove stronger than the other by pulling the rope over to their side, hence increasing the 3:1 ratio to 5:1, i.e., five positive thoughts against each negative thought—and guess what?

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

Eventually, the authentic leader in me won. I stood by my decision because I could foresee the results, the bigger picture, the

bigger battle! My way of dealing with disappointments in the midst of victories always has been the same. I woke up early the next morning and said, “This is the day the Almighty has made. I’m going to enjoy to the maximum. I’m going to be happy today.”

Driven by my consciousness and true north, I rowed through the rough, albeit temporary waters. As Carl Jung asserted, “I am not what has happened to me, I am what I choose to become.” Even when His Highness himself questioned me for my highly criticized decision about collecting a project connection fee, I stood by my vision to turn SEWA around, although he had mixed reactions to me at that time.

If you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.

—Peter Marshall

By God’s grace and mercy, the next morning he approved my decision and supported me. How did it happen so fast? Only God made it possible, and I told him humbly, “Thank You, Your Highness.” I felt a powerful sense of relief, one I can’t explain even to this day. It’s a pure kind of feeling. I sighed with relief, and the weight of the days past began to fall from my shoulders. I gave credit to the one to whom credit is due: “God alone.”

WHEN YOU SEEK GOD, HE WILL PROVIDE A WAY

I thought I was facing a problem that couldn’t be remediated. However, when you rely on God, His resurrection power will guide you out of hopelessness and into a hope-filled future. Thus, my advice is to remain alert to the way God is working

continually to shape your character. God may seem slow, but He is sure. God always has had something in store for me. The enemy may have the furnace roaring to cook you like a broiled chicken, but they forget that God controls the thermostat. He can alter any tough or negative event to achieve positive outcomes; as they say, “all’s well that ends well.” Your best days are not behind you. They’re in front of you. God has some WOWs in your future.

FROM A BAD GUY TO A BLUE-EYED BOY

In my first book in the SEWA series, *The SEWA Way*, I shared my story of being considered a bad guy by some portion of society. My dynamic leadership style and rapid decision-making skills didn’t go down well with some of the people in the Sharjah community. They misconstrued my enthusiastic and high-powered way of doing things as abrupt and episodic. Well, I can’t blame them for this perception because they hadn’t encountered a leader like me, who not only has sleepless nights, but also ensures that all those who work with him, or are a part of his core team, have restless nights as well.

However, I listened to one of the best pieces of advice my friend had, “Keep your cool when others are losing theirs.” I didn’t allow the pressure to prove myself right to add to an already pressure-packed life. I told myself, *Rashid, you must be patient with yourself*. Another important factor that kept me going was finding my haven, finding a place that brings me extreme peace. Many of my friends, as I do, love the beach and the lapping of waves, and they visit often to feed their souls and find peace.

Fortunately, my peaceful place is my bedroom. I actually do a

lot of my writing before sunrise in my “French-styled” bedroom. There, I am surrounded by my favorite things: ceiling-to-floor cream drapes, an antique mirror and chest, family keepsakes, my favorite art, a cushy white chair and ottoman. My bedroom provides peace, serenity, and tranquility, and allows me to do my best writing, and as I write this paragraph this morning, I couldn’t be more thankful to God for turning the tables. Yesterday was a remarkable day in my life. His Highness Sheikh Saif Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, deputy prime minister and minister of interior, honored me for our efforts in achieving the objectives of the national agenda that are consistent with the state’s vision, and gave me the “Mohammed Bin Rashid award for government Performance,” which is one of the most prestigious and lauded honors of all. I received it humbly and thanked God for throwing me into dicey situations and also showing me clear ways to maneuver through them.

So, has the bad guy image flipped to one of a blue-eyed boy? Indeed, the answer is a definite “yes.” Further, I would end this paragraph with another piece of advice that I’ve held onto: “Assume the Best Intentions.” This has helped me remain grounded in the way I interpret things, both in professional and personal situations. I hope all of this will bring you peace as well. That’s a powerful place to be. Peaceful people are centered, unflappable, and make really good decisions.

BACK TO NORMAL

When an authentic leader hits the ceiling and falls through the cracks, he pauses but doesn’t stop. In that hiatus, he analyzes his strengths, motivations, and blind spots, and adjusts his priorities so that he can bounce back with dramatic intensity. In times like

this, I remind myself of what leadership guru Tom Peters says, “I trust a leader who shows up, makes the tough call, takes the heat, sleeps well amidst the furor, and aggressively chomps into the next task in the morning with visible vitality.”

This experience also reminded me of another saying: “The toughest crisis you face is just the flip side of your greatest opportunity.”

I finally found peace and fulfillment. The criticisms that had once pressed in on me like a dense fog became more like clouds passing through a blue sky.



Chapter 5

SCORE AND EVALUATE

The world is changing more rapidly than ever before... and companies that don't have marketing strategies are often left behind. The dynamics of future isn't what it used to be.

—Dr. Rashid Alleem

THREE MONTHS LATER

As I write this page, I remember what Philip Kotler stated in the Foreword of the book, *Drucker on Marketing* by William A. Cohen. It made me smile, and I'm sure it will bring a smile to your face too. Here's the intelligent remark, "If I am the father of marketing, then Drucker is the grandfather." I told myself, *I don't mind being the grandson!*

Certainly, I don't mince my words. By now, SEWA is truly marketing oriented—everyone understands that to survive, thrive, and prosper, we need to monitor our SEWA marketing plan to ensure it meets its objectives. By now, I can claim that I've made everyone in the organization part of the marketing process—made them focused on the future and ensured that everyone knows what they must do to meet their marketing objectives and customer expectations, and is trained, equipped, and motivated to do so.

At the same time, I've kept an eye on the PEST environment, identified "Big Picture" opportunities and threats, and scanned news items, etc., for any opportunities or threats that we may encounter in the near future.

ARE WE HITTING OUR TARGETS?

The marketing planning process was a chain of interconnected parts, all linked together and all of equal importance in achieving our marketing objectives. Does this sound like a recipe for success? I wanted to test drive the SEWA marketing plan now. I believed we were competent, and most importantly, confident, and I wanted to see if the same held true for my team. Immediately, I asked my executive assistant to arrange a quick meeting with my nine champions, three musketeers, and marketing and branding team, and all of them swarmed up to my office.

"We have invested a significant amount of effort in the analysis and planning stages," I declared. "However," I continued, "it's easy for management to be lulled into a false sense of security."

The customer engagement officer said, "We have set up a smart action plan, so there's nothing more to do than to let the implementation take its course."

I said, "In my recommendation, I've indicated the way we will monitor and measure the steps to achieve our marketing goals. It is common knowledge that, without measurement, you cannot identify (1) where our organization or products stand, and (2) whether the desired goals are being achieved." I continued, "You've heard a lot about positive thinking and my CRITICAL thinking philosophy, but let me ask you; how many of you have ever heard about reflective thinking?"

The market strategy officer replied, “Sir, you are one of the most listened-to-speakers, we would like to hear it from you.”

I thanked him and then said, “Then pay attention, please. First, can anyone remind us all about my CRITRAL thinking philosophy.”

The chief innovation officer jumped out of her seat and said, “Sir, the CRITRAL thinking philosophy is your self-coined term and it stands for the blend of critical (calculative, rational, skeptical, etc.) and lateral (creative, innovative, inquisitive, etc.) thinking. Which means it’s the amalgamation of the right brain and left brain thinkers that generates out-of-the-box ideas.

“I’m so proud of you. Let’s all give her a big round of applause.”

REFLECTIVE THINKING

Critical thinking and reflective thinking often are used synonymously. Critical thinking is used to describe “... the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome...thinking that is purposeful, reasoned and goal directed—the kind of thinking involved in solving problems, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions when the thinker is using skills that are thoughtful and effective for the particular context and type of thinking task. Critical thinking is sometimes called directed thinking because it focuses on a desired outcome.”

On the other hand, reflective thinking is a part of the critical thinking process that refers specifically to the processes of analyzing and making judgments about what has happened. John Dewey, an American philosopher, suggested that reflective thinking is an active, persistent, and careful consideration

of a belief or supposed form of knowledge, of the grounds that support that knowledge, and the further conclusions to which that knowledge leads. Learners are aware of, and control, their learning by participating in reflective thinking actively—assessing what they know, what they need to know, and the way they bridge that gap during learning situations.

In summary, critical thinking involves a wide range of cognitive skills that lead to desirable outcomes, and reflective thinking focuses on the process of making judgments about what has happened. However, reflective thinking is most important in prompting learning during complex problem-solving situations because it provides students with an opportunity to step back and think about the way they actually solve problems and the way a particular set of problem-solving strategies is appropriate to achieve their goal.

To think and write reflectively you must:

- Experience something
- Think about what happened
- Learn from the experience

You think reflectively all the time; you probably just don't realize you're doing it.

WEEKLY PROGRESS MEETING

We knew that our marketing plan was prepared cohesively with adequate resources and all the right skills. However, we expected to encounter surprises during the implementation process, such as, the way the plan would be controlled and the results would be measured. We spent a few minutes at the beginning of

our weekly marketing progress meetings reflecting about these issues. Each time we asked two questions:

- What did we learn this week?
- What should we share with the rest of the organization?

From time to time, we took a good look at our progress to see whether we actually *were* making progress. We asked ourselves:

- Are we seeing a return for our investment?
- Is what we are doing getting us closer to our goals?
- Are we headed in a direction that helps us fulfill our commitments, maintain our priorities, and realize our big dream?

Why do I place such emphasis here? Because I want to ensure that the key indicators of success are simple, flexible, and resourceful in the face of ever-changing conditions so we can respond in a resilient and productive manner when change is required. We kept track of measures that would lead to the achievement of our goals, and recognized and rewarded people who met those measures. We also set up a regular cycle of follow-through by conducting frequent meetings in which team members held each other accountable for achieving particular outcomes.

SIX MONTHS LATER

Here's a quick overview of SEWA's marketing return-on-investment:

It was Monday, December 31, 2018, when my marketing team, the nine champions, and my three musketeers paid me

a surprise visit. I was flabbergasted to see them all together. However, their jovial faces hinted that they had come with some great news. Further, the black forest cake in their hands confirmed my beliefs.

Pointing to the cake, the customer engagement officer said, “Sir, we are here to celebrate with you once again the phenomenal success of SEWA’s marketing plan. SEWA is the talk of the town. Mega-corps and industry juggernauts of this region are partnering with us willingly. And more importantly, we have created an organic human connection between our business and our customers.”

I listened calmly and smiled back.

One of the marketing team members said in an exhilarated tone, “Your innovative marketing approach and minimalistic, aesthetic appeal is the reason behind our brand make-over.”

“I bet you are a winner, every single time. What’s your trick?” Boutheina added.

I said, “Yeah, I’ve given SEWA a facelift. But I want you all to understand that creating an identity within a mass market doesn’t demand a revolutionary idea. One needs to have one special thing. In reality, it’s possible to be ‘a one trick pony’ as long as that trick is really good. I figured out what that special trick is, then I concentrated on it. Voila! SEWA gained recognition in time.” I continued, “You’ve done a brilliant job, the planning, analyzing, execution, and monitoring has been par excellence, but some customers remain frustrated.” I continued in the same breath, “I do understand that we cater to over 1.5 million customers, and keeping everyone happy, all the time, is a ‘Tsunami challenge’. There always will be unmet needs, wants, and expectations to be met.”

The chief culture officer said in a husky voice, “Any advice?” “Let me warn you about the hockey stick graphs that I’ve talked

about previously. We need to be cautious about becoming lulling into the trap of a false sense of security. Let me tell you an interesting story.”

The customer voice officer said, “You read my mind; I was about to request that you share a story that would reinforce your belief.”

I smiled and began, “This is an interestingly shocking story about General Electric’s manager of the vacuum tube division who came into his boss’s office boasting of having increased the vacuum tube business by 20 percent. Guess what his boss did? He fired him. ‘You increased the vacuum business because our competitors went out of business. That was easy. What you should have done is got us into the transistor business. You kept us in the past when you should have prepared us for the future’.

The lesson that we can learn from this story is that we need to be the movers and shakers who work tirelessly to build and optimize our brand, and exceed the customers’ expectations at all times. The end result tends to be a brand that always is on the cutting edge in its industry,” I concluded.

Now, the final step was to test our findings. To evaluate our situation analysis and mapping’s tenacity, I scrutinized it with the VRIO Framework, “value, rarity, imitability, organization.” The ultimate goal in implementing the VRIO model is that it will result in a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Here’s the way to think of each of the four VRIO components:

- **Value.** Are we able to exploit an opportunity or neutralize an outside threat using our analysis results?
- **Rarity.** Is our analysis sufficiently unique?
- **Imitability.** Is our organization’s product or service easy to imitate, or would it be difficult for another organization to do so?

- **Organization.** Is our company organized sufficiently to be able to exploit our product or resource?

What the customer thinks he is buying, what he considers “value,” is decisive. Because any business enterprise’s purpose is to create a customer, it has two—and only two—basic functions: marketing and innovation. Marketing is the business’s distinguishing, unique function. Not only is marketing much broader than selling—it is not a specialized activity at all. It is the entire business seen from the point of view of the final result, that is from the customer’s point of view. Therefore, concern and responsibility for marketing must permeate all of the enterprise’s areas.



THE LAST NOTE

A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC ORGANIZATION

As we move into the next century, companies will have to become customer-oriented and market-driven in all that they do. In SEWA's case, we oriented ourselves around our customers' needs and wants and marketed ourselves with the right tools, which, in turn, earned customer satisfaction and recognition. It's not enough to be product- or technology-driven—too many companies still design their products without customer input only to find them rejected in the marketplace.

I would like to cite an example of a great company that knows how to play safe in this hyper-competitive market. I am talking about a great friend and one of the finest businessmen in the UAE, Mr. M. A. Yusuffali, chairman and managing director of Lulu Group International. Yousuffali gave me a VVIP invitation to inaugurate the 157th Lulu hypermarket in Sharjah; I was delighted utterly and waited eagerly for December 8, 2018—the inauguration day.

The day arrived and as promised, I inaugurated the opening ceremony of the new hypermarket. However, I was quite baffled to see that the hypermarket was situated in the center of a densely populated community. I said to Yousuffali, "It's quite unusual to see such a hypermarket in a congested and populated location." He smiled and replied immediately, "Rashid, we live in a world where we need to reach out to our customers rather than wait for them to reach us." I was quite impressed and convinced by his apt answer.

Unsurprisingly, we are now seeing a flood of books and articles with such titles as *The Customer-Driven Company*, *Customers for Life*, *Turning Lost Customers into Gold*, *Customer Bonding*, *Delivering Wow Service*, and *The Loyalty Effect*. These books emphasize that the key to success in this rapidly changing marketing environment is a strong focus on the marketplace and a total marketing commitment to providing value to customers.

This reminds me of my recent visit as a VIP guest to the Forbes CEO event held October 30-31, 2018 in Bangkok, Thailand, where Mr. Goh Choon Phong, CEO of Singapore Airlines, stated proudly, “The single reason behind Singapore Airlines world-class status is their decision to make customers the focal point of their business.”

WHAT’S YOUR SPARK PLUG?

People ask me often, “What’s your spark plug?” My reply always is the same: “My high energy, good humor, and people skills, and a can-do attitude, help me realize important objectives. My satisfaction is in the doing, in the giving.”

“What do I get in return?” the reader may ask.

My results are outside the limelight. When I get emails like the one below from a fan for life, it fills my heart with indescribable emotions. These opinions of my well-wishers are my spark plugs and catalysts.

“I was glued to each page as I read *The SEWA Way*. It is only noble to acknowledge the depth of knowledge and wisdom documented in the book, filled with breathtaking real-life examples and pragmatic decisions saddled with risks and yet defining dexterity as the new way of doing things. Thanks, Dr. Rashid for inspiring me. I am making a formal appeal to you for mentorship under your tutelage.”

A HEARTENING CONCLUSION

I would conclude here that as we move into the next century, companies will have to become customer oriented and market driven in all that they do. Like what SEWA did. We oriented ourselves around our customer ‘needs’ and ‘wants’ and marketed ourselves with the right tools that wins customer satisfaction and recognition. It’s not enough to be product or technology driven—too many companies still design their products without customer input, only to find them rejected in the marketplace. Not surprisingly, we are now seeing a flood of books with titles such as *The Customer-Driven Company*, *Customers for Life*, *Turning Lost Customers into Gold*, *Customer Bonding*, and *The Loyalty Effect*. These books emphasize that the key to success in the rapidly changing marketing environment will be a strong focus on the marketplace and a total marketing commitment to providing value to customers.

When I held the reign of SEWA’s brand turnaround, a plethora of colleagues, friends and well-wishers had raised a red flag at my attempt to transform SEWA. They said, “There’s no need to reinvent the wheel.” I replied to them, “But reinventing the brand is another story—If I abide by conventional wisdom, then you are right. However, I like to play my cards unconventionally. In SEWA’s case a rebranding was imminent.”

In a recent interview, I was asked to share some rebranding tips with the world. Let me share the secret sauce behind SEWA’s phenomenal success. The reader may distill my wisdom from the reply I gave to the press; “If your business is changing, it’s OK to be bold with your rebranding. I started by thinking about SEWA’s history, values, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, future goals, and key differentiators. Based on the organization I was determined to create, I reverse-engineered

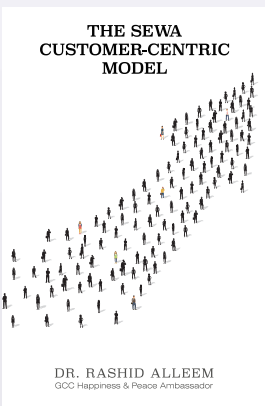
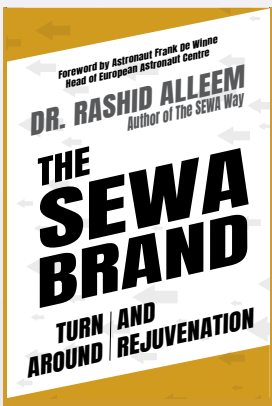
my marketing. I asked myself; what do I want prospective customers to think and feel about SEWA brand moving forward? Remember that rebranding is like an iceberg—your customers only see the surface. The most successful brand transformations include a thorough internal transformation while also providing a crystal-clear external repositioning and seamless experience for customers.”

I would sum up my final thoughts in an infallible quote by William Jennings Bryan; “Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for; it is a thing to be achieved.”



The SEWA Marketing Plan will help you to improve your odds against more experienced competitors and newly emerging ones. The Plan enables you to recognize and take action on any trends and consumer preferences that other companies have overlooked, and to develop and expand your own base of loyal customers now and into the future. The Plan also shows to others that you have carefully considered how to produce a product or service that is innovative, unique and marketable- improving your chances of stable sales and profits - reasons for investors to financially back you.

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