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OFF THE SHELF

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Success, Built One Customer at a Time

SOMETIMES, book publishers' timing is exactly right.

Everywhere you look, once-infallible marketers are flailing: AT&T never mastered how to provide cellphone service, Coca-Cola has been struggling on the supermarket shelf and Wal-Mart has a stock price that has been essentially flat for the last five years. Given all that, the time is right for advice aimed at helping marketers regain their footing. Many books arriving in stores promise just that.

They focus on different audiences, from neophytes to senior marketers, but the best of these books — the only ones we will talk about here — have something in common: they concentrate on explaining the one-customer-at-a-time approach to business. It's the only way to achieve mass market success, their authors contend.

Alexi Venneri, the chief marketing and communications officer at Who's Calling, a research and consulting firm based in Kirkland, Wash., has aimed her book at people relatively new to marketing. Her main message is that in order to be successful you must have fun and be provocative. The title of the book, "Balls!" (Wiley, \$19.95), is an acronym for five factors that she says are required for marketing success. You need to be brave, authentic, loud, lovable and spunky. (A sixth quality she mentions is inspiration, which accounts for the exclamation point.)

Ms. Venneri shows each of the principles in action in examples from her own company and from others like Boston Beer, which makes Samuel Adams beer, and Marquis Jet, which sells fractional jet ownership. Her intent is to underscore how each of these companies experimented in a small market to find out what clicked with customers and only then tried to expand beyond its base.

The problem with that kind of expansion — and maybe with the initial entry into a market as well — is that a company will run into others that are already serving its intended audience. In the tradition of great salesmen everywhere, Randy Schwantz says that this is not a problem, but an opportunity.

In "How to Get Your Competition Fired (Without Saying Anything Bad About Them)" (Wiley, \$24.95), Mr. Schwantz, the president and chief executive of a sales training firm based in Dallas, advocates calling on prospective customers and having them identify the areas where they are being underserved. He offers a number of strategies.

In a conversation with a prospect, Mr. Schwantz says, you should paint a detailed picture of how clients should be served and then ask the prospect if its current supplier is offering that kind of treatment. When it answers no — as it invariably will — you have a wedge to use to separate the prospect from your competition.

Does Mr. Schwantz feel bad about getting the competition fired? Hardly. He argues that it is one's duty. If you can't move buyers from unsuccessful relationships to better ones, "then you are letting them down," he writes. The best way to stave off competition is to build a relationship with your customers that is virtually unbreakable.

Intriguingly, Alex Wipperfürth, a partner at a small advertising agency in San Francisco, says that you may have less than total control over whether that will happen. In "Brand Hijack" (Portfolio, \$24.95), Mr. Wipperfürth argues that consumers own your brand as much as you do, and that they ultimately decide what it symbolizes in the marketplace. Instead of fighting that by trying to define your brand, find out what consumers believe makes it special. Then aim to reinforce that idea.

As a reaction to overpriced, overhyped brews, for example, some beer drinkers have made Pabst Blue Ribbon their drink of choice. The last thing Pabst should ever do in this situation, Mr. Wipperfürth contends, is to create advertising pointing out how fashionable the beer has become.

Is there a way to create hip status for a brand? Yes, he says. If you want to have your product implicitly endorsed by rock stars — that is, you would love it if they were

photographed holding your product — you should offer samples to people who work in recording studios and to the stars' roadies, in the hope that the product will come to the stars' attention.

Because this kind of approach seems inherently hit or miss, it may have less resonance with marketers than the book's overarching idea that you should listen to consumers in fashioning what your brands and products ultimately represent.

At its heart, of course, marketing is all about relationships. Keith Ferrazzi, a consultant and a former chief marketing officer at Deloitte Consulting and Starwood Hotels and Resorts, understands the concept clearly. In "Never Eat Alone" (Doubleday, \$24.95), Mr. Ferrazzi, with an assist from

Tahl Raz of Fortune Small Business magazine, offers a step-by-step way to build relationships with anyone. The tone is engaging and the advice practical: you should have your network in place long before you need it, for example. Sometimes, it may seem counterintuitive.

"I'll sum up the key to success in one word: generosity," Mr. Ferrazzi writes. His point is that the more you do for people in your personal network, the more they will trust you and want to

do things for you. Along those lines, he says you should introduce members of your network to one another, so all can benefit.

Mr. Ferrazzi tends to play down the intelligence and hard work it may take to be successful. Still, he has created an excellent networking book in the tradition of Harvey MacKay's "Swim With the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive" and "Dig Your Well Before You're Thirsty."

Ultimately, all of these books reinforce an idea that has been around a half-century. In 1954, Peter F. Drucker wrote in "The Practice of Management" that "there is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer."

"The customer," he added, "is the foundation of a business and keeps it in existence." Nothing has really changed. □

**In new books,
advice for
putting
marketers
back on track.**