



**FIND YOUR PEOPLE:
HOW FOCUS CAN HELP
YOUR BUSINESS STAND OUT** **Steve Dennis**

A few years ago, I generated a certain amount of notoriety after opining in an article that “physical retail isn’t dead. Boring retail is.”

In retrospect, rather than “boring,” it might have been better to say “unremarkable,” “irrelevant,” or “meaningless”—or some combination of the three.

At the time, I was intent on challenging the ridiculous but increasingly popular narrative that we were going through a “retail apocalypse,” wherein physical stores would go the way of the dodo bird, largely because of the rapid growth of e-commerce.

The reason I was confident in my declaration was that I understood that, by and large, the retailers that were closing stores had failed to reframe and narrow their focus in a world that increasingly demanded that they do so. The era of “massification” was ending for all but the few that had already positioned themselves to have a great assortment, low prices, and tremendous convenience all at once. The idea that anyone was likely to out-Amazon Amazon or out-Walmart Walmart was becoming increasingly nonsensical.

What the shift in market dynamics demanded was an aggressive move away from a strategy that was a little bit of everything for almost everyone and toward becoming more inspiring and more intensely relevant for a more tightly defined set of customers. Less was indeed becoming more.

The fact is that no customer wants to be thought of as average.

I knew from my years in retail that the mass-market strategy of “stack it high and watch it fly” that had once made brands like Toys“R”Us, Bed Bath & Beyond, Circuit City, and many others household names and the envy of many had hit a wall years earlier. The retail brands gaining traction with consumers were doing so thanks to their greater focus and deep customer resonance. In all but a few instances, more specific was becoming better than exceedingly general.

Across a spectrum of categories, it was a diverse set of brands like Lululemon, Canada Goose, Trader Joe’s, Crocs, Tractor Supply Company, and RH that were finding great success by having a far better understanding of who they were for, what they were for, and what story they hoped their customers would spread. Also, they had the confidence to say “no” to the customers at the peak of the mass-market bell curve and avoid, as the saying goes, spreading their peanut butter too thin.

This is far from a retail-centric phenomenon. As just one example, in a search world overwhelmingly dominated by Google, DuckDuckGo and Ecosia have carved out meaningful positions. They are not trying to be better for everyone. They are, however, trying to be better for a particular set of someones, namely those who deeply value privacy in their search activity or who want to be environmentally conscious.

Despite these clear trends, too many companies, in every sector, still plan their strategy around the mantra “bigger is better.” The insistence on tradition—on doing things the old way, just because—almost feels religious in a way. This is not where most of us have any chance of winning. In an era of abundant choice, distracted customers, and frictionless access, where the competition has often built tremendous economies of scale and scope, failure to improve your customer focus and hone your offering dramatically increases the odds of sinking into irrelevance.

The fact is that no customer wants to be thought of as average. Perhaps paradoxically, editing down what we do—and who we aim to do it for—can greatly amplify its impact.

HUMANS, NOT TARGETS

An essential part of intensifying our focus is understanding whom we seek to serve in a deeper and more emotionally connecting way.

Although it’s common to refer to our current and prospective customer base as “targets,” I propose we get away from that language. This is more than a semantic point. “Target” definitely implies great focus on the seeker’s behalf, but it does not reinforce the other skill that is inherent to achieving greater relevance and resonance: empathy.

We must understand people as people, not merely consumers, customers, members, and users. This means dialing down our reliance on left-brain, logic-heavy approaches that center on precisely defined strategies, solving “use cases,” employing Six Sigma processes, and the like and instead turning up the art, emotion, and storytelling.

Let’s face it. No one actually needs a \$5 bottle of water, \$125 yoga pants, a \$500 hotel room, a \$2,000 handbag, or a \$6,000 sofa. But the brands that succeed in bringing these products and services to market understand (1) who their brand is specifically for and (2) how to satisfy both their customers’ rational and emotional needs in remarkable ways.

Connecting with our customers’ wants and desires, not just their functional requirements—discovering the emotional why behind the buy—is essential if we want to convince them that we truly are special. It’s how we will find the higher ground we wish to occupy and command, the highly relevant signal we wish to boost, the story that demands to be told.

NOT QUITE MY TEMPO

As much as we must find our passionate core and, from there, widen our circle of fans to related customer cohorts, we must also be clear about who’s not in the circle—who our brand is not for.

There are many reasons why some folks should be way outside our circle. It could be that we have the wrong offering, the wrong messaging, the wrong price, or any number of other reasons we can’t meet their needs, be they logical or emotional.

And that's okay. In fact, it can be a real advantage.

When we chase the wrong customers, we chase our own tail. Attracting the wrong customers can mean we have to discount too much to earn a solid return on investment. Attracting the wrong customers may mean we are forced to endure greater product complexity or higher costs to meet their needs. Attracting the wrong customers may mean they never feel connected enough to our mission to spread the story of our brand. Or they spread the story to more of the wrong customers. Or, their expectations unmet, they may spread a story that is harmful to our brand.

It's best to shun the nonbelievers from the start. It's more than okay to fire customers that don't fit within your focus framework (nicely, of course). Stop trying to seduce the promiscuous shopper. They're just not that into you.

When we truly understand who we want to create meaning for, we put ourselves in a far better position to go do something intensely relevant and truly memorable. And to have them deeply appreciate it.

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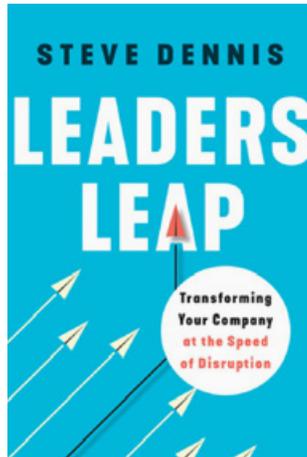
IS SMALL THE NEW BLACK?

In a world of too many choices, constant distraction, and endless clutter, it often comes down to this: you can pay for attention, or you can earn it.

Shifting to greater focus; choosing our filters; curating products, services, and experiences; and finding those best-fit customers can be a superpower. Rather than assemble a bunch of stuff and hope a bunch of people like it, we can edit against a smaller set of someones and a more clearly honed idea. And then, through clarity of our brand positioning and more focused storytelling, we can amplify the edit **to become a compelling signal amid all the noise.** 📌



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Dennis is a strategy and innovation consultant, keynote speaker, podcast host, and bestselling author of *Remarkable Retail*. He has been named a top global retail influencer by multiple organizations, and his thoughts on the future of shopping are regularly shared in his role as a *Forbes* Senior Contributor, as well as through other media, including CNN, *The Wall Street Journal*, and Bloomberg. As a sought-out keynote speaker, Steve has delivered talks on six continents, sharing his unique perspective on what it takes to reignite customer growth in a world of constant change and shifting consumer preferences. Steve is the President of SageBerry Consulting and a former SVP at the Neiman Marcus Group. He serves on multiple for-profit and non-profit boards. Steve holds an MBA from the Harvard Business School and a BA in Economics from Tufts University. He lives in Dallas, Texas.



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