



By Richard D. Czerniawski

“STEEL MAN” YOUR MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR BETTER OUTCOMES

Steel man — Argue against the best form of your strategy



Steel manning your marketing strategy is a practice to help make your best strategic thinking even better. It is an effective way to pressure test your work before you launch it into the market to support your brand and business.

It deals with strengthening your strategy before you attempt to refute it. It is followed, in practice, by evolving it or developing a new one, depending upon how the strategy fares to the pressure testing.

Brian Dyson, the former President of Coca-Cola of the Americas, was a master at steel manning his strategies. After formulating a plan, he would play devil's advocate (which, I believe, is a sound practice for steel manning) to reveal weaknesses to address and remedy.

The goal is to make the strategy as productive as possible. I remember Brian inviting me into his office to address particular strategies that the Company was planning to take.

While he respected my thinking, he didn't just want to hear from me. He paced his office and offered arguments against specific aspects of the strategy, even his own! He would invite me to contribute opinions. We would then tackle these together.

After I left Coca-Cola USA, I was hired back as a consultant. On the heels of New Coke's growing failure, Mr. Dyson invited me to Atlanta to meet with him and his lieutenants.

The session's purpose was to address whether the Company should reintroduce the original Coca-Cola (which, history reveals, became Coke Classic). I was the only non-Coca-Cola employee present at the meeting.

He wanted me to participate as he knew that I was inveighing for the original formula's return and would vigorously share my opinion. In other words, he forced a debate as opposed to managers going along to get along.

We decided to bring back the original formula as Classic Coke. Brian asked each of the participants to state which Coke, New or Classic, would achieve and maintain the higher market share.

Every one of the several who gathered for the meeting chose New Coke, except for two people: the project leader for New Coke, Jack Carew, and me.

We believed that Classic Coke would win the day. Results in the market bore out our conviction. Today, New Coke no longer exists.

Perhaps, steel manning should have been undertaken before the introduction of New Coke. It may have served to avert the disaster, embarrassment and loss of reputation to the Company, and Coca-Cola loyalists' perceived betrayal.

It's important when steel manning to do the following:

1. Make your strategy as productive as possible.
2. Identify and shore-up possible weaknesses.
3. State the strategy to ensure you understand it and the market context in which you will use it.
4. Challenge not merely the strategy but the assumptions that went into developing it.
5. Avoid putting down anyone with a contrarian view. Instead, seek to understand it and apply the thinking where appropriate.

Steel manning is not only a sound practice for making your strategies more productive but can also be used to explore the direction competitors' strategies can and might go. As such, it will help avoid underestimating your competitors and prepare for the worst.

Don't let competitors outwit you strategically. Read Chapter 10, *Overstating Your Capabilities and Underestimating Competition*, from my new book, **AVOIDING CRITICAL MARKETING ERRORS: How to Go from Dumb to Smart Marketing**. Learn more here: <http://bdn-intl.com/avoiding-critical-marketing-errors>

Get started! Apply steel manning to your Brand Idea.

Peace and best wishes,





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