

STEVE JOB'S "INSANELY GREAT" ROADMAP



In 10 years, Steve Jobs transformed Apple from a flagging \$5 billion company into a \$350 billion iconic powerhouse. What sparked this turnaround and what lessons can "the rest of us" apply to our businesses?

I was planning on exploring this topic prior to Steve Jobs' passing, which happened the day before I started writing this column. We all figured Steve was gravely ill, but it still came as a shock when one of humanity's brightest stars is no longer alive to lift us up with his unique insights and magical feats.

Even so, his genius still serves as a guiding light. None of us can hope to become the next Steve Jobs, but we can certainly follow his lead in order to elevate our own brand of success. Recently, the global Chief Marketing Officer for General Motors declared his desire to turn GM into the "Apple of the auto industry." It's a common mantra for businesses looking to model success at the highest level.

Steve Jobs' death caused all of us to pause and reflect upon his monumental accomplishments at Apple and Pixar. Having done so, let's lean forward and see what nuggets of wisdom or, more aptly, what boulders of wisdom, we can apply to our own businesses. The following is by no means a comprehensive list. Rather, it's a jumping off point for pursuing, as Steve would say, "insanely great" things.



Boulder #1: Think Different.

We've all know the importance of "thinking outside the box" in search of creative solutions. But how many of us can keep our nose to the grind stone, shedding blood, sweat and tears to understand every nook and cranny of our business, then pull back for a fresh "36,000-foot" view from an outsider's perspective?

That's exactly the kind of genius Steve Jobs displayed when he revolutionized the computer industry with the Mac. Or when he transformed the animated movie industry with Pixar. Or when he turned the music industry on its ear with iPod and iTunes. Jobs was a master at putting sacred cows out to pasture and looking at the products he envisioned not from a manufacturer's perspective, but from a consumer's point of view. "I don't think of myself as a businessman," he said. "I think of myself as a creative person who makes things people truly enjoy." It's a vital distinction.

I was inspired to "Think Different" during a recent business trip, so I questioned everything I encountered at my hotel. Why, after I've checked in and been given a magnetic room key, can't the elevators detect the room key as I approach and automatically open without me having to push a button? Why can't my hotel room unlock when it detects me approaching the door, rather than having to swipe the card? How often do any of us look at our own businesses this way?

Boulder #2: Design Matters.

Apple is able to command the pricing power it does partly because its products are innovative, but also because they are exquisite works of high-tech art. One of the first things Jobs did upon his return from exile to Apple was to kill the beige-box clones that the company was licensing in favor of an elegant all-in-one iMac design offered in a rainbow of colors. It was a design that made the kind of splash for which Apple has become famous.

How much effort does your company put into crafting its products and services into masterpieces? Is each of your customer-facing touch points designed with "Wow!" in mind?

Boulder #3: Advertising Matters.

Show of hands – how many of your companies cut their advertising budgets during the past couple of years? Okay, you can all put your hands down now. Advertising is one of the first line items companies trim in a lean economy. It's also one of the primary drivers of demand and builders of brands. It's not surprising, then, that Apple has invested so heavily in advertising as a catalyst for building their fortune. Not to mention their profit margins.

Every company I know is buying into the social media frenzy as a means of engaging with customers and extending their brands. Nothing wrong with that. But, if we're looking to model success, look at Apple's approach. Rather than building Twitter and Facebook fan empires, Apple channels its efforts into mainstream media with brilliant messaging and wonderfully produced ads that, like the products they promote, are works of art. Who can forget "1984"? Or the iPod silhouette dancer ads? The "Think Different" campaign or the "Mac and PC" guys?

Apple is also smart in the way it uses earned media to build feverish anticipation and buzz for new products. And nobody was a better presenter on stage than Steve Jobs during product launches. Jobs turned these announcements into expertly orchestrated, gotta-be-there events – always with an eye on delighting the crowd. Even if you're not a rock star, you still need to be asking: How is your company fanning the flames and sparking interest in new products or services? What kind of showmanship do you use to cut through the din of marketing messages and show people how "magical" your offerings are?

Boulder #4: Trust Your Instincts.

Being a focus group of one and trusting your instincts takes guts. Even the most brilliant among us can produce ideas that sink like a stone when the waters aren't tested ahead of time (Apple's Lisa computer is a classic example). Focus groups provide you with cover. By the same token, polling the crowd very rarely leads to revolutionary ideas. The kind of ideas that can put you on top. And keep you there.

People are good at telling you what they want, but they have trouble discerning unmet needs. Had Jobs relied on focus groups to steer the creation of the Macintosh, he would've been instructed by customers to develop a bigger/faster/cheaper beige box. People didn't know that they needed a GUI interface and a mouse. At least, not until Apple presented it to them.

Steve Jobs 1955-2011

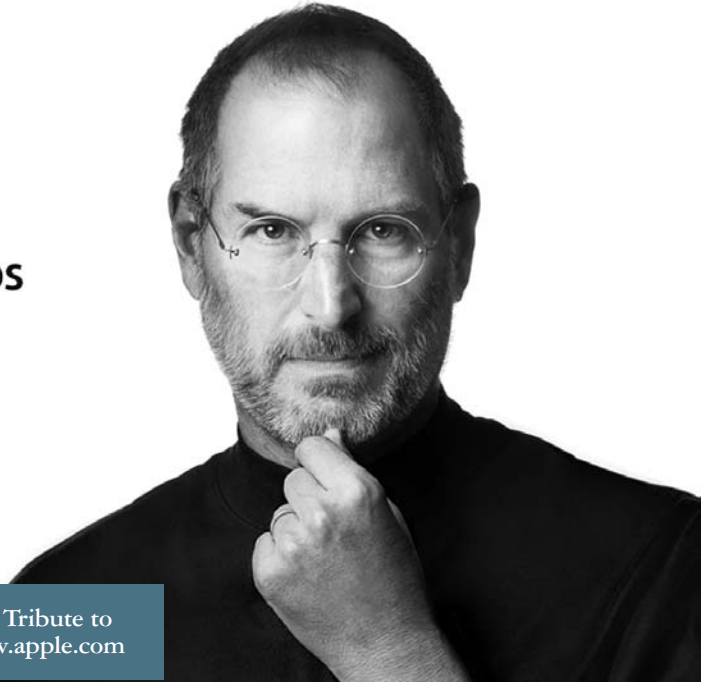


Photo taken from Tribute to Steve Job's on www.apple.com

Jobs believed the passion and creative energy that accompanied his convictions would spur greater success than following a focus group's playbook. He also understood the difference between being a manager (managing resources within the constraints of the company) and being a leader (looking beyond corporate constraints and trusting your vision to find a new way). Having a keen understanding of your customers, and how to delight them, is key.

Boulder #5: Create A Cause.

As head of the Macintosh development team, Jobs was tyrannical in the way he drove his team to produce. And they followed willingly, because they weren't designing a new computer. They were changing the world. They were mavericks on a mission to save us from Orwellian mediocrity at the hands of IBM. Jobs even hoisted a pirate flag outside of their offices on the Apple campus to reinforce and inrain this attitude.

People will move mountains if they believe they're part of a team that's making a difference. What kind of dreams are you creating for your team to buy into? Is the challenge big enough and bold enough to ignite a genuine sense of passion, or do you need to Think Different?

Ann Nygren is President of Key Consulting Software (KCS), an IT consulting company focused on gaming and hospitality applications ranging from Agilysys (LMS/Stratton Warren/Infogenesis), Infinium (AM, AR, FA, GL, HR, IR, PL, PY, TR), Bally's (CMS, CMP, ACSC & SDS), and interfaces with Aristocrat, IGT, and Micros to Transitioning properties during purchase, sales, or merging of properties. KCS provides IT Departments with assistance in installation & upgrades, customization, interfacing and creation of unique client-specific software. Ann can be reached at ann@kcsoft.com.

A FINAL THOUGHT

"Remembering you'll soon be dead is the most important tool to help make the big choices in life." ~ Steven P. Jobs