

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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Is Your Brand Half Full... or Half-Empty?

Is there something about your business that embarrasses you? That makes you blush? Something that you wish wasn't there at all?

An authentic business is one that isn't afraid to show its warts. In fact, being transparent enough to celebrate your faults can be a very positive thing. Very few businesses do it well, and those that do are rewarded with very high brand loyalty.

White Castle hamburgers are known to many as "sliders". There are several theories and wives' tales about why they're called sliders; one is that they slide easily down the hatch because of their size, and another is that they slide easily out the other end a short time later.

"We're not quite sure who actually came up with that name," says Jamie Richardson, White Castle's director of marketing. "Some of it is regional. In the Chicago area, they call them 'Sliders.' In St. Louis, they're sometimes known as 'Belly Bombers.' We think it has something to do with the temptation to have more than one, but we leave the interpretation up to our customers."

For a long time, White Castle suppressed the Sliders nickname, but today they recognize its value, putting it on some of their signage and point-of-purchase materials. "Slyders" (as it's now spelled and trademarked) are uniquely White Castle, and their corporate office has now recognized the value of promoting that differentiator.

"A lot of people here in the corporate office didn't like the negative connotation, but we saw that the name was consumer-driven, so rather than fight it, we decided to embrace it," says Richardson. "We're willing to be a little self-deprecating in order to better position ourselves in the marketplace."

They were also smart enough to recognize that their product doesn't appeal to everyone. "We've known since we began that the taste of a little burger with onions can be polarizing; you either like them or you don't. Those who love White Castles use the word "Slyders" as a term of endearment."

White Castle now sells over 500 million little square hamburgers a year. Indeed, they even have a White Castle Hall of Fame for the chain's biggest fans, located in their hometown of Columbus, OH.

Not bad for a product whose very name rumbles the bowels of millions of consumers.

There are several great idea starters from the White Castle example:

- Take one of your business weaknesses and reposition it into a strength. For example, an out-of-the-way dry cleaner could be “inconveniently located, but worth the effort to find.”
- Consider being loved by a few instead of marketing to everyone. For example, a small auto parts retailer may not have the largest inventory, but could be the very best at locating original equipment parts for foreign cars.
- Ask a few of your customers what they believe is the one thing they would improve about your business. For example, if your customers wished that you offered house calls, consider having fun with it, and even put it your new marketing slogan: “Keeping prices low, and still not doing house calls, since 1966.”
- Try a little self-deprecating humor. It’s better to say, “We’ve been so busy we haven’t even had time to wash our delivery trucks” than to be known for a filthy fleet of vehicles. It’s best to poke fun at yourself, instead of having others do it for you.

Back in college, my friends and I would travel 45 minutes to the closest White Castle to our campus. Some people couldn’t stand them, but in our minds, nothing else would quite satisfy like a sackful of those little square burgers at 2 am. Twenty-five years later, my digestive system can’t handle them, but I still love the smell.

What half-empty element of your business can you turn into a half-full benefit?

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