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A Challenger Mentality

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In 1999, Adam Morgan wrote a book entitled *Eating the Big Fish*: this study analysed the similarities between 50 different challenger brands across the world and identified the different principles that united the ways these brands thought and behaved together.¹ Theory today suggests that the original definition, made famous by [eatbigfish](#), has rapidly evolved since its inception.

We are no longer talking about start-ups, disrupters, and underdogs – today any brand can be a challenger. It's not about going up against someone. It's not even necessarily about disruption. It's a mindset that centres around trying to facilitate change and breaking conventions. It is a mindset that all brands can adopt. Here we explore the principles of having a Challenger Mindset:

CHANGING YOUR MIND(SET)

Being a challenger is a state of mind. These brands and businesses have big, bold ambitions, and are prepared to go against the existing codes and conventions of their category.

Challenger brands today are not focused on WHO they are challenging (market leaders), but are more focused on WHAT they are challenging (category drivers, customer experiences, etc.)

Being number two (or number six or eighteen) is at some level, simply an accident of birth. Challenger brands relentlessly pursue change and innovation, regardless of their market share. Any challenger has to start here.

BREAK SOMETHING

Challengers are brands that challenge the status quo in their industry. Successful challengers free themselves from the “habits and baggage that time wields” and must look “at the category with fresh eyes”². Very few brands decide to adopt this focus by explicitly taking on other brands in their category (though some do), but all challengers test something that they feel must change.

¹ eatbigfish, [Link](#)

² The Challenger Project, [Link](#)

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Understanding their central challenge should give these brands strategic clarity on how they should craft their culture, communications behaviour, and positioning.

A common tendency in marketers today is to respond to a fast-changing world by focusing on the wrong things - the new shiny object, conference buzzword, etc.

Instead of chasing after the next big thing, marketers must constantly refer to the core elements of strategy and brand building that drive their competitive differentiation. But be warned drifting from a brand's true focus can be dangerous for a market leader and fatal to a challenger.

BREAK FREE FROM SOMETHING

A challenger mentality is all about breaking free from the habits of time, and instead, looking at a category with fresh eyes.

Challenger brands are “less about business enmity, and more about an often mission-driven desire to progress the category in some way in the consumer's favour”

Challenger brands bring an innovative take to sometimes outdated and impractical ways of doing business. They do not feel limited by the traditions and expectations that serve as limiting factors for other brands. These companies' mentality breaks free of established norms in the industry. Zappos, “a service company that happens to sell shoes”, breaks free from the established norms of the industry by rewarding customer service staff for having the longest call.³

GAINING MOMENTUM

Challengers do not just disrupt the market once and then get comfortable. Having a challenger mentality is about introducing new ideas that will help sustain a brand's momentum.

³ The Challenger Project, The essential characteristics of a challenger mindset, [Link](#)

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Challenger brands do not believe that they can simply stay afloat during high tides - they believe that they can change the tide.

Challengers do not do these things just to agitate competitors. Rather, they continually push industry standards and conventions because they truly believe in driving progress. A challenger mentality is all about being restless.

Challenger brands have been particularly active within the finance field. BBDO Singapore has worked with CIMB to encourage consumers to 'break free of traditional banking' and to 'bank differently'.

MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

When success begins to happen, challengers do not change their mindsets. A challenger mentality is steadfast. They understand that a mindset of constantly changing, and innovating is integral to consumer's perception of their brand. They are never afraid of questioning even their own successful practices and understand that doing so is a necessity.

AMV BBDO's work with Smart Energy demonstrates this: an unwavering belief that smart meters will revolutionise the energy field and save consumers money, communicated at every opportunity. This commitment has not only led to significant and important behaviour change it has led to successful business outcomes.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR BRANDS

Today, any brand can adopt a challenger mentality, and those that do not, are missing out. A thoughtful and consistent challenger mentality can help brands immediately differentiate themselves in consumers' minds. In time, a challenger mentality can lead to brand growth, business growth, and increased PR opportunities.

ABOUT BBDO KNOWS

BBDO KNOWS is a planning resource for the BBDO network.

BBDO KNOWS offers thinking, strategy, insights and inspiration on key categories, key themes and consumer segments.

If you are interested in learning more about the way BBDO thinks please contact BBDO Knows on bbdo@bbdoknows.com

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