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--by Jack Miller

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Perception is reality

By Jack Miller

Two time Super Bowl winning football coach Bill Parcells famously said, “You are what your record says you are.”

It doesn't matter how well you perform in practice, or how fast you can run, or how well you can throw or catch. At the end of the day, all that matters, all that defines what you are, is winning or losing. In the long run, why you won or lost doesn't matter. Bad bounce? Bad calls? Bad luck? It all evens out in the long run.

The same is true in business. If they're not buying your product, it doesn't matter how good it is. It doesn't matter how well it does in focus groups, or in lab tests. You are what your sales record sells you are.

The paper business is a good example. Like in many industries, paper companies test their products. They have specifications for strength, smoothness, brightness, opacity. They test how well their papers print on a printing press, or how well they run on a copier or printer.

Of course, this is where business and football are different. In football, the score is an objective measure to determine who wins or loses. There is no subjective judgment about which team did better. In business the customer makes the subjective judgment.

In business, unlike football, perception is reality.

In both football and business, if you're not winning, you need to fix it. And that means you need to know why you're losing.

In business, where perception is reality, you need to understand the perception. Do customers not know about your product? Or do they think it is not so good? I remember a time when I was a product manager. We were hearing about quality issues, and I told the mill technical director. He said we had no problem, we weren't getting complaints. I said they struggle with the paper and make it work. They don't file a complaint, but the next time they buy something else.

It was hard to prove this, so we visited some printers together. Some printers liked our paper, said it ran well and printed well. They used it regularly. But some printers had a different perception. One printer had a problem as much as three years earlier, and had not bought our paper since.

So you are losing. Why? Is it price? Sales says prices are too high. Management says prices are too low. Who is right? Is it service? Is it quality? And it's not only about the reality – it's about the perception. If the perception is that price or quality or service are not where they need to be, you might need to make some changes. But you also need to change the reality.

And, don't forget that it is equally important to know why you are winning so you don't mess it up. Know your strengths; play to your strengths. And for sure, make sure your understanding of your strengths matches your customers' perceptions – or you might suddenly start losing.

If you **Need to Know™** what your customers perceive, you might need a third party to ask them and get honest answers in an environment where there is no negotiation going on.

For Need to Know™ market intelligence, call Jack Miller at 203 925 0326 or email jack.miller@market-intell.com.

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