

Being New and Different, and Representing "Change"

By *Harrison Barnes*

Several years ago, I was driving down the freeway around Birch Run, Michigan, and pulled off the freeway to get some gas. Across from the gas station there was a small diner named Tony's that had a line that must have been half a block long. I could not believe there was such a long line to eat in what appeared to be an ordinary diner.

Curious, I went inside to see what all the commotion was about. When I looked around I thought I was seeing things. People were eating sandwiches that looked as if they were five pounds. I quickly realized the reason the restaurant was so popular was its hyper-large portions. It served a BLT with a pound or more of bacon--on an entire loaf of bread cut in half horizontally. Its banana split was made with more than a half-gallon of ice cream. Virtually everything on the menu was giant-sized beyond imagination. I had never seen anything like this restaurant before—and I have never seen anything like it since.

Over the next few years I went back to the restaurant a few times and was surprised each time. One time they had a new special: pancakes the size of a medium pizza. Another time they had a piece of prime rib that probably weighed more than the average human arm and was so large it could not fit on the giant plate it was served on. I always looked forward to going to the restaurant to see these novel meals.

In business and in life, there is a tremendous advantage to doing something in a way that other people do not expect—something that is new and different—"a change." Most successful businesses and people became that way by doing things in a way ordinary people and businesses did not. It is people and businesses who change the rules of the game that typically are the most successful and allow us to see the world in new ways.

Have you ever noticed that you can tell when a home was decorated by a professional? I can go into any house professionally decorated since the 1950s and tell you within around ten years when it was decorated. One color is used more than others during certain time periods. Certain styles dominate certain eras. Certain types of furniture are used during various periods.

- From the mid-1990s and for roughly the next decade, it was impossible to find a designer who did not make extensive use of the colors brown and tan.
- In the 1980s, interior designers made extensive use of mirrors and chrome. They also brought along a few elements from the 1970s, such as extensive use of shag carpeting—but the colors of the carpeting became less bright and pronounced.
- In the 1970s, it was as if people were discovering plastic and bright colors for the first time.

Take a look at interiors from any period in professionally decorated houses. You will find very few exceptions to the rules above. Time periods are dominated by various styles and ways of doing things. Everyone is following the crowd and doing things in a similar manner. Most people, businesses, and others are followers who do things the same way as everyone else.

What ends up happening with these styles? Consumers get bored and crave something new and different. Marketers understand this. Here's an example: I have stayed in many W Hotels that have hallways plastered with black wallpaper and lighting so dark I have no idea where I am going. The showers are difficult to work with. Glow-in-the-dark condoms and sexual aid kits are for sale inside the rooms. The phones are answered by young operators who instead of saying "Hello, may I help you?" exclaim "Whatever! Whenever!"

What few people know about these hotels is that they typically buy old hotels and then chop the hotel rooms in half and redesign them with their unique edge. They charge twice the rate as before and offer half the space. A few years ago, I was staying in a W Hotel across the street from the Waldorf-Astoria in New York. My room was \$575 a night, had no bathtub, and was so small there was less than a foot of space between the bed and the wall, and the desk hardly fit in the room. I got so fed up I went across the street to what W patrons might consider the "stuffy" Waldorf. I got a traditionally decorated 1,500-square-foot suite with two bathrooms and its own kitchen for \$500 a night!

At the W, though, people can hang out in all-white lobbies and wander around in a "new" environment. What the W Hotel is doing is all about being new and different. It attracts a younger crowd and is very popular. People want the latest stuff, the latest experience, what is different.

A few months ago, I was having dinner in the Burj Al Arab in Dubai, apparently considered the most exclusive hotel in the world. What amazed me so much about this hotel were its interior designs and the use of colors. It was unlike anything else I had ever seen in my life. The uniqueness of this hotel and part of its allure, I believe, comes from the fact that its interiors are designed in a way that is unexpected, fresh, and different—and so well done, it would be hard to replicate. According to many publications I have read, it was the incredible uniqueness of the design of this hotel that put the entire city of Dubai on the map.

When you look at the most powerful and successful people in the world, you will generally find that they are able to express something in a new way, one that has not been done before—that they represent a "change."

- It could be someone like Elon Musk, who decides to make an electric car.
- It could be someone like Steve Jobs, who decides to make a clean computer interface.
- It could be someone like Sam Walton, who decides to make giant convenience stores with low prices.
- It could be someone like Andy Warhol, who uses colors and images in art in a different way.

The reason these people are elevated to such positions of power is that society is always hungry for newness. For

example, Barack Obama's campaign slogan (simply the word "Change") played to the desire people had for something different. Politicians understand this, and most political campaigns are framed in terms of some sort of change (but few as well as Obama).

It is interesting to note that most politicians who rise to power follow essentially the same strategy that they stand for change. While I am certainly not comparing Obama to Hitler as leaders, they both followed a similar strategy. In Adolf Hitler's acceptance speech when he became the chancellor of Germany in 1933, he described Germany as having "seen the unity of the nation vanishing away, dissolving in a confusion of political and personal opinions, economic interests, and ideological differences." In most of Hitler's speeches that left his audiences at the time inspired and spellbound, he promised change, unity, and peace if people followed his plan for National Socialism, laid out in *Mein Kampf* years before he had done anything notable in his [political career](#).

Similarly, in Barack Obama's acceptance speech when he won the presidential election, he described the United States as dealing with "the greatest challenges of our lifetime" and also promised change, peace, and unity—if we only follow him as "one people" into his view of politics. Before he had really accomplished anything of significance politically, Obama also wrote a biography (*Dreams of My Father*) and came into office viewed by a mesmerized nation as someone who could "save" them. During his election speech, he discussed the fact that the nation was at a defining moment of *change*.

I am making parallels between these two men not because I have any political philosophies one way or another (for example, I have no reason to dislike Obama), but to show you the tremendous allure and power of change. People crave something new and different. Dictators, presidents, and others rise to power based on their ability to appeal to the desires that people have.

To cater to our desire for something new, fashion designers, car designers, and others are always innovating. They make sure things are always evolving and becoming different. If they were to do the same thing over and over again, people would get bored and competitors would be able to attack them and better them.

Many businesses and people are under the impression that conservatism and remaining the same are good. The problem with remaining the same, though, is that by doing so, others will always be able to understand what you are doing and copy it and potentially do it better. In addition, if you remain the same, people will look around for something that is more interesting.

One of the "dirty secrets" of the advertising world is that few people last with large [advertising agencies](#) very far into their 40s. The reason is that advertising thrives on "fresh" insights that come from new generations and new ways of looking at things. By the time most advertising copywriters and others reach their mid-30s, they have developed all sorts of stylistic ways of looking at the world, and the products they sell are no longer "fresh"—sort of like hiring a designer from the 1980s to design a house in the 2010s.

One of the keys to being extremely successful is never settling too long on one way of doing things—and always improving and varying what you are doing. In business, many people spend a lot of time aggressively studying their competitors to figure out how to copy them. This is common among people you work with as well. If you are in a leadership role, there is no doubt that people below you are studying your moves and thought processes so that they can one day be like you.

If you settle on a certain way of doing things and become predictable, your competitors, peers, and others will easily be able to attack you. They will be able to define you as one sort of person and not another and paint you into a corner. Doing things in the same manner over and over again allows people to see where your weakness lies. Once you are painted into a corner, you will have a very difficult time defending yourself, will eventually look outdated, and will have a difficult time remaining successful. The world craves the fresh and the new.

To continually be successful, you need to be constantly reinvesting yourself and doing things in a different way—and surprising the world with fresh and different approaches to the world. Artists like Andy Warhol, for example, painted the serious (electric chairs) and also the comical and the banal (soup cans). When you do not allow people to see you as one thing and are constantly changing forms, people cannot define you and you become more interesting.

In just about every pop music concert I have ever attended, the musicians change what they are wearing every few songs. The reason for this, I think, is that the performers do not want to be seen as the same person from song to song. Part of being an artist like this is constantly looking "fresh" and "new"—in order to keep the interest of their audience.

Being new, standing for change, and constantly reinventing yourself so that you look "fresh" all help you to advance and to be seen by the public in a favorable light. Businesses, artists, and others understand this. You too can benefit from looking and acting the part of "change."

THE LESSON

The most successful people in the world have found new ways of expressing themselves professionally. To be continually successful, it is vital for you to reinvent yourself and find new, fresh approaches to the world. Settling into a single way of doing things is dangerous as it makes you predicable, and therefore easier to replicate and ultimately replace.