

## Concentrate on Your Product

By *Harrison Barnes*

When I was growing up, I used to spend most weekends with my father. Like most fathers I knew, my dad loved to watch sports. Football was always on during the season, and he always seemed most interested in college sports. I have always been amazed by college football because of the high level of enthusiasm that students, alumni, and others have for it. My mother went to the University of Michigan, my father attended law school there for some time, my grandfather went there, and my grandmother got a master's degree there as well. My grandparents liked the school so much that they both donated their bodies to the school when they died. (We had a secondary small memorial ceremony for them six months after they died, to bury the ashes that were returned to us by the medical school.)

Because my family was so excited about the University of Michigan, I was always hearing about Michigan football during the season. I even went to a few games at the giant stadium in Ann Arbor, and I saw football fans get really out of control. People drive around with flags on their cars, bars are packed with people during each game, and there is overall a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and support for all the Michigan teams. Our next-door neighbors used to hang a giant Michigan flag on their house.

When I moved to California, I still could not escape Michigan football. I moved to Pasadena, and since Michigan seemed to be playing in every Rose Bowl, I would again see the crazed fans driving by my office and home with flags on their cars. And of course I went to the Rose Bowl to watch my home team play ball. Before each game, stealth bombers would fly over the stadium, which was extremely thrilling to watch.

In all my years of working in the legal industry in California, I have met only a few people who went to Michigan. It is a great school with an awesome [law school](#) and many other great programs; however, when I think of the University of Michigan, what first comes to mind is football.

For people who grow up in Michigan, attending the University of Michigan is a wonderful thing. Typically attendees have proven themselves as top-performing and exceedingly dedicated students. The most spirited new students typically move to a suburb of Detroit and hang a giant flag in front of their houses, outfit their cars with little flags, and then travel to Ann Arbor to go to all of the football games each weekend.

When I got into Michigan, I was excited, but not nearly as excited as I was about getting into the University of Chicago. You see, I had played football in high school but was not that good of a player. In fact, I sat on the sidelines virtually the entire season. The thought of being reminded of football every day really did not appeal to me; it struck me as a depressing reminder of my years as a benchwarmer.

You are probably wondering what any of this has to do with your career and your life. In reality, this has just about everything to do with your career and life. Michigan, like any institution, has a variety of products that it could be known for. It could be known for how smart its students are. It could be known for its strength in math and sciences. It could be known as a school that spawns a lot of important politicians--as Harvard does. It could be known as a place where offbeat humanities types attend--like Reed College. However, what most people think of when they think about the University of Michigan is football. Just football.

Football is so important to a school like Michigan that the donations from its alumni increase dramatically when the school does well in the football season. Therefore, the school goes to great lengths to recruit for its football team.

I chose to go to the University of Chicago largely because when I thought about the school, I thought about *academics*--learning and studying. These were things I was much better at than football, and that appealed to me much more. A funny thing about the University of Chicago is that it once had one of the greatest teams in college football--until the president of the school, Robert Maynard Hutchins, abolished the team:

Not only did Hutchins buck the dominant trends in philosophy and instruction, he also challenged higher education's emphasis on intercollegiate football. Hutchins abolished the university's football team in 1939 because he believed students needed to focus on scholarship and Chicago should play football only if it could remain competitive with major athletic programs. This was a momentous decision as the Maroons were a founding member of the Big Ten Conference and once a national powerhouse under the famed coaching of Amos Alonzo Stagg. In fact, Stagg, who had retired from Chicago in 1933, had been the first coach in the nation to be a tenured professor, and his large athletics' budget was exempted from normal institutional review. Even as late as 1935, Chicago's Jay Berwanger became the first Heisman Trophy winner, but by 1939 Chicago's scoreboard indicated that the glory days had passed, including a 61–0 loss to Harvard. Therefore, despite the legacies, and partly because of them, after much debate the university dropped football.

<http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2520/University-Chicago.html>

Today, there are few people who would think of the University of Chicago and not think of academics and scholarship. This happened because President Hutchins looked at the school and what its *product and image* should be, and decided that the emphasis needed to be on academics rather than sports. Every school produces a certain product. For example, there is a high proportion of professors and others that come out of the University of Chicago. Michigan's product is almost certainly more likely to be a football fan, or great athlete, than a professor. Because Michigan's predominant product is football, a lot of the school's reputation rests upon having a solid and good football *product*.

- What would happen if Michigan suddenly had no football team?
- What would happen if Michigan's football team started losing all of its games?
- What would happen if there were a huge ethical controversy surrounding Michigan football?

If Michigan football went to hell, a lot of things would change within the school. There would probably be decreased alumni contributions and all sorts of other issues. The school would no longer be known for the same sort of product, which would have a corresponding impact on the school. Similarly, imagine if Chicago decided it were going to have the best football team out of any college in the United States, and went to extraordinary lengths to recruit players and promote this goal? What sort of effect do you think this would have on the school? I am pretty sure that the academic people at the institution, as well as all the alumni, would be pretty upset about this. It would not go over well.

The reason I use this example is that every company, every person, and most schools have a particular *product* that is very strong, for which they are known. Companies and other organizations thrive on their ability to have a strong, defined product. In most instances the successful organization becomes known for one specific thing, *and for doing this one specific thing especially well*. When an organization tries to have multiple products that are beyond its sphere of influence, things usually go badly.

For example, what if Apple, the maker of the iPhone, MacBooks, and so forth, suddenly decided that it wanted to get into the business of manufacturing all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) with the Apple logo on them? Say, in addition, Apple decided that ATVs were where its future was, and that it was going to put a lot of energy into manufacturing ATVs from this day forward.

First of all, the ATVs would probably not be very good because Apple does not have decades of experience manufacturing these machines, the way it does in making computer devices. In addition, its core customers would suddenly feel alienated and would likely stop buying many of its core products, so the company would suffer in this way. Apple would be guilty of manufacturing the wrong product and forgetting what business it was in.

When I was in college, I had a girlfriend who was one class year ahead of me. She was exceptionally creative, smart, and funny, and she had a great overall personality. In her final year of college she interviewed with major advertising agencies and did very well. It was difficult to secure these interviews and callbacks with major advertising agencies, but she was able to pull it off easily. The advertising agencies loved her. Yet she ended up taking a job with CBS in the summer, instead of a job with an advertising agency. What the advertising agencies saw in this woman was her creativity, sincerity, and the ability to relate to all sorts of people, while being nonjudgmental, and constantly coming up with useful, new ideas.

At the same time, she was also interviewing with investment banks and other similar employers. Her friends were all [getting jobs](#) with investment banks, and she was getting the cold shoulder from the investment banks. The interviewers would come in very well dressed, professional, and so forth--and always be rude to her. The advertising agencies, on the other hand, were very nice to her, and they would come in much less judgmental and even a bit frumpy.

- The advertising agencies did not like my girlfriend's friends, who secured jobs with investment banks--but they really liked my girlfriend.
- The investment banks really liked my girlfriend's friends--but they did not like my girlfriend.

"They do not like me because I am too vulnerable and not bitchy enough," my girlfriend told me one day. "I need to change," she said.

She was visibly upset about the fact that the banks would not even invite her back for an interview. I knew why this was occurring: She was too much of a free spirit, and too likable. She did not project the sort of authority and confidence that a banker needs to project. A banker is just a different person and a *different product* than my girlfriend was. She was perfect for advertising because she was flexible, creative, fun-loving, and the sort of person who would come up with a variety of creative ideas and concepts for the advertising agency. Her friends were the exact opposite. They were uptight, inflexible, and suspicious of creative thinking. They would have been horrible fits for an advertising firm.

My girlfriend did decide to try to change. She turned from one of the nicest people I had ever known into a "bitch" virtually overnight. It did not suit her at all because deep down she was not the person she was trying to be. She was trying to be a different *product*--and more like her friends who got jobs in the investment banks. When she tried to be bitchy, it just did not work out right. Because it was not part of her natural personality, she was often incredibly rude to people and burned bridges. Unfortunately this whole transformation ended up alienating me too, and a wonderful relationship that had looked like it was headed for marriage, was soon over. All because she tried to change her *product*--and who she was.

One of the worst things a person or a company can do is lose sight of what its product is. My girlfriend, for example, decided that she wanted to be a different product and it simply did not work. Organizations and people lose sight of what their product is all the time. The idea of what is your *product* is something that is of profound significance to your career and life, and losing sight of your product is one of the greatest causes of failure.

For several years, I have run a [legal recruiting firm](#), and I have hired and managed close to, if not more than, 100 recruiters over the years. In the legal recruiting field, the product is the candidates who the recruiters represent and send out to law firms. There is really no other *product* besides the people that the recruiting firm represents. Due to this product being a person, in order for the recruiters to earn money, they need to:

- have good products, and
- have a lot of high quality products, and
- have customers (in this case the customers are law firms who are willing to hire the candidates)

In order to be a successful recruiter, the recruiter needs to have a good product--and to have many products they can sell. As long as the recruiter ensures this and nothing more, he or she will generally be in good shape. However, it is very common for recruiters to forget what their product is. They may spend their days talking on the phone, and not sending candidates out to law firms. Or they may go out to numerous lunches and have all sorts of meetings with attorneys and others, but never send out a product. None of what they are doing is really related to what their business is about--even though they may think so. They get incredibly distracted and stop concentrating on their product. It is very easy for me to tell when a recruiter is going to fail. All I need to do is examine how many products they have (i.e., candidates), and whether or not they are doing anything with these products (i.e., sending the candidates out to law firms). Assuming the recruiter is doing this, the person will rarely have problems making placements--and a good living. It is as simple as this.

One of the most unusual cases I ever observed of a recruiter failing was an extremely talented recruiter at our firm several years ago. He related well to the people and candidates, who liked him very much. However, this recruiter never sent a candidate out to a law firm unless he was nearly 100% confident that the law firm would interview his candidate. He did not want to get rejected by the law firm. Because of this one characteristic, the recruiter probably only made 20% of the

placements he could have made. In this case, the recruiter's failure to produce was more related to his ego (his not wanting get rejected) than anything else. Because the product of his efforts was so strongly tied to his ego, this particular recruiter did far worse in his job than he could have done.

You need to keep your product in clear view at all times. There is nothing more important than the product you are offering, and you need to know what that product is. Imagine, for example, if you were a professional rock star and then you decided that your true calling was also to be a painter and a public speaker. The odds are that these other *products* would unnecessarily occupy your time and also make your original, highly valued product (*a rock star*) suffer. This exact sort of thing is extremely common and happens more often than you might think.

You need to know what your product is. You also need to be working for an organization that has a product and knows what it is. I personally have made a number of mistakes in terms of not understanding our companies' products in the past, and this has hurt me and the people inside the organization. Several years ago, our company was doing incredibly well in the student loan business and I hired all sorts of people for money-losing products that were unrelated to student loans, such as educational seminars and other things. The new products were unrelated to what the company's strength was at the time, and they did not endure. Every company and organization needs to know exactly what its product is and make sure it is promoting the right product. Our strong product in this instance was "student loans"--and we should have stuck to promoting this only.

An organization or person cannot be strong when it is trying to promote the wrong product. Random products or a lack of concentration on the right products leads nowhere. Everything is about supply and demand: What products can be exchanged that have economic value? The money coming into a company generally comes in due to some sort of product or service being offered, which must be of some value. The money does not flow in due to the gossip at the water cooler, the long lunches, the screwing around with ideas that the company will never use, the Internet surfing, and so forth. The product itself comes from something that is important--a need that people have, which the company can fulfill in a unique way.

You cannot succeed without a product, or without offering a product that people want. Never lose sight of what product you are offering, what your strength is, and what makes you unique. Concentrate your efforts on delivering the product, and delivering it effectively--not the distractions that will inevitably emerge along the way.

### **THE LESSON**

Knowing your product is crucial to your career and life. Just as you must have a clear sense of your own product, you must seek companies with a strong sense of their products. Random products, or lack of focus on the right product, can be disastrous for businesses and individuals alike. You must not only have a product, but a product that people want, so concentrate on your product and its effective delivery.

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