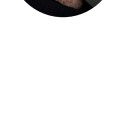


Why Some Companies Succeed While Others Go Supernova: A Case Study



Chris Priest



This isn't the story of success. This is the story of greatness.

At a business roundtable, a prominent marketer asked an intriguing question: what is the main reason why one company is just a success while another becomes a market defining, once in a generation game changer.

Here's my answer - it comes down to how the company defines itself and communicates who they are through their content and branding - their identity.



Take Ravi (all names and most details have been changed in this article). A 10-year-old tech company, Ravi was one of the very first firms to join a prominent cloud solution's partner network, we'll call it MotherShip.

Ravi languished as a mid-level service provider dabbling in just about everything cloud-related. In all actuality, Ravi was doing some pretty incredible things - we were on the bleeding edge of developing tools that streamlined cloud adoption, we created systems to redefine how whole markets addressed logistics and competition, and we introduced analytical solutions that would later become a premiere product for MotherShip.

Yet, you could not tell any of it from how MotherShip interacted with Ravi or what kind of reputation we had in the tech industry. In fact, Ravi was seen as a fairly run-of-the-mill, nebulous tech outfit. Within our sector, we were widely regarded as wannabes.

What changed?

MotherShip, of course, had sophisticated branding and marketing - as you'd expect from a multi-billion dollar household name - but the key to everything that made them different came down to their understanding of who they are. They knew it so well, they had four simple terms that defined it - Aspiring, Genuine, Cooperative, and Engaging.

I was hired by Ravi to create a marketing program - something I've done for several organizations. The first thing I do is assess the 'current state', determine what we want the 'future state' to be, and build an implementation plan to achieve it (to be as simple as possible).

I argued, and it took quite some time to convince leadership, that we needed to define who we were and determine who we wanted to be. We performed competitive analyses of the organization and our primary competition. We conducted reputation surveys and interviewed key partners and clients. We slowly formed a picture that fit exactly what we thought - Ravi was seen as a sedate, unadventurous provider of the same technology as everyone else.

We were boring and everyone thought we were boring. We did things exactly the way every other partner did things and then we wondered why we were seen as every other partner.

I joined a creative, engaged organization. I knew we had magical thinkers and tech dynamos on staff at the company. I saw us perform miracles and be so innovative it was breathtaking - it was exhilarating. So, why were we being so boring?

Because - ironically - that's what people think they are supposed to do. If you are a records management firm, you're called FileSafe. If your organization develops apps for the outdoor industry, your product is called RunApp or ClimbPro.

This is the exact opposite of differentiation and without differentiation, there can be no distinction.

How Did It Change?

The best companies don't compete - they completely change the game. Look at early Google, early (actually mid-) Apple, early Microsoft, early Adobe, et cetera, et cetera.

At Ravi, we threw everything out. We spent time learning who we aspired to be as a community and how that would be best represented. We developed a brand and a content guide that reflected this new identity.

We had naysayers and certain members of our leadership group, including C-Suite decision-makers, who were diametrically opposed to the changes. They argued that Ravi had been a success for over a decade and was a profitable enterprise. Essentially, they said, don't change what's not broken.

But, that is exactly the difference between being successful and becoming legendary.



We were creative, collaborative, and clever. We really were, but we failed to show it.

Through branding and significantly content, we began to change how we presented ourselves. From our job postings to our firm profile, from our customer stories to our team bios, we began to make it all creative and clever.

Before, we were, "Ravi is a full-service cloud advisory and services firm providing sales, development, change management, and ongoing customer services to organizations interested in moving to and operating in the cloud."

We became, "We're an international, full-service cloud enabler that makes transformations as close to perfect as possible. We drive innovation. We enable change. At Ravi, we dream in data. Focus on performance. Solve problems. We obsess over details - all 400 of us."

All our content followed this tone and presentation. We rebranded the company to complement this identity. We differentiated through storytelling.

Things began to change. The products we had in development that were true innovations and game changers were being taken extremely seriously by not only Mothership but other partners and our competitors.

Literal doors that were once closed to us were flung open. Our merchandise was all over MotherShip because it wasn't just a logo and a tagline, it was fun, engaging, and clever. Our job postings were exchanged at their offices and we became a real threat to their talent pool. The people applying for our positions were names in their industries - big names.

Because of how we presented our content, our submissions brought in several awards, including an extremely coveted, national honor in one of the most competitive categories. We beat out household names and firms considered the best at what they do. People took notice.

We were asked to present at national marketing conferences and to deliver talks on their monthly exchanges. I was invited to join an exclusive internal think tank.

Within a few months, the things we had always been doing were big deals - big enough to get more funding and resources from MotherShip and to draw the attention of the highest echelons at their organization.

We transformed from yet another, useful member of their partner network to giving MotherShip a run for their money on several fronts, from figuring out how to steal customers from one of their biggest competitors (a problem their thousands of thought leaders had never cracked) to developing a system that had the potential to cost them billions of dollars.

They began putting us up front, challenging us to help them break into other sectors and win contracts with Fortune 500 companies. And we delivered. We had the talent, we had the ideas, we had the brilliance, and now we were making it shine.

It was incredible. It was a true runaway success.

Why Did it Work?

Tech tends to be complex and so, most companies present it that way. Their content looks like a page from the dictionary. They plug in overused icons and even more overused stock photography.

They follow tired tropes and employ worn out phrases. E.g. "We are pleased to provide this proposal for..." or "TechCo is a cloud development company founded in 2015".

Everything they do ignores how storytelling and design works. People read a few words and then they move on. Most people don't even really read - they scan content and only review the headline and a few other portions.

They don't digest anything. They don't notice anything. That's because they're not given any reason to - we're all so overloaded with information, unless it really stands out, we aren't going to spend time working too hard on it.

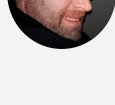
Nothing had changed at Ravi one day to the next - our staff was the same, our products were the same (it certainly helped that we were actually doing incredible things).

The key was people who mattered started actually reading and engaging with our content. They enjoyed reading it. It peaked their interest and then it sustained it.

Whether it was a candidate reviewing one of our job descriptions or a major corporation deciding who will lead their cybersecurity efforts, we were able to capture their attention and make them want to learn more by simply presenting it better.

We went from dictionary entries to poetry, from schematics to art. We used time-proven storytelling techniques and we captured not only their attention, but their imagination. We became the most interesting person in the room because that's who we were, and we did it because people not only wanted to hear our story, they implored us to tell it.

This is what differentiates one company from another, from a success to an icon. But this is not the end of the story, it's actually just the beginning...



Chris Priest is a Think with Google fellow, certified LinkedIn Marketing Expert, Google Marketing All-Star, and Google Partner Marketing Advisor. He is currently the Director of Marketing at