

Inspired By or Ripped Off From?

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Often times when people think marketing, they think of appealing color schemes or eye-catching logos. What they don't realize is there is a lot more meat and potatoes put into a successful marketing strategy. Don't get us wrong, an organization's brand awareness relies heavily on pretty colors and attractive logos. Let's take for instance, Apple. Their logo has undergone a serious transformation over the years (check out that transformation [here](#)), and we'd bet our last dollar you could show that white apple with a small bite in it to anyone from age 8 to 80 and they would recognize it. However, that logo (as fantastic as it may be) wouldn't be recognized if there weren't serious marketing strategies and campaigns put in place to present it to the public.

The misunderstanding of the complexity behind marketing is staggering at times. Even a marketing campaign that seems simple is a complicated web of efforts. Those efforts typically end up being unsuccessful if you haven't done your due diligence on the who, what, where, when, and why of the message. So here is a quick question checklist of what you may want to ask yourself as you begin a marketing campaign:

- **What:** What is our product or service we are ready to present to the public?
- **Who:** Who is our target audience? *Be sure to get pretty granular on this. Demographics are your friend.*
- **Where:** What are our channels? Meaning, how are we going to present this product or service? The great thing about it being 2016 is you have an assortment of marketing channels to choose from. For example:
 - **Social media**
 - **Email campaigns**
 - **Podcasts**
 - **Blogs**
 - **SMS messaging**
 - **Commercial space**
- **When:** Timing is big. Is the release happening at a good time in our audience's calendar year? Also, on a smaller level, are we releasing the details at a time of the day and/or week that won't clash?
- **Why:** Why are we putting this out there? What is our brand promise in relation to this product or service?

Once you have answered these questions it is a lot easier to start your strategic planning and campaign building. But, even with all this, you still have a job to get done—make your product or service available and appealing to the public, and create those opportunities for your team to maximize. So now what? You have questions, you have answers, and you quite possibly have pretty colors and a nice logo. Now is when you might be intrigued by a marketing secret that can help you to create and tell your marketing strategy – the “fast follow.”

Often times, marketers take inspiration from other successful organizations to get the ball rolling on creating their own brand presence, or as we casually call it – fast following. The majority of the time, this copycat technique isn't verbatim, but more an appreciation of their method and weaving it into your own aesthetic. Maybe you like the verbiage on a competitor's website. Or maybe you like the cadence of another organization's reach-out process. Whatever it may be, it's not uncommon to take small details and mesh them with your original vision. In our field, where many of our organizations and communities are working toward the same goals, fast following might even be a way to identify and incorporate best practices.

However, there are some cases where it looks to be a bit more identical. For instance, I'm quite sure if you are reading this then you are familiar with today's social media platforms. And with knowledge of those, you know that Instagram recently rolled out their newest feature, "Instagram Stories." Everyone's first impression? *"This is just like Snapchat!"* That would be a completely accurate observation. So what about ethics? Didn't Instagram just completely steal one of Snapchat's main features? Again, another completely accurate observation. However, it's important to note Instagram did this intentionally knowing it would be perceived as a copycat roll out. Regardless, the feature is being adopted at a rapid rate. Instagram currently has nearly twice as many users as Snapchat and took advantage of an opportunity to build their platform. If you think about it, this happens pretty regularly in the technology industry.

So, where do you draw the line in relation to your own marketing goals? When does fast following become a twin operation versus an inspiration? We're not ones to judge Instagram's choice, mainly because already it's showing success, and really who doesn't want to do better than their competitor? For the record, we appreciate a well-executed fast follow and have adopted the technique ourselves at times. However, the decision for you boils down to your industry, your product, and those questions you previously asked yourself: How new is your idea? How strong is your following? Most importantly, how comfortable do you feel with the choices you'll make to help your team? To help our national communities?

Remember, marketing isn't a two-step process. There is a lot that goes into making your ideas heard. Being aware of the "fast follow" technique is important when considering your marketing strategy, whether you want to avoid it or embrace it. How big of a stepping stone are you willing to accept to bring your vision to life?