

How to Stand Out When Your Competitors Have Had a 100-Year Head Start

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New businesses can still win in crowded markets dominated by long-established brands. Here are practical ways to differentiate, take smart risks, and build loyal customers.

[Building out your own business](https://familybusiness.org/content/launching-a-new-business-invest-in-yourself) (<https://familybusiness.org/content/launching-a-new-business-invest-in-yourself>) is a massive undertaking in itself, and it can be even more daunting if the main competitors in your industry have been successfully operating for a long time. These types of businesses, some of which have dominated their markets for over a century, are called legacy businesses.

When I launched my own business, [All Occasion Tents](https://tentrental.net/) (<https://tentrental.net/>), we didn't have the capital for the kind of traditional marketing methods my competitors were using. Instead, I erected a 30' x 40' tent on the side of the road with a massive sign reading "Rent me all sizes" and the number 1-800-799-TENT. This bold and unique approach caught the eye of our first major client, and we turned that first job into a long-term relationship with the movie industry. Soon enough, All Occasions Tents was a rapidly expanding success.

Legacy competitors have a lot of advantages due to their size and brand reputation, but ambitious [young competitors](https://familybusiness.org/content/how-young-companies-can-build-online-communities) (<https://familybusiness.org/content/how-young-companies-can-build-online-communities>) still have room to take a piece of the market. They just have to act smart and do what they can to make a splash that will be noticed by their target audience. In this article, we will discuss some key strategies for standing out in a market full of legacy competitors.

Understand Your Legacy Competitors

Before you do anything to stand out, you first need to understand your legacy competitors. Make a list of your [topcompetitors](https://familybusiness.org/content/who-will-be-your-competitors-in-the-future) (<https://familybusiness.org/content/who-will-be-your-competitors-in-the-future>) and sort out the ones that have been operating for an especially long time. Some of the reasons that these brands are successful might seem obvious, but it is key that you do your due diligence before you whip up your own strategy.

Visit the locations of your biggest competitors (if they have physical stores) and do your best to actually sample their products to get an idea of their brand identity and what seems to be working so well for them as unique brands. Take ample notes about what you like and what other customers seem to be enjoying if you can. In addition to these basics, take a look at the brand's website as well as their social media to get an idea of how they pitch themselves and what they think makes their products or services unique.

In addition to what is so clearly working about these businesses, it is also important to take notes on things that could be better, ranging from customer service concerns to overall product quality. For example, my biggest competitors when I first entered the tent business were doing safe digital marketing techniques, but I stood out thanks to my "outside the box" roadside tent idea. I also worked tirelessly and went that extra mile while my competitors were off the clock, setting us apart once again.

Find a Unique Angle

Now that you understand your legacy competitors and what makes them so successful, you need to find your own unique angle within the same industry. You should definitely emulate the strengths of your competitors and



adopt them as much as possible so that you can find similar success.

More importantly though, *you need to find something that your competitors do not offer and make it well known that you do in fact fill the gap they are missing.* For example, our company operates in an area where other competitors focus just on daily rentals, so we make it known that we have packages specifically designed for [long-term use](#) (<https://tentrental.net/california-tent-rental-services/large-tent-rentals/>).

Personalize Customer Service

You can also stand out from your legacy competitors by providing a thorough customer service model that is heavily personalized. Many classic and more traditional companies are so large that their customer service is, at best, spread pretty thin and, at worst, replaced by AI-assisted chat bots and other software that customers tend to find frustrating. Since you have a much smaller client base and the infrastructure, you can build a customer service model that treats people in a way that legacy competitors could never do at their current scale.

You should also make sure that your customer service is clean, effective, and focused and that quick action is always taken to resolve any outstanding issues. For example, our company uses customer contact forms that are easy to use and broken down into popular formats, such as those for [restaurants](#) (<https://tentrental.net/california-tent-rental-services/tents-for-restaurants/>) or [university and other large school facilities](#) (<https://tentrental.net/california-tent-rental-services/tents-for-schools-universities/>).

Even though your company cannot absorb costs as easily as legacy companies, you also still need to offer reasonable refunds and discounts whenever customers do not receive the quality that they deserve. This will help your audience take you seriously as a business, because it will show that your business has integrity. Mistakes should be rare, but you should also hold your brand and your employees accountable whenever you can in an authentic way to give your customer service that personal touch.

Take Bold Risks

You also need to take [bold risks](#) (<https://familybusiness.org/content/a-tech-entrepreneurs-journey-hard-work-and-smart-risks>) that will help you

stand out in a competitive market. While your company is still small and young, you can make big shifts in identity and product without ruining your brand reputation because no one really knows you yet. This built-in wiggle room means that you can try something fresh and change course if you find that it didn't really pan out. Try out new products to see if anything sticks with customers and also maybe try out new methods of advertisement if one doesn't seem to be panning out after all.

When I first started All Occasion Tents, I took a bold risk by requiring no down payment for new tent contracting jobs even though we had launched with minimal capital investment. This strategy ensured full client satisfaction and positioned our clients as holding all the leverage in the relationship. Our radical client-first practice ultimately paid off and it has since become a core operating philosophy of the company.

Focus also on risks that legacy competitors could not afford to take at the scale at which they operate. For example, a coffee business could give out free coffee all day on their first day of business in order to get the word out that their product tastes delicious. Such a move would cost an already established coffee chain thousands of dollars, but the investment would be much smaller at the scale where a brand new coffee shop is operating.

Reward Your Loyal Customers

Another enormous part of standing out from your competitors, especially legacy competitors, is keeping customer retention rates high by rewarding loyal customers. You can start with a really basic reward program that your startup business can actually afford, such as discounts or free items after returning a certain number of times. You can also reward new customers for purchasing a certain amount of product so that you are at least making your money back and then some.

You should also care for any significant business partnerships that you form so that they do not run to your legacy competitors or any fellow startups trying to make a name for themselves. [Collaborating with other companies](#) (<https://familybusiness.org/content/startups-c-an-attract-employees-and-financing-through-borrowed-re>) can easily spur growth for your business, but if you don't maintain these collaborations you will lose them.

Thanks to our work in the Sonoma/Napa Valley area,

we have a lot of wineries as clients and have used that partnership to gift other clients with wine cases. To reward our loyal winery clients in return, we have kept their rental prices the same for years and offered them exceptional service.

Conclusion

Legacy companies have a lot of natural advantages thanks to their famous brand reputation and identity, and they have already by definition cornered a big chunk of the industries within which they operate. This means that newer companies need to be strategic about how they are going to stand out in markets that are already being dominated. Even the smallest business can stand out and experience growth if they find enough unique angles from which to break out and provide a mix of product quality and customer service that simply cannot be overlooked.