

# HoustonSuccess

Issue 1

MAGAZINE

*SWIMMING WITH SHARKS*

## Daymond John

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For Success

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## Welcome,

**H**ello and welcome to *Houston Success Magazine*. We hope you all had a wonderful 4th of July weekend and are back to business for a successful Q3 and Q4.

For over 20 years, Braintek has been supporting small and medium-sized businesses in the Houston metro area, working with manufacturers, doctors, attorneys and more. Braintek has grown tremendously since we started back in 2002. In the beginning, it was my wife and I, and now, we have over 20 people on staff helping our clients with the technology in their businesses. We are very excited about our latest major development, a new building that we purchased in the Woodlands. It is an old, 3,800-square-foot house off of Oak Ridge Drive which was set up as a hair salon, and it is now being turned into a Network Operations Center for Braintek. It's currently being remodeled and, as of the time of this writing, is going through the final phases of drywall, tape, floating, and paint. By the time this is published, I hope that finishing touches will be wrapped up and we'll be scheduling the move in.

When the idea to produce a magazine was presented to me, I thought it would be a fantastic way to reach out to the business leaders in our community. I love the idea of having a magazine that is not necessarily focused on IT but all facets of business that would be a helpful and interesting contribution to our local area for both our current and potential clients.

Technology in general has evolved over the past 20 years. When I first started, much of the work that I did was pretty basic, setting up computers, troubleshooting issues, and making sure that clients could access what they needed from their servers, like QuickBooks. As the



internet evolved, becoming more mature and faster, that made remote and cloud services much easier to implement and set up and, as a result, security has become much more of an issue and a focus. We need to ensure that we're constantly educating our clients on ways that will improve their businesses operations, protect them from threats, and help them grow. Everything is constantly evolving, including technology and threats to security, and we are doing our best to stay on top of that for you.

If you are looking for IT support for your small or mid-sized business in the greater Houston area, why not give Braintek a call! ■

**Greg Brainerd**  
**Founder and CEO**  
**Braintek IT Services**  
**Braintek.com**  
**(281) 367-8253**

**PUBLISHER** Tulip Media Group  
**EDITOR** Greg Brainerd  
**GRAPHIC DESIGN** Jessica Embree  
**COORDINATORS** Katey McNeil  
Jen Kershaw  
Erika MacLeod

**CONTRIBUTORS** Robin Robins  
Greg Brainerd  
Aundrea Young  
John Dijulius  
Daymond John  
Jocko Willink

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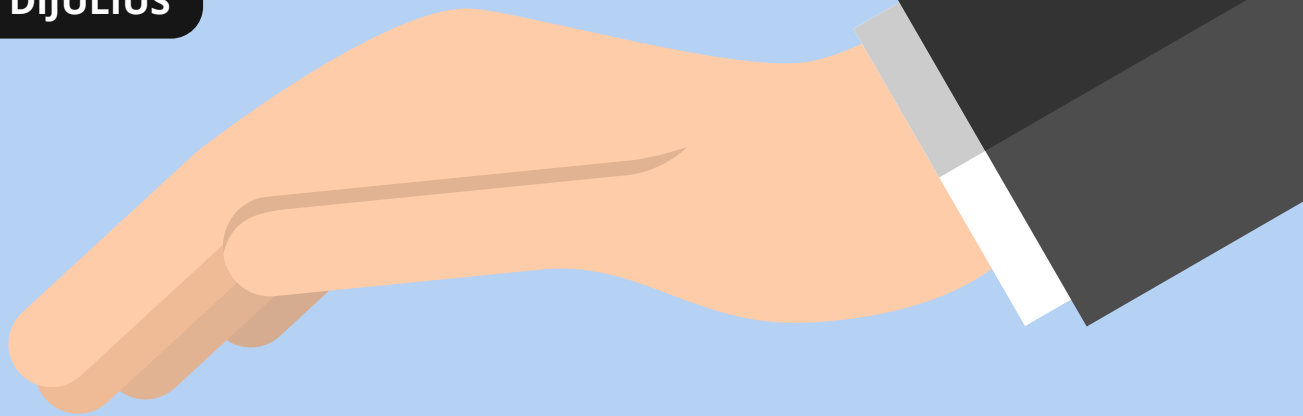


MEET DAYMOND!

# Customer Loyalty Strategy

## Screw Up First

BY JOHN DIJULIUS



One of the key characteristics of the top customer experience brands in the world is that they are “Zero Risk” to do business with. A Zero Risk business isn’t one that never makes mistakes; every excellent customer service company drops the ball from time to time. The secret to what makes these top brands Zero Risk lies in their customer service training—specifically, how well they have trained their employees to make it right when things do go wrong. In other words, Zero Risk means peace of mind for the customer.

A lot of organizations force their customer-facing employees to hide behind company policy. Policy is a word that tends to create a negative experience. During customer interactions,

customers hate hearing the words, “Our policy is . . .”. They understand policy was created to protect the organization from being taken advantage of by the customer.

Take an objective look at your rules of customer engagement and stop punishing 98% of customers for what only 2% do. Instead, train your employees to have a charitable assumption, which means giving customers the benefit of the doubt. In addition to being the right thing to do, it is a fantastic business strategy for building customer loyalty and enhancing customer lifetime.

## A BRILLIANT COMEBACK: PROVEN MARKETING STRATEGY FOR GROWTH AND CUSTOMER RETENTION

When a problem arises with a customer, it gives us the opportunity to own that customer for life.

Brand loyalty often results from screw-ups, i.e., how well a company handled a situation that initially went wrong. It is a fact that a high percentage of customers will do more business with a brand after a positive resolution was made to a problem. This is known as the Service Recovery Paradox, which is where the customer actually becomes more loyal to the brand than if the initial mistake had never occurred. It may sound counterintuitive, but the handling of problems can and should be part of your customer retention strategy. An unhappy customer quickly moves on. A happy customer is a loyal customer. And with acquisition five times more costly than merely keeping customers around, a healthy customer retention rate is very good for your bottom line.

It’s a proven fact that customers can often be more loyal to your business after they have experienced a service failure than if it had never happened in the first place. If your business deals with it well, you will clearly see the positive effect of customer satisfaction on loyalty growth.

In fact, new research from Stella Connect supports this. It was discovered that 97% of consumers across the United States and United Kingdom say that if a brand turned a poor customer service experience into a positive one by solving their problems immediately, they would do business with that brand again.

## LEGENDARY EXAMPLES OF BUSINESSES EXPERIENCING HIGH CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Being Zero Risk also tends to create heroic, legendary stories about your business that get shared amongst employees, with customers, and on social media. For example, I have

worked with the Ritz-Carlton hotels and have heard numerous epic tales such as this: When a guest tried to check in upon arrival and their room wasn’t available and the hotel was fully booked, a Ritz-Carlton team member booked and paid for that guest’s hotel room at their nearest competitor.

This clearly went far beyond the average customer experience. No company can make customers happy 100% of the time—there is no mobile app for that. But greatly exceeding customer expectations can be part of every company’s marketing strategy and business model. Putting guests’ needs first, always, is a sure way to not only build a strong customer base but also to greatly reduce churn rates.

Another great example of brilliant service recovery is found in the Starbucks customer service experience, which allows baristas to go the extra mile. Baristas are trained to provide a card to inconvenienced current customers that says:

*We apologize if your Starbucks experience was anything but wonderful. The next time we see you, please enjoy a beverage on us.*

With every complimentary beverage, customer relationships are strengthened in real time. Such personalized experience—a reflection of the company’s customer service vision statement—leads to the right kind of customer feedback and enriches the customer life cycle.

## TAKE THESE STEPS FOR BUILDING A ZERO RISK BRAND WITH STRONG CUSTOMER LIFETIME

To build a Zero Risk brand, you need to realize where you drop the ball the most, implement systems that reduce occurrences of those service defects, and create corrective protocols. Then, train your employees on these protocols to make things right.

Organizations can achieve greatness when their employees are allowed to do unexpected things—to show initiative and creativity, to step outside the scripted path. That is when the most delightful, interesting, and amazing results occur. ■

**John Dijulius**, best-selling author of five customer service books, is the chief revolution officer of The Dijulius Group and works with the top brands in the world on customer and employee experience.



# UNMITIGATED DISCIPLINE

## Military-Tested Leadership Strategies From A Navy Seal To Guide You In Everyday Battle



WITH JOCKO WILLINK

In 2004, Ramadi, Iraq, became the center of control for the Middle Eastern terrorist group al-Qaeda. Two-year battles ensued over the city of 500,000 people, during which the rule of law was nonexistent, bloodshed was constant, and devastation was unrelenting. US forces posted battle stations within the city and managed to keep al-Qaeda at bay until everything came to a head in March 2006.

The United States' position was threatened, and sensing urgency and rising tensions, the US Marines, Army, and Navy partnered to steamroll al-Qaeda and take back control centers in a pivotal location in the Iraq War. The result was a near-complete toppling of the once-powerful terrorist stronghold in the Iraqi city.

None of this would have been possible without military leadership having its boots on the ground and executing, supporting, and pushing these teams through power moves deployed by the intensifying US forces in the Middle East.

Today, one of those leaders is sharing his secrets with business leaders: Navy SEAL team officer Jocko Willink, a guest speaker at the 2020 Technology Marketing Toolkit IT Sales and Marketing Boot Camp.

A lifelong devotion to becoming a commando led Jocko to military service at the age of 18. Over a 20-year military career, Jocko served as a leader in the Navy SEALs, trained fellow SEALs on the complexities of combat in the Middle East, and earned multiple military honors. Today, Jocko is a *New York Times* best-selling author, host of the leadership podcast Jocko Podcast, and cofounder of Echelon Front, an organization devoted to preparing and training business leaders. And, like so many of us, this soldier's start began in his backyard.

### THE ORIGINS OF A LEADER

As a kid, Jocko was painting mud on his face and preparing for an imaginary war he had created. Battle lines were drawn in the dirt of

his yard, while every piece of wood or stick he could find became a toy gun. There was nothing but his own backyard shadowing his mission, but that didn't matter. He was going to lead his men to victory.

When the East Coast-grown boy discovered Navy SEALs, the image of what his future could be like as a commando started to unfold. Jocko enlisted in the Navy at 18 years old and was immediately stripped of his freedoms. This wasn't his backyard anymore; he was becoming a soldier. Jocko trained with real machinery, underwent intensive boot camp operations, and prepared for real combat. Eventually, Jocko worked his way through the ranks of the Navy to earn that additional freedom and become the soldier he always dreamed he could be.

Jocko trained as a Navy SEAL and was ultimately named an officer. Jocko's distinguished 20-year career saw him deployed to Iraq, where he led Navy SEAL Team Three's Task Unit Bruiser through the Battle of Ramadi. Leading alongside Colonel Sean MacFarland, Lieutenant Colonel Ronald Clark, and Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Neary, Jocko's Navy SEAL team joined the US Army, US Marines, and Iraqi Special Forces to resecure war-torn Ramadi during the nine-month battle.

Together, multiple branches of the US military and Iraqi Special Forces were able to restore their presence and apply pressure over al-Qaeda to attempt to rebuild peace in this turbulent and war-devastated region of the Middle East.

For his service, Jocko was awarded the Silver Star and Bronze Star, and Unit Bruiser was the most decorated Special Operations Unit during the Iraq War. After his deployment, Jocko served as the officer in charge of training for all West Coast SEAL Teams.

"It was the best job ever," Jocko says. "Being on the SEAL teams is awesome. You're working with a bunch of people and have

awesome missions. Your job is very fun day to day if you like being outside and diving out of airplanes and diving into the water.”

## THE DISTINGUISHED NAVY SEAL TODAY

As Jocko neared the end of a lustrous career, the lifelong Navy SEAL was prompted with an interesting proposition. The CEO of a company approached him about speaking to their team about the value and qualities of leadership. This CEO was a friend, and while public speaking wasn’t exactly in the career military man’s job description, Jocko knew he had lessons to share.

When Jocko finished the presentation, his friend had another favor to ask. They asked Jocko to present his lessons and expertise to every division of the company. Even better, the CEO was going to pay him. It was a done deal, and off Jocko went.

That’s where a little bit of fate intervened. The CEO of the parent company happened to be sitting in the audience at one of those divisional speaking engagements and was so impressed with what Jocko had to say that the CEO requested Jocko speak to every CEO in the company. Once Jocko finished speaking to those 40–45 CEOs, the requests for more presentations flooded in.

What was once an unclear path after retirement was crystalizing. There was a need for the leadership values and lessons Jocko had gleaned from a career in the military, and rather than sit on these lessons, Jocko saw an opportunity to lead through the battlefield of the boardroom.

“There was a high demand for it,” Jocko says. “What we realized is that in any organization’s leadership, leadership training is a big thing. There are a lot of civilian companies that don’t have leadership training, and they don’t learn that on the job if you don’t have good leaders to learn from. There’s a demand for leadership training.”

## ON THE FRONTLINES

In 2015, Jocko partnered with fellow US Navy SEAL Officer Leif Babin to co-author the *New York Times* best-selling book *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win*. The book pushes leaders to evaluate the ways in which they lead and challenges them to become better for their teams and in their personal lives. Together, Leif and Jocko provide readers with a thorough military-grade guide to navigating the nuances and landmines of leadership to become the best versions of themselves for their team and mission.

But the pursuit of education didn’t stop there. Jocko and Leif once again partnered to found Echelon Front to address the need for effective leadership training for organizations at all levels. The company now deploys 10 experts to teach leadership skills and styles the military ingrains in soldiers like Jocko and Leif before trusting them to lead a group of men and women into intense combat zones.

Building off the lessons Jocko and Leif compiled in *Extreme Ownership*, the team engages business leaders across the nation to create a culture of pride in work while fully accepting responsibility

for the actions and results of their leadership. To encourage finding the balance between pushing hard and being compassionate about a team’s success, Jocko, Leif, and the Echelon Front team deploy the Extreme Ownership Principles to serve their lesson.

They’re the very same tactics Jocko and Leif were taught in SEAL training, and while the war zone is vastly different than the boardroom, these tactics are still vital, Jocko says. These Extreme Ownership Principles give leaders a guide to that everyday battle.

**1. Cover and Move:** Just like the military teams that weave and advance toward an enemy target, your team has to be coordinated in the goals of your mission and the steps you are taking to get there. As Jocko often explains, if you have a sales team that is underselling what the manufacturing floor can create, then your sales team is failing your company and the manufacturing team. They are leaving the team dead in the water. Likewise, a manufacturing team that cannot produce the quality materials a sales team is pushing is failing the sales team. Sales will plummet, and you will lose customers.

**2. Simple:** This one is easy. Keep it simple. There’s no need for added complexities in your fight toward optimal company culture and production. Find the easiest, most effective, and most powerful way to get there and deploy it—simply.

**3. Prioritize and Execute:** Does this sound familiar? You settle into work on Monday morning, field 20 emails, prepare for the big meeting in an hour, manage a complaint from the floor, and overhear of a budding problem in your shipping area, among dozens of other matters that pull your attention away. How do you manage this? Where many untrained leaders fail is in their inability to prioritize the biggest problems ahead of them and focus on what they can accomplish rather than everything they want to accomplish.

**4. Decentralize Command:** When Jocko was leading a team of trained Navy SEALs into combat, he wasn’t taking the brunt of the responsibility of the tasks simply because of his rank. He was relying on the leadership capabilities of every member of Unit Bruiser. He recognized that other members of his team had skills that went beyond his own capacities, and he capitalized on them. A successful business leader does the same.

## DISCIPLINED TO SUCCEED

Becoming a great leader doesn’t happen overnight. It takes discipline, courage, and the foresight to understand where you need to grow and how you can get there. When Jocko spent his childhood days fighting his backyard war, he didn’t let each day pass hoping opportunity would land in his lap. Instead, he remained dedicated to his dream, enlisted, and climbed a ladder that many struggle to climb. All it took was that first step and a willingness to work.

“I’m not a big believer in motivation,” Jocko says. “. . . To think that every morning I feel like a spring chicken to go lift weights and go for a run . . . I’m not motivated. It’s because I demand unmitigated discipline.” ■



# When Is Marketing To Blame When Sales Don't Happen?

WITH ROBIN ROBINS



**M**y philosophy about marketing is, and always has been, that if I spend a dollar on marketing today, I should be able to directly point to a sale and tangible ROI from that investment as quickly and efficiently as possible. In my world, we don't count hashtags, likes, friends, and followers as "success." Only dollars generated in sales from new customers count, and every dollar you spend should directly support the goal of driving profitable customers in the door and additional revenue from existing clients.

However, the simple reality is that marketing *can't* always get that job done on its own. At some point, a *salesperson* needs to answer the call, book the appointment, conduct the demo or consultation, and ultimately, close the sale. Thinking that a great marketing plan will instantly produce more sales is asking it to do too much—a bridge too far.

In many cases, marketing is blamed for the failings of the sales team. "The leads were weak" is a very common complaint of crybaby sales reps who *only* want leads who are "buyers in heat," showing up with a check in hand and unbridled enthusiasm about buying *today*.

And while marketing can certainly produce some leads that fit that criterion, it significantly limits the number of opportunities you'll get, filtering out anyone who has a question, concern, or desire to talk to someone first before they buy. Candidly, if my marketing could produce those kinds of leads, I wouldn't have a need for professional salespeople. I could hire administrative assistants to simply process the orders.



So, what *can* marketing do, and where are its limits? Here's a short list of what you can and should expect from your marketing efforts.

## REPLACE **COLD** PROSPECTING

Great marketing can drive inbound leads of people who have a serious interest in buying or are at least open to the idea of a conversation. Even with all the available marketing media and strategies today, some companies still stupidly rely on salespeople to sift, sort, and trudge through an ice-cold list of names in search of a gold needle in a haystack. This is the fastest way to lose a great sales professional through burnout. Salespeople don't get burned out from selling—they get burned out, tired, and frustrated from prospecting. When you finally get a marketing plan producing *and* you've built a great list of unconverted leads in the process of getting ready to buy, selling gets a lot more productive and easier because you let your marketing systems find, qualify, and cultivate buyers.

## MAKE A GOOD SALESPERSON **GREAT**

Following on the previous, a good salesperson should spend the majority of their time talking to prospects who have some level of willingness and ability to buy what you're selling. Really great marketing can presell and predispose a prospect to want to do business with your organization by answering frequently asked questions, building trust, demonstrating differential value and USP (unique selling proposition), and creating urgency to buy. Great marketing can provide client testimonials and case studies to demonstrate competence, introduce risk-reducing guarantees and proof, reduce or eliminate fee resistance, and *educate* the prospect on what "good" is and what to look for when buying what you're selling, which makes you the *obvious* choice regardless of price. All of this makes the actual process of selling *easier*.

Recently, I hired a top salesperson from a very well-known and well-run organization local to Franklin, where we have our offices. I was delighted to actually recruit their rock star and had great expectations for his performance.

However, it quickly became apparent that he didn't know how to sell at *all*. I was actually shocked at how abysmal he was in his ability to have a consultative conversation, ask good questions, and *listen*. As you might imagine, he didn't last long. So, what went wrong? To my estimation, the company he previously worked for was so well-known and great at marketing that he only had to take orders, not sell. When he came to our team, we grilled him on good sales processes, which he was unable to grasp, so I never felt comfortable putting him on the phone with a prospect of ours.

This is a very common scenario to be aware of when hiring salespeople. Many can be great if sufficient marketing props them up. If you don't have strong name recognition and a

## "IF YOUR TARGET MARKET IS "ANYONE," YOU DON'T HAVE A TARGET MARKET..."

powerful brand to support the sales effort, someone who was a rock star in another organization that has those marketing assets may turn out to be a terrible rep for you. Of course, if you build that level of marketing power, you have the advantage of hiring average people and getting them to perform brilliantly.

## REPEL **WRONG-FIT** PROSPECTS

Most businesses *don't* give much thought to who they don't want as a customer, often because they're starved for business to the point where they'll take almost anyone. Big mistake. If your target market is "anyone," you don't have a target market—and part of communicating who is a right fit is communicating who the wrong fit is.

In my business, I make it abundantly clear that we aren't selling instant rice. Success in marketing requires a commitment to doing the work and sticking with a strategy long enough to get it to work. That is the extreme opposite of what many other marketing "gurus" will tell you. They're selling easy buttons and quick fixes because those have universal appeal. Who doesn't want a four-hour workweek or seven-minute abs? It's hard to sell "homework" that will produce results over time. However, I know our best client isn't one created with quick fixes and shortcuts. They want a *real* business and marketing plan that will actually sustain them and deliver consistent success, not a Happy Meal with a cheap prize in the box. ■

**Robin Robins** is the IT industry's most in-demand marketing consultant, sales trainer, and direct response marketing consultant who specializes in developing strategic marketing, sales and lead generation systems for MSPs, VARs and IT services companies.

Robin is the Founder of Technology Marketing Toolkit, MSP Success Magazine and Big Red Media. To date, her organization has coached, trained and consulted with over 10,000 IT business owners from all over the US and in 37 different countries. She currently runs the largest C-level peer group in the IT services channel for MSPs and her annual event, the IT Sales and Marketing Boot Camp, attracts over 1,600 attendees every year and is sponsored by the IT industry's leading vendors.

This vast experience has given Robin a broad knowledge of hundreds of marketing and sales tactics used by some of the most successful, sales driven organizations in the world.

# SWIMMING WITH SHARKS:

## The S.H.A.R.K. Strategies For SUCCESS


FEATURE STORY WITH DAYMOND JOHN

**T**here's no doubt that as one of ABC's *Shark Tank* investors, Daymond John knows what it takes to start a company from nothing and grow it into a massive success.

Born in Brooklyn and raised in Queens by a single mom who worked three jobs to put food on the table, no one can say John had any special advantages as a kid. After his dad left when he was just 10 years old, John believed he had to step up and be the man of the house. To earn money, he'd hand out flyers for \$2.25 an hour at a local mall, and when he returned home, he would save all the money he earned.

He decided he wanted to start his own clothing company, a goal that seemed like a pipe dream for a young, inexperienced, dyslexic,

broke "wantra-preneur" like John. However, his tenacity and hard work paid off, and his clothing line, FUBU, grew to a \$6 billion brand that has been worn by prominent artists from LL Cool J to \*NSYNC.

Today, John is a three-time best-selling author, an investor, and the CEO of The Shark Group, a branding and consulting firm. His experiences have given him the expertise to identify integral components of long-term success in his life, career, and the years he's spent growing as an entrepreneur and a person. John shared his five key S.H.A.R.K. points that serve as a template to keep you motivated, driven, and on track—just as John needed when he launched his global brand. "I had a lot of failures, but my hustle, my desire, my drive got me where I am," John said. And these five principles guided that push. 



**ALL OF THE  
CHALLENGES HE FACED  
WERE SURMOUNTABLE  
BECAUSE HIS PASSION  
NEVER WANED, AND  
HIS BRAND GREW  
BECAUSE OF IT.**



## S - SET A GOAL

As a teenager, John worked for small-business owners at the Coliseum Mall in Queens. These local entrepreneurs were his first examples of the people with the drive and hustle required to make a name for themselves. They weren't the greedy, rude business owners who were being depicted on famous TV shows like *Dallas* or *The Simpsons*. The entrepreneurs John worked for were real people who worked tirelessly every day for their goals and valued the community where they had set those goals.

"They were the first to the office, the last to leave," he recalled. "They thanked everyone for their success, but they blamed only themselves for their failures. They were mentors in the community. They were always educating themselves. They were amazing people." In the same mall where John once handed out flyers, he learned what his own entrepreneurial aspirations could become.

While John had cultivated a sense of entrepreneurship from a young age, his sense of what he wanted to do crystallized at a 1986 concert at the Spectrum Theater in Philadelphia. As Run-DMC took the stage, John's chief passions—business and hip-hop—fused together in his mind to provide a blueprint for the years to come. "In that split second, my life turned from black and white into Technicolor," John said. "I understood, in that moment, that no matter what, I was going to live, die, and prosper in this world of hip-hop."

As Run-DMC played, kids in the crowd were holding up pairs of their Adidas sneakers. John realized there was money to be made creating clothes specifically for the growing community of people who identified with hip-hop. He set 10 goals that night. Six of them expired in three months, while the others expired at two, five, 10, and 20 years. He thought about those goals every night and took a step toward one of them every day. It's a practice he continues to this day. "You can't hit a target you can't see," John said. "If you aren't in control of the goals you set, you let other people set goals for you."

## H - HOMEWORK

John was already devoted to hip-hop. How could he not be, growing up in the city where the genre was born and living in the same neighborhood as some of its earliest heroes, like LL Cool J and Run-DMC. In a sense, John had been gathering data on his market demographic his entire life by immersing himself in hip-hop culture.

But John had to find a way to fit the lifestyle he and his friends were emulating in the streets of New York into that Technicolor vision he saw at Run-DMC's concert. Hip-hop had found a way to create a culture from hundreds of people dancing all night with music blasting from speakers with stolen electricity into

a movement that was now encapsulating thousands of people. Suddenly, John had people to look up to who weren't the "pimps and drug dealers" driving fancy cars outside his doors. "Through this music, the kids were communicating about their hopes, their dreams, their loves, their aspirations," he said. "Hip-hop wasn't something that you just listened to; it was a way to live."

He began broadening his understanding by studying the fashion brands adored by his peers but realized that many brands had unspoken disdain for the people who were buying their products. One of them, Timberland, even went so far as to put an ad in the *New York Times* declaring they didn't sell or make their boots for "drug dealers."

John was incensed. He was working two jobs, having picked up a second at Red Lobster, in order to buy things like Timberland boots because his homework told him those were the boots his hip-hop heroes wore. But those same boots on his feet were sold by a company that was calling him and his community criminals. "Who's ever going to support, love, and value the customer who's purchasing their goods?" he thought. Well, he was.

"I'm going to come up with a name; it's going to be four letters," he decided. "It's not going to be about a color, because I'm not going to be [bigoted] the same way Timberland is; it's going to be about a culture." He went home and created a shirt and hat emblazoned with the letters BUFU: By Us, For Us. A few days later, John flipped the letters to FUBU, and a business was born.

John's lifelong homework came in handy when it came to marketing FUBU on a shoestring budget, and his love for the business he was creating is what propelled it forward. He'd show up at video shoots and convince rappers to wear his FUBU clothing. He asked business owners in large cities if he could remove the graffiti on their storm gates and paint them white, slapping an "Authorized FUBU Dealer" stencil on them, making FUBU familiar to anyone who walked, drove, or rode by after hours. He harangued hip-hop's biggest star, LL Cool J, for a promotional photo, making him the company's first spokesperson. He found out about the MAGIC show, an industry event where he could launch FUBU on a wide scale. He and his partners didn't even have a booth when they arrived, but they left with \$300,000 in orders.

The thing is, he didn't have \$300,000 to spend on creating these orders. Instead, he turned to the woman who had been his business partner since he was 6 years old when he was selling pencils to the kids at school: his mom, or Ms. John as she likes to be known publicly. She was able to acquire a \$100,000 loan against their \$75,000 house, and John and his business partners funneled that loan and the money they had made at the trade show into creating a makeshift sewing operation in their home. They would sleep in sleeping bags

on the ground, clothes were stacked to the ceiling, and by the end of it all, there was only \$500 left in the bank.

Again, John had a problem. He was lacking the financial savvy he needed to get the clothes out the door before his money ran dry. And, again, his mom stepped up. She asked him to save \$2,000 from his job at Red Lobster, and then she would help him out. When he handed her the \$2,000, Ms. John placed an advertisement in the local newspaper that read, "\$1 million in orders—need financing." That ad generated 33 calls offering help. Three of them were legitimate, and one was Samsung's textile's division.

With backing from Samsung, FUBU sold \$300 million worth of products in just three months. As FUBU continued to grow, John kept studying and fueling his passion. He learned about distribution, manufacturing, staffing, and everything else required for functioning as a multimillion-dollar brand. As FUBU took off, so did John's celebrity in the rap industry. His homework was paying off.

## A - AMORE

For John, sleeping in a sleeping bag next to a sewing machine didn't feel like sacrifice. Learning new skills and doing his homework was never a problem. Waking up at 6 a.m., sewing, selling his shirts, working at Red Lobster until midnight, and sewing again until 2 a.m. never felt like work. All of the challenges he faced were surmountable because his passion never waned, and his brand grew because of it. "The single thing that every successful person I've ever met has in common is *amore*—love," John said. "I would've dressed people for free for the rest of my life."

No matter how big FUBU grew, John believed his love for the business would grow with it, and FUBU was on the cusp of booming. Years later, LL Cool J would covertly rap about FUBU in a Gap ad while wearing a FUBU hat. The company's advertising team was targeting the market that LL and his hip-hop partners had built, but they never caught the subtle mention by LL before airing the advertisement.

The hip-hop community would flock to Gap stores because they believed LL was telling them they could purchase FUBU clothing at Gap, only to leave without purchasing anything in search of FUBU elsewhere, John explained.

After Gap's fiasco, FUBU would grow even larger than it had after Samsung's backing. Suddenly, John had made it big time, and his personal celebrity star was rising. He wasn't just this up-and-coming kid from Queens in the hip-hop world anymore. He was Daymond John, and he was living in Asia for six months, Europe the next six, and partying every day with rappers in between—rappers who weren't even wearing FUBU anymore. (Ironically, they were wearing another clothing brand John owned.)

But this didn't matter to his family. Fast forward a few years, and John was married with two little girls, Yasmeen and Destiny. Yet, the family rarely saw him. Instead, he was turning into the father who had left him at 10. His wife was stuck taking care of the family's eight houses and two daughters with nobody to talk to. Eventually, she had enough and filed for divorce.

"I remember my ex-wife calling me up and saying, 'I didn't leave because I don't love you; I left because I do love you,'" John said. He had a stark realization that he had lost himself and the love FUBU was built on. The guiding principles he believed in were no longer a part of



his life, and the love he had for his business had turned toxic. His ex-wife insisted he stop his self-destructive actions and instead talk to other entrepreneurs and funnel that passion and desire that was once so bright into something that was useful beyond FUBU. “She kicked me in my ass,” he said.

John discovered that his focus was on the celebrity his brand was creating for him, and his initial love was getting lost in the shuffle. As his daughters grew, he was parenting them over the phone half a world away, dazed and hungover from a night of partying. His love had shifted from the goals and passion he had years prior as a young adult, and this time, John took his ex-wife’s harsh reminder to heart.

“You’re not setting goals,” he told himself. “You’re out drinking and partying; that’s not setting goals. You’re not doing your homework. A hot fashion brand lasts 5–7 years. And amore, love—do you love not seeing your daughters?”

### R - REMEMBER, YOU ARE THE BRAND

In redefining himself and discovering a new path, John learned that the way he was living his FUBU lifestyle wasn’t representative of who he needed to be. Sure, the hip-hop stars who were wearing his clothes were partying until 6 a.m. In fact, FUBU stood for “For Us, By Us,” and he was living the lifestyle that the movement, which began in the streets, had developed. But that’s where his growth stopped, and while the movement grew into new clothing and styles, John was stuck repeating the “work hard, party harder” lifestyle.

He took the tough love from his ex-wife, shifted his focus, and began working on a better version of himself to transform his life. The rap stars he once partied with were replaced with morning TV hosts and entrepreneurs working through the early vision of their business. When reality TV show producer Mark Burnett saw John speaking on networks like CNBC, he thought John would be a good fit for a little show he was developing called *Shark Tank*.

By the time he joined the *Shark Tank* team, John had learned a valuable lesson on vision. Instead of investing his lifestyle and work into the moment, John learned how he could influence the future, and it started with the budding business owners he met on *Shark Tank*. “We don’t invest in brands,” he said of his experience on *Shark Tank*. “We invest in people. That’s the most important thing.”

John proposed that people should brand themselves with just 2–5 words. Those words will shape who you are and your goals at that moment. And as he was discovering what his personal brand was again and the value of investing in people on *Shark Tank*, he was living by the motto,

“I’m on a quest.” Those four words rang true for John as he was hustling at a higher level than ever before. This time, as his success grew, he expanded into industries he never even thought about before. His quest was partnering with real people, becoming synonymous with success, and celebrating the achievements of those he mentored.

With his newest sense of who he was and who he could be, John understood that he could communicate his value, and he began looking at others that same way. “Any time you take a picture or post a selfie, your brand is being represented, and those 2–5 words are in there,” John said. His brand was rising and getting stronger by the day. Nothing could stop him.

### K - KEEP SWIMMING

On Good Friday 2017, something almost did bring John’s latest growth to a halt, and John’s definition of his life would be boiled down into a new set of 2–5 words. That morning, he was admitted to the hospital for a simple hour-long procedure to remove a growth on his thyroid. Before being put under, the anesthesiologist asked John to think about what true success means to him. If he could think about his future, including his new daughter, the doctor told him, he would win before the surgery even began.

That surgery turned into a three-hour ordeal in which doctors removed a stage-2 cancerous growth that was set to overtake his lymph nodes and his brain.

That day, his 2–5-word motto turned from “I’m on a quest” to “My health is first,” John said. “When I was under, I knew I was going to beat this thing because I was going to be here to be around my fellow sharks and walk my three beautiful girls down the aisle. Because you know what we do as sharks?” he asked. “We always just keep swimming.”

John’s life has been a series of obstacles that could have prevented him from building his empire. He didn’t let his father’s absence, nor his dwindling bank account, nor his spiraling while FUBU soared stop him from achieving the goals that kid at the Run-DMC concert set out to do. And on that operating table, John was facing another obstacle that threatened to sink him.

Instead, John kept swimming.

Business and life are full of hurdles, and there are times when we want to pack it up and call it a day. We can’t. If we want to reach new heights, we must have persistence, determination, and a ceaseless attitude of progress. We may not all be sharks on TV, but we can all learn to swim like one. ■



# Client Success Story: Aundrea Young, Competitive Choice

WITH AUNDREA YOUNG



**C**ompetitive Choice is a full-service provider of specialty chemicals as well as industrial supplies and is celebrating their 20th anniversary this year. In their industry, they find themselves in constant need of IT management services. They were with a company that CEO Aundrea Young would describe as OK but mostly nonresponsive.

“Whenever we had an emergency, especially weather-related, then our technology would go down,” Aundrea says. “It is imperative that we can process orders and respond in a timely manner. We could not afford to have nonresponsive or slow response time as our customers expect more from us. We would be working on projects, and [our IT firm] would not answer our calls on time, and so we just reached a point where we were done.”

Then Aundrea discovered Braintek on the internet. “I interviewed several companies,” she recalls, “and what impressed me the most about Braintek was that Greg Brainerd, the owner, came out himself, with another team member. His company has grown as well but he has remained very attentive to our needs as a company.”

At that time, Competitive Choice had 11 or 12 employees and did a lot of business in the federal space. Says Aundrea, “Greg and his team are deeply knowledgeable and hands-on, and they’ve helped us grow as a company. They are very aware of the recent technologies and required compliances that are coming down the pipe. They have been able to help us with that and oversee the projects to implement them. When we must bring in a third party, they have come in and helped facilitate everything so our system remains intact.”

“What I like about Braintek, especially in the climate that we are in,” says Aundrea, “is that you get the old-fashioned service. They will pick up the phone and you can talk to the owner if you need to, and if he is not available, you can copy him into an e-mail and you will get a response.”

“When Greg came in the first time 5 or 6 years ago,” remembers Aundrea, “what impressed me was that he came in prepared and on time. I did not have to tell him what I needed. He came with a plan, and it was tailored to our situation.”

“Greg not only helped grow our company,” explains Aundrea, “but we now have more employees, and we outgrew our space. We moved to a bigger location, and when we moved, Greg’s team was hands on. You would have thought they were part of our team and my payroll. They planned everything out with us, working on the weekend, working at night, to ensure that when Monday came, we were up and running.”

“They also had a person in our office every day after the move, for as long as we wanted them,” recalls Aundrea. “We were nervous, implementing new software. We had a new phone system, and we had new employees, but his team was there every day until we told them we were okay. We now see them every two weeks. This took so much stress from us as a small company, oh my gosh! Greg Brainerd is a man who uses common sense!”

Here’s how you can contact Aundrea:

[competitivechoice.net](http://competitivechoice.net)

[ecommsales@competitivechoice.net](mailto:ecommsales@competitivechoice.net)

713-838-1144, 1-844-838-8224 (toll free), 713-838-1188 ■

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