Being Different Is Worth It

Idea In Short

Copying the well-worn playbook is efficient and produces average results at best, evidenced by how few publicly traded companies are consistently profitable. Real differentiation follows a two-step sequence: learn the fundamentals like a professional first, then deliberately break from convention like an artist, backed by patience, feedback and financial runway.

Every Mom's Advice

Every parent eventually tells a child some version of the same thing: just be yourself, stop trying to copy someone else. The advice sounds almost too simple to repeat as an adult, and it holds up remarkably well in a professional context too.1

Copying the Crowd Produces Average

Following established best practices, the wide and well-trodden path, is efficient, and efficiency and excellence are not the same thing. A useful data point: fewer than a third of the more than eight thousand publicly traded companies in the United States are consistently profitable, despite most of them broadly following the same conventional playbooks. Copying the competition is a reliable road to average, or worse, not a shortcut to standing out.

Learn the Rules Like a Professional

Picasso's well-known advice applies directly: learn the rules like a professional, so you can break them like an artist. Skipping the fundamentals and going straight for idiosyncrasy produces something juvenile rather than genuinely original. Real preparation looks like studying the foundational principles of a craft deliberately, staying smart and efficient rather than reinventing solved problems unnecessarily, building a genuine network of peers to

learn from and push against, identifying the actual drivers, regulations and competitive dynamics that shape an industry, and learning the specific vocabulary that resonates with employees, customers, suppliers and investors alike.

Then Break Them Like an Artist

Only after that foundation is genuinely in place does breaking from convention become a strength rather than a gap in competence. This stage is less a straight line than an energetic, winding trip: learning continuously, staying curious, getting rewarded both financially and emotionally for helping others, building real friendships along the way, and politely declining opportunities that pull attention off the chosen path. The destination is being known for something specific, not remaining a generic, interchangeable professional.

Five Conditions That Make It Sustainable

Financial independence matters first, since covering basic needs, and ideally creating some genuine margin beyond that, removes a huge source of pressure to conform. A supportive community matters just as much, whether that support comes from a spouse, family or close friends, since feeling genuinely secure makes it considerably easier to step visibly into the light. Honest feedback loops matter too, since winning requires knowing in real time whether paying customers think the work is genuinely great, merely acceptable, or simply not worth the asking price. Real patience matters, since the odds that customers love new, differentiated work in its earliest days are close to zero, for entirely ordinary reasons: it usually is not fully polished yet, it is not yet visible to enough people, there is no track record and no accumulated word-of-mouth. And a coherent set of activities matters most of all, echoing Michael Porter's definition of strategy as a deliberately chosen, mutually reinforcing set of activities rather than any single standout idea.2

Friend Up, Deliberately

Building a network of professional relationships that genuinely support growth, rather than merely coexisting alongside a career, deserves active investment rather than passive hope. Starting that habit earlier rather than later compounds meaningfully, since the relationships that end up mattering most in a career are frequently the ones cultivated years before they become useful.3

Why Differentiation Feels Scary Before It Feels Rewarding

The discomfort of stepping away from the safety of consensus is not a sign that something has gone wrong; it is the expected cost of doing something genuinely distinct rather than merely comfortable. Early skepticism from peers, slow initial traction and the nagging temptation to quietly revert to the well-worn path are all part of the normal sequence, not evidence that the underlying approach was mistaken. Recognizing that discomfort as a predictable stage, rather than a red flag, makes it considerably easier to keep going through the early, unglamorous stretch before differentiation actually starts to compound into something visible.

A Trip, Not a Formula

None of this reduces cleanly to a checklist that guarantees differentiation on a schedule. It is closer to a disciplined trip: rules learned thoroughly first, then rules broken deliberately and specifically, supported by patience, feedback and a genuine community willing to catch the inevitable early stumbles along the way.

- 1Individuality
- 2Michael Porter
- 3Mentorship

Summary

Copying the crowd is efficient and rarely produces anything better than average. Learn the rules of the craft first, then break them deliberately, backed by patience, honest feedback, financial runway and a genuine support system. Differentiation is a fun, winding trip, not a straight line.