The Cost Of Brand Imitation

Idea In Short

Stop benchmarking the competition before writing another line of brand strategy. Best practices reduce operational risk, but they were never built to create a distinct market position and treating them as a growth engine produces brands that look credible yet leave no impression. When positioning mirrors the category, customers default to comparing prices, a contest few organizations can sustainably win. The fix is not reinventing everything; it is building strategy from an honest read of your own organization's constraints, beliefs and unmet opportunities before borrowing anything from outside. Companies that did this, including Airbnb, Tesla and Liquid Death, built positions that were hard to copy because the conviction behind them could not be copied. Generative AI is raising the cost of skipping this step, since it can now produce competent, indistinguishable content at a volume no team could match manually.

Walk through any industry's marketing pages, whether software, consulting, retail or professional services and a pattern becomes hard to miss. The visual identities blur together, the taglines are interchangeable and the promises overlap so closely that swapping one company's homepage for a competitor's would require nothing more than a logo change. This convergence is the direct result of an entire category adopting the same set of best practices and it carries a strategic cost that most organizations underestimate for years before it shows up in the numbers.

Best Practices Were Built To Reduce Risk, Not Create Advantage

Shared industry standards exist to lower the odds of failure and on that narrow goal they work reasonably well. A practice earns the "best" label only after enough organizations have used it long enough to generate evidence that it works, which means the label always arrives after the practice has already become common. Common practice, by definition, produces common outcomes, since everyone applying the same method converges toward the same middle of the pack. Reducing risk and building a distinct market position pull in opposite directions more often than executives want to admit. An organization that wants both outcomes at once is usually optimizing for neither, because the safest path in any category is also the most crowded one.

The Harvard Business School economist Michael Porter drew this line decades ago, arguing that operational improvement and strategic positioning solve different problems and get confused constantly.1 Copying a rival's operational tactics might close a performance gap, but it cannot manufacture the kind of position that makes a customer choose one brand over an equally competent alternative. That distinction gets lost inside most benchmarking exercises, which measure how closely an organization matches the field rather than how far it has moved from it. The result is a strategy function that spends its energy tracking competitors instead of defining what the organization itself is for.

Imitation Feels Rational Because It Mirrors A Human Instinct

The pull toward copying what appears to be working elsewhere is not a failure of judgment; it draws on a documented pattern in human behavior. People and organizations gravitate toward following the crowd when the stakes are high and the correct answer is genuinely unclear, a tendency researchers describe as herd behavior.2 Inside a company, this shows up as benchmarking every significant decision against category leaders, adopting their tone and visual conventions and treating close resemblance to a market leader as evidence of sound judgment. Executives rarely frame it this way out loud, but the underlying logic is simple:

> if a respected competitor is doing it, doing the same thing feels defensible even if it is not effective

The consequence is what might be called invisible differentiation, a brand that reads as competent and professional yet leaves no distinct impression on the people it is trying to reach. Gallup's long-running research into service brands found that once product quality and price reach parity across a category, the remaining driver of loyalty shifts to something harder to copy:

> the specific, lived experience a customer has with the organization's people and delivery.3

When a brand's positioning sounds identical to its competitors, that remaining lever disappears too and price becomes the only variable customers have left to compare. Few organizations can sustain a strategy built around winning on price alone. The costs of this drift build slowly:

> teams stop asking original questions and start scanning competitors for cues, brand narratives lose their specificity and internal culture starts rewarding safe execution over original thinking

None of this appears in a quarterly earnings report, which is exactly why it persists for years before anyone names it.

Borrowed Models Fail Because They Skip The Conditions That Made Them Work

The clearest evidence that best practices resist transplantation comes from the long list of companies that tried to replicate the internal models of Spotify, Toyota and Netflix. Each of these three organizations developed an internal system that performed extraordinarily well under a specific set of conditions and each became a magnet for imitation once its results became public. Spotify's squad-based structure functioned because of years of engineering autonomy paired with strategic alignment that developed gradually inside that specific culture, not because of the org chart itself. Toyota's production system rested on decades of continuous learning and organizational reflection; the Lean Enterprise Institute has documented how organizations that copy the visible tools without that discipline typically end up running a cost-cutting exercise rather than the compounding improvement process Toyota actually built.4

Netflix's culture of candid feedback and minimal formal policy fits an organization that deliberately hires people who find that intensity energizing rather than exhausting, which is not a universal preference. Harvard Business School's own review of the model notes that Netflix itself had to test whether the culture still matched its circumstances once growth slowed, suggesting that even the originating company treats the model as conditional rather than fixed.5 Organizations that adopted the surface features of these three models, the rituals, the titles, the language, without the underlying conditions typically ended up with new terminology attached to their existing problems. This is the core failure of best-practice transfer:

> it documents outcomes without transferring the conditions that produced them

Context does not travel with the framework and context is usually the factor that decided whether the original approach worked at all.

Contextual Strategy Starts With The Organization's Own Situation

The alternative to imitation is not reinventing every process from a blank page. It is building strategy on a clear, honest understanding of the organization's specific situation before importing an idea from anywhere else. Contextual strategy asks a different set of questions from the start. Instead of asking what competitors are doing, it asks what problem the organization is actually trying to solve, what is genuinely true about its own capabilities and history and what position in the category no one else has credibly claimed.

This produces three practical shifts in how strategy gets built inside an organization.

1. Honest observation of where value actually flows internally and where it stalls, replaces the assumption that a competitor's solution will map cleanly onto a different set of constraints
2. Borrowed ideas become starting points for small experiments rather than templates for direct application, tested with feedback loops before any resource commitment scales up

3. Internal learning takes priority over imported wisdom, on the premise that what an organization discovers through its own direct experience is more actionable than anything observed from outside

Airbnb, Tesla and Liquid Death illustrate what this looks like once it succeeds. Airbnb built its early positioning around travel as a human connection rather than a transactional booking, a framing no established hotel brand could adopt without contradicting its own business model. Tesla repositioned electric vehicles away from an efficiency argument toward an aspirational one, well before most competitors treated electric cars as anything but a compliance category. Liquid Death built a canned-water brand on the visual and cultural language of heavy metal, deliberately targeting a consumer who found conventional health marketing condescending. Each of these positions rested on a specific, falsifiable belief about what the market was missing and each proved difficult to copy precisely because copying the surface required also adopting the conviction underneath it.

Original Positioning Is Built, Not Discovered By Accident

Brand originality is not a creative talent some organizations happen to have and others lack. It results from three things operating together:

> clarity about what the organization genuinely stands for, willingness to act on that position even when it feels uncomfortable internally and consistency in reinforcing it across every point of contact until it becomes recognizable without a logo attached

A B2B services company that worked through this process with Spinta Digital shows what the shift looks like in practice. Its website, sales materials and messaging had become indistinguishable from its competitors, using the same language, the same design conventions and the same broad claims about expertise. After repositioning around a specific belief, that the company actively rewrote industry standards rather than followed them, the tone, visuals and storytelling were rebuilt to replace category clichés with a direct point of view. Within 90 days, the company recorded 55 percent higher engagement on its content, a 43 percent lift in brand recall and inbound leads that specifically cited the brand's distinctiveness as the reason for reaching out. That growth came from breaking the category's shared assumptions, not from executing them more efficiently than competitors.

Sustaining this internally requires deliberate structure rather than a one-time repositioning exercise.

- Monthly cross-team sessions built to challenge internal assumptions rather than benchmark against competitor moves
- Brainstorming sessions that deliberately exclude competitor references, so ideas originate from internal conviction instead of external observation
- A culture that treats a failed experiment as valid evidence rather than a mark against the people who ran it, since that tolerance is what allows original thinking to survive an organization's natural risk aversion

Generative AI Raises The Cost Of Staying Generic

Generative artificial intelligence [AI] is intensifying the pressure toward category sameness rather than relieving it. As tools for producing content, design and campaigns become faster and more accessible, the volume of material that is competently produced yet completely indistinguishable keeps expanding. A recent analysis in Forbes described this dynamic directly, arguing that when organizations across a category rely on the same AI platforms trained on similar data and optimized for similar engagement metrics, differentiation erodes even faster than it did during the era of human-written best-practice content.6 The organizations that benefit from this shift will treat AI as an amplifier of a position they have already defined, not as a substitute for defining one.

AI systems can produce content efficiently and at a scale no team of writers could match. What they cannot produce is lived experience, a genuine point of view formed through direct practice, or the specific conviction that makes a market position feel earned rather than assembled. The online business commentator Joel Comm has drawn a similar distinction between content that describes an action taken and content that merely describes other content, noting that his most effective work came from sharing direct experience honestly, including failures, backed by specific data rather than generic advice. Tactics can be copied by any organization willing to study them. The lived results behind those tactics and the perspective that comes only from having produced them, cannot be copied at all.

Best practices will continue to serve a legitimate purpose in reducing operational risk and setting a baseline for competent execution. The mistake organizations keep making is treating that baseline as a route to leadership, when it functions as precisely the opposite. A best practice, once documented and adopted broadly, describes only what the average organization in a category has learned to do adequately. Leadership requires doing something the average organization has not yet worked out how to do and no amount of benchmarking against that average will produce it.

- 1What Is Strategy?
- 2Herd behavior
- 3Building Brand Differentiation
- 4Setting the record straight on lean
- 5Freedom, Fear and Feedback: Should Other Companies Follow Netflix's Lead?
- 6Why AI Is Drowning Your Marketing Into A Sea Of Sameness

Summary

Best practices will keep earning their place as a floor for operational competence, not a path to leadership. An entire category can adopt the same playbook and still produce nothing but average outcomes, because the practices were built to spread risk, not to create distinction. The organizations that pull ahead do the harder work first:

> they name what is genuinely true about their own constraints and convictions, test that position honestly in the market, then reinforce it everywhere they show up

Borrowed frameworks still have a role, but only as raw material for experiments, never as templates to install directly. Generative AI has made that discipline more urgent, not less, since it can multiply sameness faster than any team of copywriters ever could.