

Creative Swiping

What is Creative Swiping?

Creative Swiping is the name given by American management guru Tom Peters to the practice of adopting and adapting the good ideas of others and making them your own.¹

Who is better than you?

Many Western companies have a poor knowledge of their competition. Competitor analysis is an essential prelude to understanding who is operating effectively and may therefore have something worth copying. The biggest threat may not be a traditional rival but a new competitor moving into your market. In the early 1980s General Motors was obsessed with its local competitor Ford. Ford, however, had realised that Toyota presented the more serious challenge.

When assessing your competition, don't just look at the familiar rivals, look at:

- Foreign firms, particularly those making unobtrusive entries into niche markets. Most Japanese companies made their Western market entries this way.
- Small domestic companies focusing on a profitable niche
- Large domestic companies diversifying into your territory
- Companies with regional dominance
- Companies exploiting novel distribution channels *e.g.* Amazon

Competitor analysis should be as detailed as possible: coarse figures will not reveal changes in market or geographical niches.

It is important to understand not just how successful competitors are, but how they operate. A company which has flexible and non-bureaucratic management will be able to introduce new products and services much more quickly than a staid, more traditional business.

Competitor analysis should not be the sole preserve of an isolated unit – all staff should be involved in gleaning competitor information. There need to be clear channels for the collation, analysis and dissemination of the information.

A side benefit of involving all staff in competitor analysis is that readiness to change is increased.

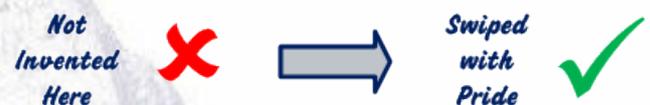
Not Invented Here

Your business needs to trade "Not Invented Here" (NIH) for "Swiped from the Best with Pride". You need to be alert to the NIH deniers:

- We can't copy old rivals because
 - If they do it it can't be any good
 - Who wants to look like them anyway?
- We can't copy new rivals because it wouldn't work in our environment/culture
- We can't copy small rivals because we're too big - you can't do that sort of thing with more than 500 on the payroll
- We can't copy large rivals because we are too small - we don't have their deep pockets
- We can't copy from non-rivals because that wouldn't work in electronics / engineering / banking / pharmaceuticals (delete as appropriate)

The attitude needs to change to:

- Being positive about competitors' products and services, in particular being alert to small features which are appreciated by customers
- Being positive about products and services of other industries which could be adapted to your own
- Involving all levels and functions in the business in "What's going on out there that's interesting?"



Copying & Uniqueness

Given that success usually depends upon differentiating a business from its competition, how do we square that with copying?

1. Every idea you steal should be adapted and enhanced to fit your special circumstances
2. Uniqueness is often the product of continually improving a product or service, most of which will already have been done by someone else in a different market. Consider small, innovative companies as experiments worth watching.
3. Copying does not interfere with breakthrough thinking – it improves the chances of achieving a breakthrough by seeding the creative process.

¹ T Peters, 'Practice "Creative Swiping"', *Thriving on Chaos* pp 228 - 236, Pan Books, London 1989

It is important to understand that creative swiping is more than simply copying a competitor. Copying without improvement is simply playing catch-up. Copying from non-competitors, however, can be powerful.

RS Components

In the 1990s RS Components became aware that their despatch system was becoming a constraint on growth.



Photo: Mohd Nor Azmil Abdul Rahman from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The despatch team went to Silverstone for a day watching the pit teams to learn how they were able to refuel and replace tyres so quickly. Applying the lessons to their work they achieved substantial improvements in despatch times.

Customer perceptions are everything

Customers like a competitor's product for reasons that *they* choose, whatever you may think of the relative quality of your offering. An essential prelude to any business improvement activity is to understand what customers value in your product or service. (See separate sheet "Lean in a nutshell")

How to start?

Try running a contest within each department (or across the whole business for a smaller organisation) with prizes for:

- The best swiped idea overall
- The most ideas swiped from outside the organisation
- Highest percentage of participation
- Best idea from a small competitor
- Best idea from a large competitor
- Best idea from a foreign competitor
- Best idea from a non-competitor

Maybe start a separate "Swiped with Pride" suggestion scheme to run alongside an existing scheme.

A flying swipe?



The low-cost airlines are hugely successful despite criticism from detractors. They must be getting something right – can you swipe it and use it in your own business?