Book Review:

Unlabel: Selling you without selling out

by Marc Ecko

In this book, Marc Ecko uses the template of a textbook and a loose, personal tone to tell the story of his company, Ecko Unlt., and how he developed it from his parents’ garage. One of the best-selling business books of the year, Ecko explains how he learned his craft, build his brand, and picked up the knowledge base needed to run a multi-national clothing company.

Overview

Marc Ecko, born Marc Milecofsky, taught himself to create graffiti style spray-painted t-shirts, and over twenty years gradually built from selling them locally to worldwide fame. Ecko has written the textbook that he wish he had, part-memoir, part how-to, with a heavy emphasis on personal growth and authenticity. It’s at times inspirational, funny, or informative, but always seeks to communicate the passion with which Ecko infused his business.

Developing a Craft

As a clothing company, Ecko found a huge audience by bringing graffiti and hip-hop clothing styles to huge audience. In the beginning, the author built his foundational artistic skills through hours of practice, mimicry, and experimentation, while also practicing promotional tactics such as constantly wearing, and touting, his gear. During this time, he was also developing a strong sense of his target market and how to reach them, working hard to get his clothing into the hands of tastemakers like Spike Lee.

In describing his path to becoming a master designer, Ecko communicates his respect for the craft and especially the product. There are deep dives into topics like color saturation and screen printing, and you learn that Adobe Illustrator made using a greater number of colors possible with cheaper machinery. Ecko’s enthusiasm for his work gives these perhaps dry elements energy, and he does a nice job of building out the scenes and characters that populate these stories.

Building a (Big) Business

The next part of the book applies the same process-oriented attention to the second stage of the company, when it was confronted a host of growth-related highlights and problems. Ecko discusses openly the pitfalls and processes that he encountered as the company grew: taking on and losing partners, marketing with budgets cheap and lavish, finding reliable overseas manufacturing partners,
and expanding the business into different brands and brick-and-mortar stores. Throughout all of these transformations, the company cycled through taking on greater debt, painfully adjusting to their new circumstances, and then growing fast enough to survive. These maneuvers all work, until a few too many mistakes and big risks occur at the same time. In the end, Ecko wishes they had brought in a financial expert who was personally, and financially, invested in the company’s success.

For me, these descriptions hold the real value of the book: clearly connecting business choices made to the results that followed. In the end of the book, the company is saddled with high debt but is able to find a buyer, allowing Marc Ecko to move on to other endeavors.

The Formula

To organize this story, Marc Ecko creates an “Authenticity Formula”, through which he attempts to relate the important personal characteristics that have led to the success and self-honesty he’s been able to achieve. Elements of this formula begin the book and each of the subsequent ten chapters, but I didn’t appreciate their overall value in organizing the book. These sections are brief, however, and can be scanned quickly or skipped altogether.

Should you read it?

This book could be a great fit for a younger person looking to get excited about starting a business while also cluing them in to the difficulties and dangers possible. It would also be a good read for someone very interested in youth culture, clothing, and hip-hip in general. That said, this book is not for everyone. The confessional quality of the narrative, strange layout, and emphasis on the somewhat bizarre Authenticity Formula will turn some readers off. For the many that fall in the middle, this is a quick, informative, and mostly engaging read.

Terence O’Neill is the Entrepreneurship Librarian at Michigan State University, where he works to connect entrepreneurs to resources that will better inform their business decisions. Through a background in libraries and community education, Terence has worked to support business and innovation internationally and throughout Michigan.

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