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You're the Boss

The Art of Running a Small Business

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How One Dry Cleaner Competes With Tide

By **PAMELA RYCKMAN**

Ed Zurga for The New York Times Joe Runyan: “People like doing business with people they like.”

Joe Runyan, the founder of [Hangers Cleaners](#) in Kansas City, Mo., an environmentally safe dry cleaner, was concerned when, in 2008, [Procter & Gamble](#) opened its first franchised Tide-branded dry-cleaning facility 1.5 miles from the Hangers headquarters. As we discussed in a [case study](#) published in April, Mr. Runyan feared [Tide](#) would undercut his prices and outspend him on promotional material to gain market share.

However, Mr. Runyan said he was “thrilled” by his company’s performance this year. He said he had kept costs fixed but still expected revenue to increase 10 percent over 2009 as a result of both new customers and more business from existing patrons.

While Tide has driven some smaller competitors out of the Kansas City market — to the benefit of Hangers’ business — Mr. Runyan attributes both top- and bottom-line gains to his focus on van pick-up and delivery service. He also says the company’s quirky personality and regular communication with customers through social media is its greatest differentiating factor and the primary reason customers stick with Hangers. Tide, meanwhile, [continues to expand](#) into new markets.

Q. *What advice do you give other dry cleaners trying to survive where Tide opens franchised stores?*

Mr. Runyan: The entrance of Tide into our market forced us to consider how we’re different, what we can do that someone else won’t be able to replicate. So I tell them to perform a S.W.O.T. (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis like we did. Figure out how to accentuate your strengths and shore up your weaknesses. Forcing business owners to do that is a healthy thing, and hopefully they’re doing it before Tide or any competitor shows up.

Q. *What’s your greatest weapon against a global brand like Tide?*

Mr. Runyan: We’ve created a unique brand. We’re funny and edgy, and now that’s how our business is known. People like doing business with people they like.

It’s reinforced by our use of social media. Whether through Facebook or Twitter or our regular e-mails, I’m always getting feedback from customers who say they love hearing from us

because our messaging is hilarious, whether or not they use the coupon attached.

Q. *Such as?*

Mr. Runyan: My personal favorite: a Mother's Day promotion with a picture from the movie "Mommie Dearest" and my face superimposed on Joan Crawford's daughter's body. The slogan says, "Keep Mommie Dearest from ironing your shirts this Mother's Day ..." It still gives me the creeps.

Or an e-mail with a picture of George Hamilton with the slogan: "After another year of braving the elements, is your favorite leather coat beginning to look like this?"

We still have people asking for our presidential T-shirts. We made one with a picture of Bill Clinton that says, "I wish Monica and I knew about Hangers," and another one with George W. Bush that says, "After going to Hangers, spots are harder to find than weapons of mass destruction." I'm trying to come up with an idea for Obama.