

COLUMNS

## How a narrow marketing focus undid BlackBerry's consumer appeal

July 19, 2012



By [Vanessa Horwell](#)

"It's the consumer, stupid!"

There. I said it. In the last few months we have all read kilobytes upon kilobytes often with BlackBerry rivals about how the mighty have fallen and that the once presidential-popular mobile device and its parent company, Research In Motion, is rapidly moving toward disaster.

We have read these stories on trains, on buses, on planes, in bathrooms and even while stopped at traffic lights.

What I do not want is for this column to morph into another 800-word opinion piece that blindly attacks a company that, in the subdued language of its CEO Thorsten Heins, is "very, very, challenged at the moment."

I know that. And so do you. A 95 percent stock price devaluation and predicted 33 percent staff layoff are quite the red-alert indicators, and knocking a company when it is down is easy for the media world's pack mentality.

The question is, how could something like this happen?

Belt away

It was less than four years ago when BlackBerry, at the height of its popularity, launched its first touch screen and keyboard-less device, there were more than 10 million subscribers and Research In Motion's stock price soared to \$137.41 per share.

The danger zone, I would argue, comes with hyper reliance on niche marketing.

BlackBerry may have been sold to the North American and world public as the first mobile messaging device that could link to business email servers. But that distinction is borderline meaningless today as Android and iPhone markets dominate.

Even the slower-to-adapt Capitol Hill gang is losing its BlackBerry faithful.

In a January 2012 National Journal survey, some 77 percent of the Beltway crowd still owned a BlackBerry, but that is down from 93 percent in 2009. What is more, only 1 percent of respondents said they would be buying BlackBerrys in the future.

So, what is so bad about niche marketing?

Sharing is scaring

Arguably, nothing if your niche market is likely to remain niche and not become cannibalized by competitors. And that is exactly what has happened to Research In Motion.

By becoming so wedded to the mobile business communications industry, Research In Motion developers lost sight of their consumers.

Smartphones and tablets might be reaching critical mass adoption today, but their ascendance should have been factored into Research In Motion's product development years ago, perhaps even at the height of its dominance, since the BlackBerry touch screen in 2008 was already an obvious attempt to catch up to Apple's mobile momentum, if not yet its adoption rate.

Of course, it is easy to look back and say X,Y and Z should have been done. But BlackBerry's bloodletting is not brand new. Far from it.

Even two years ago, the signs were telling. A December 2010 Nielsen report confirms this.

After maintaining a 38 percent market share in October 2009, compared to Apple's 27 percent and Android's 2 percent, all three operating systems were neck-and-neck 14 months later.

Between December 2010 and today, Research In Motion should have begun aggressive re-branding, moving beyond the business and corporate elite.

Like Android, perhaps it could have marketed itself as the "un-Apple" product? Or perhaps it could have remained largely within the business world domain but instead devoted research and development to improving its application selection, and marketing itself as the go-to mobile business tool.

In this re-imagined BlackBerry-favored world, its new devices would capitalize on its long-form writing capability an ability which I can attest was already my BlackBerry's greatest strength as well as market a host of other services on par with Microsoft Office such as high-resolution document scanning, remote faxing and a Skype and Facetime competitor that brought mobile multiparty business teleconferencing to the next level.

Alas, not.

Dead write

Many of these ideas and mobile business tools have already become part of the iPhone and Android app universe, and the imagined BlackBerry-favored world is just that a dream.

Mr. Heins says his company is not in a "death spiral." As an early BlackBerry adopter in December 2004, I too, have a sense of company loyalty.

My trusty BlackBerry has lived with me through some tough times and has helped me meet more than a few late-night deadlines.

Even if I ultimately jump into the Android market which I am strongly considering it is painful to see any company as on top of its game as Research In Motion to struggle so, especially considering my own background in communications.

Perhaps enough foresight could have helped steer Research In Motion in a new direction when a course correction could have made a material difference.

Instead, further collision with today's consumer needs needs that have become embedded in our mobile and social media lives where what defines business and pleasure interactions have blurred seems likely to continue.

RIM or RIP

With a leaner workforce and reduced operating costs, it is possible that Research In Motion will find a way to launch its BlackBerry 10 survival device closer to its original launch date.

It is also possible that BlackBerry 10 will finally demonstrate iPhone-like functionality and a touch screen that responds like a touch screen should and not like you are using a chalkboard.

BlackBerry's niche market is evaporating as fast as the Great Lakes, and the consumer has spoken. Let us hope that like the lake, Research In Motion launches a superior product soon.

Otherwise, we will not be talking about a company's death spiral. We will be writing its obituary.

*Vanessa Horwell is chief visibility officer of [ThinkInk](#), Miami Beach, FL. Reach her at [Vanessa@thinkinkpr.com](mailto:Vanessa@thinkinkpr.com).*

American Marketer is published each business day. Thank you for reading us. Your **feedback** is welcome.