

***THE MYTH OF EXCELLENCE:  
WHY GREAT COMPANIES NEVER TRY TO BE THE BEST AT EVERYTHING***

by Fred Crawford and Ryan Mathews  
New York: Crown Business, 2001

Reviewed by Anita B. Williams, Ph.D.  
Professor of Marketing, School of Business

**F**irst things first, three definitions and a premise:

- Consumer relevancy “is the ability to see business through the customer’s eyes and conduct business on terms that customers find are meaningful on a personal level.” (p. xvi)
- Content is the value of a transaction; context consists of **values** that surround the transaction.
- Every business transaction has five aspects regardless of the type of business or transaction: price, product, access, experience, and service.

Most people think only of content when they consider business. The authors argue that context is now more important. The authors’ argument has two parts. First, while lives of consumers in developed countries are materially the best in history, time pressures and exploding information and technology overwhelm consumers. Something elemental is missing from their lives. Failed by social institutions, they “want reinforcement of their personal--not just commercial--values.”(p. xv) They are searching for trust, respect, honesty, courtesy, and ease.

The second part of the argument is that great businesses are relevant and provide the context/values that consumers are looking for. The way they do that is they do not try to be the best at everything, but they dominate in the one part of the five-part transaction most important to their target customers, differentiate or set themselves apart from the competition in one other, and are acceptable in the other three. To fail to be at least acceptable in any area is the road to failure. Attempting to excel in all five parts confuses consumers and is needlessly costly.

If their ideas seem a bit far fetched, the authors make a fair case. If you think about it, consumers are cynical about business, not without reason, and finding a business that treats its customers as real people, instead of a set of demographics, and with respect and honesty is refreshing, if rare. The authors are right about one thing, though others have said it: too many firms are doing the same mediocre things. Few give customers any reason to be loyal. When every offering looks the same as every other, price becomes the only issue.

The authors gathered the material for the book through their consulting with many firms, both large and small. They refer to massive quantities of their survey research throughout the book, but most of the evidence they present to support their arguments is in the form of the case or story, many of which are interesting, but do not always ring true.

Fred Crawford is a consultant with Cap Gemini Ernst and Young’s consumer products, retail, and distribution consulting practice. Ryan Mathews is a principal at FirstMatter, a futurist firm.

## **Biographical Sketch**

Anita B. Williams (<http://www.hsu.edu/faculty/williaa>) received her B.A. degree in history from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Her M.B.A. and Ph.D. in business administration are from the University of Arkansas. In addition to her teaching duties, she coordinates Henderson's British Studies program and sponsors ICOMA (the International Club of Martial Arts), the Marketing Society, and Beta Gamma Sigma, the honor society for AACSB accredited schools of business. She is also an active member of Arkadelphia Little Theatre.

---

Disclaimer: Henderson State University and the Office of Computer and Communication Services assume no responsibility for any information or representations contained in the student/faculty/alumni web pages. These web pages and any opinions, information or representations contained therein are the creation of the particular individual or organization and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Henderson State University or its Office of Computer and Communication Services. All individuals publishing materials on the Henderson State University Web Server understand that the submission, installation, copying, distribution, and use of such materials in connection with the Web Server will not violate any other party's proprietary rights.