Name the Problem

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The more open your eyes are, the more often you meet someone who sees the world in a way you haven't seen it yet – and who is squarely, powerfully, passionately right about what counts.

I felt that way when I met Al Ramadan, co-author of Play Bigger and co-founder of the firm under the same name. Al taught me to see category creation as the source of breakthroughs in business:

> Legendary companies create new categories that generate a gravitational pull on the market. Customers rush to a new category because it makes sense to them.... [New categories] replace our current view on the world with a new point of view. They make what came before seem outdated, clunky, inefficient, costly, or painful.

In recent years, in significant part through the work of Play Bigger, Category Design has become sharper as a discipline and a field. In the words of Al and his co-authors:

> Category design is the discipline of creating and developing a new market category, and conditioning the market so it will demand your solution and crown your company as its king.... Category design takes people on a journey.... a great new category is one that solves a problem people didn't know they had, or solves an obvious problem no one thought could be solved. Either way, you are introducing something new to potential customers' lives. You have to help them move from the way they used to think, to a new frame of reference. That is what it means to condition the market. You have to first define and market the problem – and only then can you help people understand that you can solve the problem better than anyone else.

At the heart of Category Design is a relentless essentialism, a discipline of simplification. I've recently been working with the team at Catchafire to confront head-on the humbling power of "Dave's Three Questions":

1. *Can you explain to me, like a five-year-old, what problem you're trying to solve?*
2. *If your company solves this problem perfectly, what category are you in?*
3. *If you win 85 percent of that category, what's the size of your category potential?*

Given that the heart of Play Bigger's work is to take nothing for granted, to keep pushing to the question behind the question behind the question, it is fitting that Al, Christopher, Jason and Mary – the foursome at the heart of the firm – have peeled back the intellectual onion to develop a prequel to Play Bigger.

The prequel begins with a certain irony:

> We never clearly explained what Category Design is solving for.
>
> We laid out the solution in ***Play Bigger***. But we skipped the first step, the most important step.
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> **We never named the problem!**
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> The guys who preach "Frame it, Name it, Claim it"
>
> Didn't **Name** it.
>
> Until now.

Then, they name the problem Category Design solves: **The Existing Market Trap**.

Writing books is slow. So the Play Bigger Four didn't wait to write a book. They released **The Existing Market Trap** as what they call a Primer: a manifesto with a handful of powerful examples and some supporting material to help practitioners wrestle with what to do next.

To distill the distillation, for me, the core of the **Existing Market Trap** is: "We're brainwashed to compete." Nothing is more important to building a breakthrough company than unlearning that basic assumption.

> Most companies don't fail because they build bad products.
>
> They fail because they get pulled into a market they didn't design – playing by rules they didn't set, in a game that was rigged. Before they ever showed up.

Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey teach that as adults we have the chance to keep growing up, and the form that growing takes is the opportunity to grow out of the Socialized Mind, which enables us to learn the important lesson of how to belong, and into the Self-Authoring Mind, which enables us to define the game worth playing.

"Markets are people. Categories are beliefs." **The Existing Market Trap** shows how easy it is to get sucked into building a business with this Socialized Mind, letting the beliefs of some inherited category do your thinking for you.

Those shallows are deadly. You can drown there.

No standard is harder than the standard that Play Bigger sets: to name a problem and commit fully to a transformational solution to that problem, to put one's entire identity at stake. I don't think I've ever gone there – not all the way. I don't know many who have.

As I turned the pages this weekend, I felt as though Al and his team were saying to me:

> **Here is a powerful set of glasses.**
>
> **Don't be afraid any longer. Stop looking away from the light. Turn upwards, where the truth has always been.**
>
> **Stare into the sun. Illuminated, start building what you see.**