

Move past your past

How you can honor your history while still being bold about the future

One of the quotes I share with each new employee, or “Flyer,” as we call them, is that, “We drink from wells we did not dig.” I use this quote to communicate that when you join a company that is nearly 100 years old, you benefit a great deal from all the work that was done by those who came before you. For us, the most significant asset we have is the strength of the Radio Flyer brand.



ROBERT PASIN

CEO

Radio Flyer Inc. — started in 1917 by Antonio Pasin, whose dream was “to bring joy to every boy and every girl.”

Robert is known in the company as chief wagon officer and earned his MBA from Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University.

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It is often said that the most coveted attribute of a brand is to own an image or word in the consumer’s mind. We own the “little red wagon.” To have such an established brand that consumers recognize and associate with fond memories of their childhood is very valuable, as is having strong existing relationships with vendors and retail customers and an experienced team of employees.

There are many great things that come with an established, iconic brand like Radio Flyer, but there are also limitations.

Build off your failures

Early in my career, as we were struggling to grow, I wrestled with questions like: Can we only be wagons? Are we too nostalgic? Are we a relic? How can we compete with toy giants like Mattel and Hasbro? Is red our only color?

We started coming out with a lot of new products and had a lot of failures. One was a doll called Angel Love Wagon Babies. Another was a green plastic wagon that looked a lot like our competitor.

Fortunately for me, my dad was very forgiving saying, “I made a lot of mistakes, and you will too. Just be sure

you learn from them and don’t go out of business.”

We began to mine these failures for lessons by listening to consumers and observing their behavior. I learned a lot about what worked and what didn’t work with our brand by asking critical questions such as these:

- What is the product’s clear reason for being?
- Will a consumer know this product is Radio Flyer even without the brand?
- Can we become the clear leader in this category?
- What can we do that no one else can do?

Fuel your creativity

We realized that our limitations would not stop us from growing. In fact, our limitations could fuel our creativity.

The things that did not work with our brand became our guardrails. We leaned into the key strengths of our brand — outdoor play, wheels, transporting kids, fun, red — which led to many successful product innovations.

Don’t shy away from your limitations, or gloss over them. Embrace them.

Teach everyone in your company to view limitations and problems as opportunities. Lead your team to unlock your company’s potential by asking questions from the customers’ point of view — not from your own.

This approach helped us to triple our sales and come out with dozens of great products — that get kids outside and active, that parents’ love and that build on the key strengths of our brand.

And, yes, all our wagons are still red. ●



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