The Most Interesting Beer.
How a Beer Profited by Defying Conventional Wisdom.

Dos Equis Beer
Ed Benfield has been listening to customers for a long time. In 1984 he conducted focus groups with beer drinkers in Huntsville, Alabama. Benfield says, “What we learned in Huntsville was earth-shattering. We got them talking about who drinks what beer. They told us that guys who drink regular beer are stupid, overweight, blowhard, insensitive jerks. That indicated—and we confirmed it over the next year or two—that light beer drinkers had begun to feel superior.” Benfield saw a great opportunity for the expansion of the light beer category and recommended that his client shift marketing resources to capture more of the coming market. He was right. Sales for light beer skyrocketed for the next twenty years.

Fast forward to 2006. In only a few years, Dos Equis, a low-volume Mexican import beer, transformed itself from an obscure regional brand into the sixth-largest imported beer sold in the United States. The brand’s customer research had shown that the fraternity-house approach to marketing that had been a staple of beer advertising for decades was wearing thin. “Sophomoric humor has long been a category staple, and the majority of our competitors’ advertising was insulting our consumer’s intelligence. There was, and continues to be an opportunity for Dos Equis to stand out in the crowd by acknowledging and harnessing our consumer’s thirst for intelligent humor,” said Colin Westcott-Pitt, VP of marketing for Dos Equis.

This insight led to the creation of “The Most Interesting Man in the World” campaign. The brand won a Gold Effie in 2009, a prestigious annual marketing communications award. The case study document for the campaign prepared by the brand’s advertising agency, Euro RSCG, made the case for the big idea: “They [customers] felt misrepresented and misunderstood. Probing further, we discovered two important truths: First, what these guys wanted more than anything, more than hot girls and designer toys, was to be seen as interesting. And conversely, that they were terrified of being seen as boring. We sniffed an opportunity.”

In a series of more than thirty television commercials produced by the brand’s agency, we see an older gray-bearded man actively engaged in a variety of exotic, adventurous, and dangerous pursuits: running with the bulls, ski jumping, arm wrestling the police, releasing a grizzly bear from a trap, piloting a motorboat full of beauty-pageant winners. In one commercial the narrator tells us that, “His reputation is expanding faster than the universe. He once had an awkward moment just to see how it feels. He lives vicariously through himself. He is the most interesting man in the world.” In the closing shot, we see this man seated, surrounded by a group of attractive women as he says, “I don’t always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis. Stay thirsty, my friends.”

The most interesting man’s story continues to evolve. What the brand refers to as “legend lines” continue to build the character’s mystique. Here are just a few:

- The police often question him because they find him interesting.
• His personality is so magnetic he is unable to carry credit cards.

• He’s a lover, not a fighter. But, he’s also a fighter so don’t get any ideas.

• He can speak French in Russian.

Dos Equis actively engages its audience with good humor and a twist: the most interesting man in the world isn’t a typical, hard sell pitchman for the product. He seems a somewhat reluctant product endorser when he says, “I don’t always drink beer . . .”

So who is this mysterious character who seems to actually believe that he is the most interesting man in the world? Veteran actor Jonathan Goldsmith brings the character to life. He says, “He hangs out with pygmies. He’s a teacher. He’s a sage. He’s a shaman. He’s a fantasy. He’s an illusion of things past.” Senior brand manager Paul Smailes says that, “more than anything else, [drinkers] really wanted to be seen as interesting by their friends.” The brand went against the grain to create a world-traveling, bigger-than-life, rogue of a character who wouldn’t be seen as a threat to a much younger target market. The brand’s research showed that it might be effective to create someone the customer could aspire to become. Kheri Tillman, VP of marketing for Dos Equis, said, “What’s interesting about him is that he doesn’t compete with our consumer. He’s more of an inspiration. He’s an aspirational target for them.”

The magic of breaking the rules has worked wonders for the brand. In 2009 the ad campaign went national, and Dos Equis continues to break sales records each year, outpacing all other imports. The brand has become the sixth-best-selling import beer, with over $74 million in sales. “Dos Equis is an awesome brand,” said Anthony Bucalo, an analyst at Banco Santander SA. “It’s not limited to hipsters in Vermont drinking microbrews, or blue-collar workers drinking Bud.”

Until the Dos Equis campaign struck gold, it had been tough sledding for import brands to break through to an audience dominated by domestic beer advertising. Consider that in 2008 there were 261 beer brands advertising on TV in the United States. “There’s never really been an import brand that’s been built so clearly through advertising,” said Benj Steinman, publisher of Beer Marketer’s Insights.

The brand is extending its most interesting attitude with the formation of the Most Interesting Academy. The mission is to “inform, inspire, and equip” fans to lead more extraordinary lives. The company has created the Stay Thirsty Grant competition, where fans can apply to live out their fantasies, “whether it’s base jumping in Bangkok, preparing rattlesnake soup for royalty, or traversing the Amazon.”

Imagine if your brand openly embraced the Customer CEO rebellion that’s in everyone by having more fun with its products and promotions. Dos Equis found it could be quite contagious and profitable.