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Barry Barnes. *Everything I Know About Business I Learned From the Grateful Dead*. New York: Business Plus, 2011. Hardcover, xxx + 222 pp. ISBN 9780446583794. \$24.95.

GLENN RIFKIN

As a veteran business journalist, ever on the prowl for new and exciting story angles, I was intrigued when my editor, Joel Kurtzman, suggested an article for *Strategy and Business*, the business magazine he founded for Booz Allen in the mid-1990s. It was 1997 and the dot.com bubble was still inflating. Astute investors were only just beginning to act irrationally. Business books with jazzy titles and questionable value were pouring out of publishing houses like water from a fire hose and one of the hottest topics was brands. Marketing in general was on the minds of all these nascent entrepreneurs eager to sell pet supplies, grocery delivery, and toys via the Internet. But brands, in particular, were hot. *Fast Company* magazine caused a stir with a self-absorbed cover story entitled “The Brand Called You,” entreating its readers to consider themselves their own major brand and figure out how to create brand value.

Kurtzman called me one morning and asked, “What do you think of the Grateful Dead?”

“Well, I’m no Deadhead but I really like their music. Why?” I replied.

“There’s a marketing guy at Booz named Sam Hill and he was telling me about this idea that the Grateful Dead were not just a successful rock band but a great brand as well. He suggested they offered some serious lessons in how to build a brand and I thought it might make a good article. Are you interested?”

“Absolutely!” I responded nearly before the words had left his mouth. “Sounds like a fun assignment. Send me his phone number.”

Here was a story angle that called my name. I made my living writing about corporate strategies, technology, management, and business personalities. I enjoyed what I did but rarely did I get a chance to dive into a world that I loved and extract something new and different for a

feature article. I immediately called Sam Hill, chief marketing officer at Booz Hamilton, to set up an interview.

As far as I knew, this concept had never been explored before and since this was a year before Google was founded, I couldn't do the kind of search I might today. But I did enough looking to conclude that this was virgin territory and after speaking to Hill, a brash and brilliant marketing guru, I knew I had stumbled onto something exciting. We had a long and delightful conversation. I mentioned that I had been in San Francisco two summers earlier on the fateful day that Jerry Garcia died.

It was a stunning event that shook the city to its core and mesmerized the music community around the world. The front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* flashed the sad news in 36-point type, generally reserved for wars ending and men walking on the moon. Deadheads and others converged on Golden Gate Park and tributes to the musical soul of the iconic and beloved band began pouring into radio stations and newspapers. Dead music could be heard in the Park, pouring out of apartment windows, cars, boom boxes and countless public venues. Garcia and the Dead were so inextricably entwined in the city's DNA that his loss, at the young age of 53, was a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. I saw a lot of people in tears around the city that day and in the days that followed. For an outsider, I was shocked and awed by the reaction. It wasn't quite like the night John Lennon was murdered in New York City, but the outpouring of grief in this enchanting city by the Bay was damn close.

With that revelation still fresh in my mind, I listened to Hill explain how the Dead had cleverly, if not always intentionally, mined its remarkable relationship with its core audience to create a powerful, indelible, and profitable brand.

"The Dead established a long-term personal relationship with their customers and that was the basis of the brand," Hill told me. "It was sustained development against a single segment. That's what marketing should be about, rather than glitz and tricks." The Dead, he went on, used "non-traditional" marketing methods, such as allowing their fans to tape concerts, a music industry no-no, with the belief that the sharing of the music ought to be free. Such largesse spread the band's product around in ways that the industry had never seen before. He added more to his list

and I followed up by calling a few Deadheads, masquerading as branding experts, for further interviews.

My article, which appeared in the spring of 1997, was entitled “How to ‘Truck’ The Brand: Lessons From the Grateful Dead.” Needless to say, it triggered a widespread and enthusiastic reaction, including a phone call from HarperCollins, the giant publishing house in New York. An editor had read the article and found it so compelling that she offered me a book deal on the spot. I enlisted Hill as my coauthor and we published *Radical Marketing: Lessons From Ten That Broke the Rules and Made It Big* (Harper Business) in 1999, with an expanded, extensively researched version of my article as the signature chapter of the book. Again, the reaction was over the top. We laid out a long list of compelling business decisions, both purposeful and inadvertent, that the Dead had made along their long, strange trip, which resulted in thirty years of profits and sustained brand vigor.

Sam Hill and I did a lot of speaking engagements between 1999 and the early 2000s, always invoking the business lessons of the Grateful Dead. And after a stirring run, interest naturally faded as the years passed. This is why I was surprised to see a suddenly renewed interest in the “business lessons of the Grateful Dead” emerge in 2010, with an *Atlantic Monthly* magazine article, followed by a book called *Marketing Lessons From The Grateful Dead* by David Meerman Scott and Brian Halligan. These efforts were fun to read but little more than a rehash of the ideas that Hill and I had presented a decade earlier.

I’m not sure what triggered this reawakened desire to revisit the business acumen of the Dead but one thing is certain: the allure of this iconic rock institution has not faded an iota even sixteen years after the band’s demise. And now comes Barry Barnes’ book on the subject, *Everything I Know About Business I Learned From The Grateful Dead: The Ten Most Innovative Lessons From a Long, Strange Trip*. Barnes is a management professor at the H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale. He worked in the corporate world for IBM and John Deere and ran his own record shop before becoming an academic. But the common theme of much of his adult life is his passionate devotion to the Dead. He became a full-fledged Deadhead

in the mid-1980s and at the same time began to experience the subtle but strategic business lessons that the band imparted.

“When I tell people I study the business of the Grateful Dead, I sometimes get puzzled looks,” Barnes writes:

It’s true that for much of their careers the members of the Dead were anticorporate and seemed downright allergic to making sensible business decisions. Phil Lesh, the band’s bassist, summed it up this way: “You could run an analysis of this business and drive an ordinary consultant berserk with the contradictions and waste in it.” Yet despite all that it worked. (3)

Did it ever. In his new book, Barnes presents his ten Grateful Dead business lessons, one per chapter, and in so doing, compiles a historic record of the band’s activities and achievements couched in a contemporary primer on management strategy. Though it would be a stretch to suppose that harried business executives will drop Gladwell, Collins, and Ram Charan for Barnes’ twirl on the Dead, there is no doubt that this is a challenging take on thinking outside the box.

Perhaps his most prescient move was to ask John Perry Barlow to pen the foreword for the book. Barlow, the second most prolific lyricist for the band (after Robert Hunter), is a terrific and insightful renaissance kind of thinker, so he’s always worth a read. Here he points out that:

There was a lot that worked for the Grateful Dead. Indeed, upon examination, it becomes obvious that Mr. Barnes is on to more here than I first suspected. After reading this book, I’m forced to admit that a lot of characteristics Barnes identifies as being central to our business style are accurately identified and may actually be useful now to different organizations as they confront the puzzling present and even more confounding future. (xxviii)

Among Barnes’ lessons:

- Strategic improvisation—the ability to plan, act, and make adjustments in real time—is the key to running a great organization. For the Dead, improvisation was the underpinning of their genius, both on stage and in their organization;

- Embrace strong corporate values and socially conscious business practices because it's the right thing to do—and because it is more profitable. Corporate social responsibility was hardly a part of the business lexicon when the Dead started making music. Yet, according to Barnes, the Dead believed that “treating people and the planet well had nothing to do with eco-chic or brand differentiation. Instead the Dead became one of the first socially conscious businesses because they embraced deeply held values—kindness, compassion, respect for others—rooted in the sixties counterculture but timeless in their wisdom” (32);
- Be kind to your customer—by offering high-quality products and services and being responsive to their concerns—and they'll be kind to you by becoming lifelong customers. The Dead allowed people to tape their shows, created the vaunted Wall of Sound, built their own ticket agency so Deadheads could get tickets without sleeping on sidewalks overnight, and embraced their fans by touring incessantly and keeping ticket prices low.

The underlying power of the Dead's brand was in its ability to build a vast and deeply loyal community around that brand. This was the theme Hill and I explored thoroughly in *Radical Marketing* and Barnes extends, offering a wider trough of examples and anecdotes to support his analysis. His final business lesson embodies the theme completely: “Provide your customers with authentic experiences that improve their lives” (187). The same could be said for Apple, Zappos, Uggs, and Disney. In a world of vast alienation and the steady hum of marketing messages enveloping individuals like a meteor shower, authenticity is a sainted hallmark of great brands that get it. Except none of those organizations could offer up a heart-rending, ten-minute version of “Ripple” on a clear, dark, star-filled July night.

Barnes borrows liberally and credits liberally, but what he also brings to his subject is his deep knowledge of the Dead phenomenon and especially his Deadhead ardor, making this a must-read for corporate officers and managers—especially those wearing Dancing Bear boxers.

GLENN RIFKIN is a business journalist and author based in the Boston area. He has contributed to *The New York Times* for more than twenty years and has authored more than a dozen books about business and strategy.