

Customers Are Like Fish

Sample: Chapter 1

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CHAPTER ONE

Choose the Right Lake

Why Strategy Begins Before You Cast

W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne spent decades studying what drives breakthrough growth. Their conclusion: the greatest competitive advantage is not doing what others do better — it is doing it in a place others have not yet thought to go.

Before the first cast.

Before the bait. Before the strategy. Before any of it.

There is one decision that determines everything else.

Where you fish.

Get that wrong, and nothing that follows will save you. Not the messaging. Not the team. Not the work ethic that has carried you this far.

Get it right, and almost everything else becomes easier.

The Mistake That Looks Like Effort

A founder I worked with was doing everything right. Superior product. Thoughtful messaging. Consistent marketing. No laziness, no carelessness, nothing obviously broken.

He was one of the hardest-working people I'd seen — and it showed in everything he touched.

And still, nothing was working.

Leads came in and didn't convert. Customers showed interest and didn't commit. Growth stalled at the same ceiling month after month.

So, he did what every driven person does when results don't come:

He pushed harder. More campaigns. More offers. More hustle.

It didn't fix anything.

Because the problem wasn't execution.

The problem was the lake.

He was fishing in water that had very few fish, fighting for scraps in a crowded, commoditized market where no amount of skill could overcome the structural disadvantage.

When we finally changed that, repositioning him into a narrower, underserved niche where he had genuine advantage, his conversion rates doubled in sixty days. Same product. Same founder. Different lake.

Why Effort Feels Like the Answer

Effort is seductive. It feels productive. It feels noble. When things aren't working, doing more feels like the responsible move.

But here's what nobody tells you:

Effort applied in the wrong place doesn't multiply results. It multiplies frustration.

The fisherman who casts all day in an empty pond isn't demonstrating commitment. He's demonstrating the cost of misdiagnosis.

The question is never whether you're working hard enough. The question is whether the environment can reward the work.

The Two Fishermen

Picture two fishermen at the same lake at dawn.

The first one arrives with lots of energy. He casts immediately. Changes bait quickly when nothing bites. Moves spots. Adjusts his technique. Reads every book on casting he's ever found. By afternoon he's totally exhausted and empty-handed.

The second arrives and does something different.

She watches. She reads the surface of the water. She notices where the birds circle, where the current slows, where the light hits at an angle that tells you something is feeding underneath. She studies the pattern before she makes a single move.

Then she casts once.

And catches.

The difference between them isn't skill. It isn't discipline. It isn't even experience, though that helps.

The difference is selection.

One optimized. The other observed. One executed harder. The other chose better. And in business, as in fishing, choosing well is worth ten times what executing harder will ever produce.

When I Fished in the Wrong Lake

I didn't learn this principle from a business school case study. I learned it the hard way — by watching my own results plateau while I kept casting harder and harder.

When I wrote my first book, *Men Are Like Fish*, the dominant voice in relationship publishing was Dr. John Gray, whose 1992 book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* had become a global phenomenon. It sold tens of millions of copies and shaped mainstream conversations about gender and relationships for more than a decade.

He owned the broad relationship category.

And without fully realizing it, I had drifted into the same lake. Different metaphor. Similar theme. Same wide, crowded shoreline. I wasn't competing directly with him — but I wasn't distinct from the category he defined either. I had positioned myself as another relationship author. Visible, but not decisive. Present, but not precise.

In crowded water, precision is power. And I didn't have it yet.

The media appearances came. One radio host introduced me as a “fun” dating author. Another chuckled through the fishing metaphors before pivoting to a commercial break. The audiences were entertained. The fishing puns landed. I was memorable.

But I was not indispensable.

**Memorable is not the same as necessary.
And in a crowded market, only necessary
commands attention.**

Then came a caller who changed everything.

She said: “I don’t need help catching men. Why do I keep ending up with men who won’t commit?”

Without rehearsing, without calculating, I replied: “You’re fishing for a boyfriend — not a husband.”

Silence. Then something shifted in the room. Recognition. The kind you can hear through a radio.

That single sentence revealed what I had been missing. Women weren’t searching for more commentary from other women — they had friends, group chats, podcasts, and social feeds overflowing with opinions. They didn’t need more voices from the same side.

What they really needed was a translator. Calm, direct articulation of how men actually think about commitment — from someone who understood it from the inside.

A few years after the book was released, I was chosen to run the *Ask Mr. Answer Man* dating and relationship message board on *iVillage.com*, one of the earliest large-scale online communities for women. It wasn’t about theory. It was pure unfiltered dialog. Women asked me direct questions about men. Patterns emerged. Themes repeated. Frustrations surfaced in the same language, over and over. That forum was my laboratory. That was my species.

Not “everyone dating.” Women who wanted clarity about men — specifically around commitment. Women who didn’t need cheerleading. They needed answers.

The moment I accepted that, the water cleared. The message sharpened. The right people found me. And the ones who weren’t

my fish, the ones who wanted something broader, warmer, more general, self-selected away.

That was the right lake. I had been standing at the edge of it the whole time without stepping in.

The principle this book is built on didn't come from a research paper or a business framework. It came from watching my own results shift the moment I stopped fishing for everyone and started fishing for the specific person whose problem I was actually built to solve.

The researchers confirmed it afterward. But it was the fisherman who discovered it first.

The Research That Reframed Everything

W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, professors at INSEAD and authors of *Blue Ocean Strategy*, spent years studying what actually drives breakthrough business performance.

Not companies. Not industries. Not even products.

Strategic moves.

They analyzed more than a century of business history across dozens of industries and asked a deceptively simple question: what separates the businesses that created enormous new value from those that simply competed for existing value?

Their answer was disruptive in its clarity:

The businesses that win big aren't the ones who outperform their rivals.

They're the ones who make the rivalry beside the point.

They weren't better at the game. They changed the game entirely. And in doing so, they made competition beside the point.

Crowded Water and Open Water

Kim and Mauborgne described two fundamentally different types of markets — and understanding the difference changes how you see every business decision you've ever made.

Crowded Water

- Every boat fights for the same fish
- Price is the only lever anyone has left to pull
- Every offer starts to look like every other
- Your voice competes with everyone else's noise
- Growth means taking a catch from someone else's line
- Margins shrink as more boats crowd the water

Open Water

- Demand didn't exist until you created it
- You set the terms of value, not the market
- Other boats stop mattering
- Your message is the only one anyone hears
- Growth comes from water nobody's fished yet
- Margins hold because you're not sharing the catch

In crowded water, you are not just fishing. You are fighting for every catch against every other boat working the same spot. Even if you win, the cost of winning is high.

In open water, something different happens. Fewer boats. Less noise. Fish that haven't been overworked, over-targeted, or conditioned to ignore the line.

The game itself changes.

How Most Businesses Choose Their Lake

Here's the uncomfortable truth:

Most businesses don't choose their lake at all.

They inherit it. They follow existing models, copy established categories, and enter markets because those markets already exist — because it feels safer to go where there's already proof of demand.

But familiar is almost always crowded.

And crowded means you start every day fighting for a share of something finite, in a place where the structural advantage belongs to whoever got there first.

Benchmarking makes this worse. Most businesses look sideways, at competitors' pricing, features, messaging, and use that as their north star. But that keeps you locked inside the same assumptions, the same frame, the same water everyone else is already fishing.

The better question isn't "How do we compete better?" It's "How do we make competition irrelevant?"

Changing the Water Itself

Kim and Mauborgne have a name for this move: value innovation.

Not differentiation, where you offer something slightly different at a comparable price. Not cost leadership, where you offer

something similar at a lower price. But both, simultaneously, in a way that makes the previous options feel beside the point.

You increase the value that matters most to your customers while eliminating the costs and features built around assumptions that nobody questions anymore.

You don't improve the game. You change it.

They described four moves that make this concrete:

- What could you stop doing altogether, because customers never really wanted it in the first place?
- What could you scale back, because you're overdelivering on something nobody's paying you extra for?
- What could you push further than anyone else in your category is willing to?
- What could you offer that doesn't exist yet — the thing that would make people sit up and take notice?

This is not optimization. Optimization makes you a better version of what already exists.

This is transformation. Transformation puts you in a category of one.

The Clearest Example: Cirque du Soleil

Cirque du Soleil is the example Kim and Mauborgne themselves reach for, and it's hard to find a better one.

The traditional circus was already struggling by the time Cirque came along — rising costs, animal-welfare controversies, shrinking audiences, brutal competition for the same declining entertainment dollar. Every circus was working the same shrinking pond.

Cirque didn't try to build a better circus. They asked a different question: what would an adult audience actually pay a premium for at a live show? Then they rebuilt toward that answer — cutting the animals and the marquee-name performers that ate up most of a traditional circus budget, dropping the three-ring chaos and the danger acts, and pouring what they saved into stagecraft, music, and storytelling that felt closer to theater than sideshow.

They weren't left with a leaner circus. They were left with something that had never quite existed before.

They didn't win the circus competition. They made it irrelevant.

A new lake. New fish. Different rules. And for years afterward, nobody else was even fishing in that water.

Where Opportunity Hides

Open water doesn't announce itself. It doesn't come with a neon sign. It looks, at first glance, like risk — like uncertainty, like the absence of validation, like moving away from the safety of the proven.

Which is exactly why most people never find it.

But opportunity has a pattern. It hides in the same places, over and over:

- Frustration — where customers are working around something that should just work
- Neglect — where an audience is being ignored or underserved by everyone in the category
- Misalignment — where what's being sold doesn't quite match what's being bought
- Overcomplication — where the existing solution is far more complex than the problem requires

These are not complaints. They are signals.

Every frustrated customer is pointing at an uncontested market. Every workaround is a product waiting to be built. Every underserved segment is a lake full of fish that nobody else is fishing.

To find the right lake, learn to ask the questions nobody else is asking:

*Where are customers frustrated with the status quo?
Where are they paying for something they don't really want?
Where are they settling for "good enough" because nothing better exists?*

Those aren't complaints. Those are the coordinates of the water you've been looking for.

Strategy Before Execution

Most people reverse the order. They start with execution, the campaigns, the content, the sales process, and wonder why results feel inconsistent no matter how much they optimize.

But strategy comes first. And strategy starts with selection.

The sequence that works isn't complicated. But it is unforgiving about order:

1. Choose the right lake — where demand exists and competition is manageable
2. Choose the right fish — who specifically you're for
3. Match the hunger — what they actually want, not what you assume
4. Design the bait — the offer that makes the choice obvious
5. Make the cast — in the right way, at the right moment

Skip step one, and every step that follows is built on sand. Get step one right, and every step that follows gets easier.

The Only Question That Matters First

Wrong lake. No fish. Nothing saves you — not skill, not effort, not the most elegant strategy ever assembled.

Because the environment defines what's possible. The environment determines whether effort compounds or disappears. The environment is either working with you or working against you, and all the execution in the world cannot change the fundamental conditions of where you chose to compete.

Right lake? Everything shifts. Clarity increases. Effort multiplies. Results that once felt impossible start to feel inevitable. Not because you got better — but because you stopped fighting the current and started moving with it.

So, before the message. Before the offer. Before the first ad, the first campaign, the first sales call.

Before any of it, there is only one question worth answering:

Are you fishing in the right place?

Where you fish determines what you catch.

Effort doesn't create opportunity — environment does.

The goal is not to win the competition. It's to make it irrelevant.

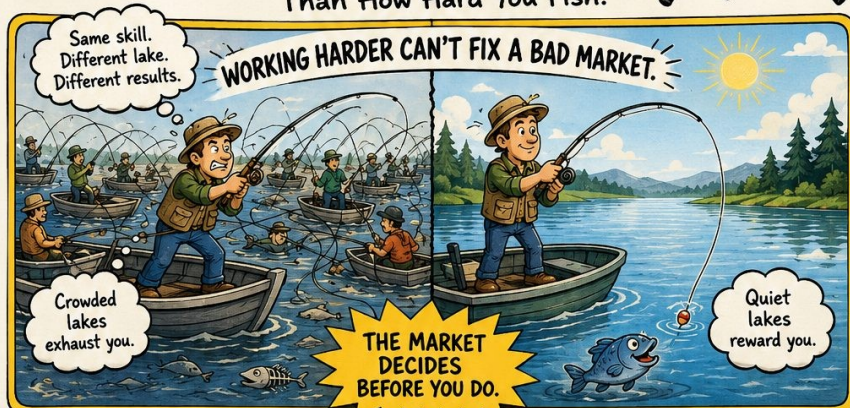
Most people don't need a better strategy. They need a better lake.

Alignment doesn't make things easier. It makes them work.



CHOOSE THE RIGHT LAKE

Where You Fish Matters More
Than How Hard You Fish.



1 THE BIG IDEA



Pick the wrong group, and nothing else you do will work.

2 TWO LAKES



Same effort. Opposite outcome.

3 WHY EFFORT FAILS



More hours. More ads.
More hustle.
Same empty net.

4 SIGNS OF OPEN WATER



Frustrated.



Ignored.



Confused.



Overpaying.



Underserved.



Overlooked.

Don't be a little better.
Be different.



Cirque du Soleil didn't build a better circus. They built a new one.

5 THE REAL STORY



Good product, good marketing, real effort — still failed, until he moved to a quieter niche.

6 SAME SKILLS, NEW LAKE



Found one specific problem nobody else was solving.

7 THE LAKE AUDIT



- ☒ Is this market crowded?
- ☒ Are people frustrated?
- ☒ Could average effort win here?
- ☒ Am I changing the game?



PICK YOUR LAKE BEFORE YOU PICK UP YOUR ROD.

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