

How the champion of consumers took on an oppressive state and malicious enemies

Hearing Grasshoppers Jump: The Story of Raymond Ackerman as told to Denise Prichard
(David Philip Publishers, 2004)
Reviewer: Athol Williams

GATHER round a dinner table and mention the term "consumer champion" and nine out of 10 times the name Raymond Ackerman will spring to mind — and deservedly so. The founder and chairman of Pick 'n Pay has stuck by the belief that the customer is king throughout his career.

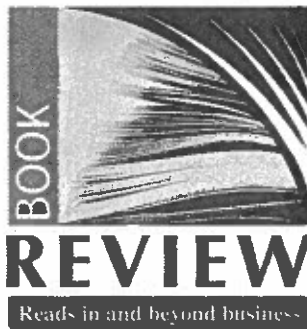
As a strategy consultant it amazes me how often clients struggle to identify what is core to the success of their business. I was curious to find out what Ackerman's secret was so I turned to his book for some insight. It shares his journey from boyhood through to his career as a major retail executive, and onwards to the stage where he is the senior statesman we all know today.

The book contains three stories: a novel of intrigue and excitement — one man's journey against an oppressive government and malicious business enemies, while simultaneously trying to nurture a loving family; a book of business wisdom that should be read by CEO, entrepreneur and student alike; and a brief but rich overview of recent South African history as experienced by the author.

Ackerman describes his mischievous childhood and recalls the incident where he pulled a chair out from under his grandmother as she was about to sit down. This childhood prank became an apt metaphor for Ackerman's business career, which was regularly punctuated by his pulling "the chair" out from under his competitors.

I found it remarkable that he was invited to join Umkhonto we-Sizwe, months before the raid on their leadership hideout in Rivonia. It was Ackerman's stance on nonviolence that kept him away.

And there are tales of business



enemies flooding Pick 'n Pay stores, setting them alight and sending death threats.

Floods, fires and death threats: these are not generally accepted as strategically sound competitive business policies, but Ackerman's early enemies tried them all.

I have, however, always believed that personal crises can create opportunities for the resourceful and the brave. Ackerman was separated from his mother at a very young age. He endured continuous prejudice and anti-Semitism at school and in sport. He was even fired from his high-profile executive job at Checkers, where the board viewed him as "difficult and unmanageable". Clearly what we need are more difficult and unmanageable people.

The core of the book, and at the very centre of the man, is his passion for radically improving access to quality and affordable food for all South Africans. He understood all too well that in an ever-changing society, if you take something away from a customer, such as personal service or credit facilities, you have to give something back, such as lower prices. The ability to understand customers' needs, coupled with the ability to satisfy these needs better than competitors can, is critical to a successful strategy and business success.

In relating the quest to fulfil his passion, the book is filled with accounts of tense meetings with the government officials of an-

other era, such as BJ Vorster and others, run-ins with price-control boards and contraventions of laws governing job reservation.

For the sake of his staff, customers and even SA, Ackerman challenged, at great personal cost, the laws of the day. And it is in that spirit that his company succeeded.

We are spoiled today with a plethora of high-quality super- and hypermarkets that offer us a wide range of products at low prices. This is in large part thanks to Ackerman's vision and drive in building Pick 'n Pay on the principles of "desirable goods, openly displayed and readily accessible".

So what lessons did I learn related to business and personal success? First, you have to have a genuine passion for what you are doing. For true success there needs to be deeper meaning to your business than the pursuit of personal wealth. Passionately believing in your product or business can be a competitive advantage, especially in today's market, where managers take executive roles for status and money, without believing in the product or business. Passion will carry you through tough times when others will quit.

Second, the secret to personal success isn't so much about being good at avoiding obstacles but in being great at overcoming these obstacles. The business world is fraught with uncertainty and challenges. The great leader can see clearly in the midst of uncertainty and rely on strength of character to deal with the inevitable challenges.

As a strategy consultant, it is good to read that even a wise and strategic thinker such as Ackerman sought the input of consultants from time to time.

As an entrepreneur who faces daily commercial battles that appear unending and insurmountable, I found great inspiration in Ackerman's story.

■ Williams is MD of consultancy Taurus Associates.