

THE
CHALLENGER
Playbook



HOW TO THINK DIFFERENT,
MOVE FASTER,
AND OUTSHINE GIANTS.

**smaller
agency.**

table of contents

1.0

enter the
challenger mindset

2.0

challenger strategies

3.0

challenger tools & tactics

4.0

activation & growth

1.0
enter the
challenger
mindset



1.1

what is a **challenger brand?**

key idea

A challenger brand is any brand that:

- **Picks a fight** with an outdated belief in its category.
- **Moves faster** than the incumbents.
- **Creates culture** instead of chasing it.

Most people think a challenger brand is just a small player trying to take down the big guys. That's wrong.

Challenger doesn't mean small. Challenger means different. It means you refuse to play by the old rules.

TAKEAWAY

You don't have to be the biggest to win.
You have to be the boldest.

brands that *redefined* their category



RXBAR



OATLY

Reframe the Category

RXBar turned an ingredient list into the entire brand.

POSITION

Every protein bar hid behind health jargon. RXBar stripped it bare.

CAMPAIGN

3 Egg Whites. 2 Dates. 6 Almonds. No B.S.

WHY IT WORKED

Turned the ingredient list into the marketing itself. They challenged the idea that “nutrition is complicated.” the narrative — making dairy feel outdated and even unnatural.

Redefine the Enemy

Oatly didn't sell oat milk, it sold the end of dairy as we know it.

POSITION

Not just “milk alternative”, they made milk the enemy.

CAMPAIGN

It's like milk, but made for humans.

WHY IT WORKED

Instead of trying to compete with dairy's strength (heritage, wholesomeness), they flipped the narrative — making dairy feel outdated and even unnatural.

exercise

The goliath

Write down the “giant” in your category.

What belief or behaviour are they still holding onto?

GIANT BELIEF EXAMPLES

SMALL COFFEE ROASTER

“Convenience beats quality”

FITNESS BRAND

“Fitness = body image.”

SKINCARE STARTUP

“Skincare is about beauty.”

How could you flip that belief into your biggest advantage?

FLIP EXAMPLES

“Slow coffee = better coffee.”

Build rituals around waiting, hand-brewed experiences, local craft.

“Fitness = mental resilience.”

Focus on community, discipline, and confidence over aesthetics.

“Skincare is about health.”

Make clear, medical-grade positioning your advantage.

1.2

the challenger *manifesto*

1

it's not about size

It's about belief.

2

pick fights

With ideas, not competitors.

3

break rules

Categories are meant to be re-written.

4

culture > campaigns

Challenger brands shape behavior, not ads.

IT'S ABOUT BELIEF

Being a challenger isn't about logos, ads, or campaigns. It's about belief.

The manifesto is the north star for every decision you make — from how you design your product to how you speak to your audience.

If you don't know what you stand for, you'll get pulled into what everyone else is doing. And challengers don't follow. They set the tone.

rule 1

It's *not* about size.

it's about belief

Big budgets, big teams, big distribution — none of that makes you a challenger. What matters is conviction.

- Incumbents rely on legacy. Challengers rely on belief.
- Belief makes your brand magnetic — it attracts people who think like you.
- You don't need everyone. You need the right someones.

EXAMPLE

Patagonia Overcommit to the planet

POSITION

Not just outdoor gear — a movement against fast fashion and environmental destruction.

ACTIONS

From the famous “Don't Buy This Jacket” campaign to giving away the company to fight climate change.

WHY IT WORKED

They didn't just say they cared about the environment. They lived it — even when it cost them sales. That belief is the foundation of their cult-like loyalty.



rule 2

pick *fights*

with ideas, not competitors

Challengers don't just "compete" — they provoke. The enemy isn't always another brand — it's a tired way of thinking.

- Fight against the status quo, not just the market leader.
- Fights clarify what you stand for and sharpen your story.
- People love underdogs — but only when they know what you're fighting against.

EXAMPLE

SmartSweets Fighting Big Sugar

POSITION

Not "healthy candy." They went after sugar itself as the villain.

PACKAGING

The callout "Kick Sugar, Keep Candy" reframed candy as a fight worth joining.

WHY IT WORKED

Instead of competing with Haribo or Skittles, they challenged the belief that candy must be loaded with sugar. That fight gave consumers a clear, simple reason to switch.



rule 3 **break rules**

categories are meant to be re-written

Every category has invisible rules that no one questions.
Challengers win by refusing to play along.

- Ask: “Why do we do it this way?”
- Break the unspoken norms: packaging, pricing, distribution, design.
- When you reframe the rules, you reframe consumer expectations.

EXAMPLE

RXBar **Stripping Back the B.S.**

POSITION

Protein bars were noisy, over-engineered, and loaded with health jargon.

PACKAGING

“3 Egg Whites. 2 Dates. 6 Almonds. No B.S.” became the front of pack, not the back.

WHY IT WORKED

By breaking the category rule that labels belong on the back, RXBar reframed nutrition as simple and honest — and built a \$600M exit.



rule 4

culture > campaigns

campaigns come and go. culture lasts.

Challengers don't just advertise; they create movements, rituals, and language.

- Build brands people join, not just buy from.
- Create insider language, symbols, and spaces where customers connect.
- Marketing is disposable. Culture compounds.

EXAMPLE

Gymshark Garage to Global Tribe

POSITION

Not just another apparel company — a community for people obsessed with training.

ACTIONS

Bet on influencers before it was mainstream, built events and communities that felt like belonging.

WHY IT WORKED

Instead of selling clothes, Gymshark sold a lifestyle people wanted to join. Their culture is now their biggest distribution channel.



exercise

Write your brand's manifesto as 4 short statements

One for each rule. Keep it bold. Imagine it on the wall of your office.

RULE 1

It's not about size. It's about belief.

EXAMPLE

FITNESS BRAND
Strength is mental,
not just physical.

RULE 2

Pick fights. With ideas, not competitors.

EXAMPLE

FITNESS BRAND
Fitness isn't vanity.

RULE 3

Break rules. Categories are meant to be re-written.

EXAMPLE

FITNESS BRAND
No mirrors in
the gym.

RULE 4

Culture > Campaigns. Challenger brands shape behavior, not ads.

EXAMPLE

FITNESS BRAND
Together, not alone.

2.0
challenger
strategies



2.1

redefine the enemy

key idea

Every great challenger brand needs a clear enemy. But here's the twist: your enemy doesn't have to be a competitor.

Your enemy is the old way of doing things — the outdated belief you're here to smash. When you define that enemy, everything about your brand becomes sharper:

- Your story
- Your product
- Your positioning

TAKEAWAY

Consumers want to know what you're for — but they understand it faster when they know what you're against.

The fastest way to stand out is to stand against.

Pick your enemy wisely — because that fight defines your movement.

brands who *fought* the enemy

Oatly vs. Dairy

THE ENEMY

Big Dairy and the belief that milk is essential for humans.

HOW THEY FRAMED IT

“It’s like milk, but made for humans.”

EXECUTION

Campaigns that mocked milk’s health halo, packaging that read like protest posters.

WHY IT WORKED

By making dairy the villain, Oatly created a tribe of people who weren’t just buying oat milk — they were buying into a rejection of old norms.



OTHER EXAMPLES

SMARTSWEETS

Enemy = Sugar addiction
“Kick Sugar, Keep Candy.”

TESLA (EARLY YEARS)

Enemy = Gasoline cars
“Accelerating the world’s transition to sustainable energy.”

DOLLAR SHAVE CLUB

Enemy = Overpriced razors
“Shave Time. Shave Money.”

exercise

The enemy

Write your enemy statement in one clear sentence.

EXAMPLES

COFFEE BRAND

“We’re not against Starbucks — we’re against coffee treated like fast food.”

FITNESS BRAND

“We’re not against gyms — we’re against fitness that’s only about vanity.”

SKINCARE BRAND

“We’re not against big beauty — we’re against hiding behind 40-step routines.”

2.2

reframe the category

key idea

Categories are built on assumptions.

Challengers win by asking: What if the category didn't mean what everyone thinks it does?

When you reframe the category, you don't just compete, **you change the playing field itself.**

TAKEAWAY

Challengers don't just play the game.
They change the rules so everyone else has to catch up.

stripping back the B.S.

RXBar

THE CATEGORY

Protein bars = glossy claims, “superfoods,” complicated science.

THE REFRAME

Nutrition = simple ingredients.

EXECUTION

Packaging that was basically an ingredient list: “3 Egg Whites. 2 Dates. 6 Almonds. No B.S.”

WHY IT WORKED

By redefining what a protein bar was supposed to look and feel like, RXBar created instant differentiation.



OTHER EXAMPLES

WHO GIVES A CRAP

Toilet paper = boring commodity
Reframed as a product with social purpose (funding sanitation).

FLOW WATER

Bottled water = plastic commodity
Reframed as sustainable + stylish.

MID-DAY SQUARES

Chocolate = indulgence & crash
Reframed as fuel for work & workouts.



exercise

the reframe

Reframe your category in 10 words or less.

EXAMPLES

ENERGY DRINKS

“Not sugar + caffeine — real energy from clean ingredients.”

INSURANCE

“Not complicated policies but peace of mind in plain language.”

SNACKS

“Not guilty treats but snacks that fuel your day.”

2.3

overcommit to a belief

key idea

Most brands say they stand for something. **Challengers prove it.**

They don't dip a toe in their beliefs. They dive in — even when it costs them money, market share, or attention from the mainstream.

Overcommitment is magnetic.

People can spot half-heartedness from a mile away.

TAKEAWAY

If your belief isn't inconvenient, it's not strong enough.
Challengers stand out because they stand firm.

example
living the *belief*

Patagonia

THE BELIEF

The planet matters more than profit.

THE ACTIONS

Ran “Don’t Buy This Jacket” ads telling people to consume less. Donated 100% of Black Friday sales to environmental groups. Transferred ownership of the company to fight climate change.

WHY IT WORKED

They didn’t just market sustainability. They operated as if it were the only thing that mattered.



OTHER EXAMPLES

BEN & JERRY’S

Ice cream + social justice activism.

ALLBIRDS

Radical transparency on carbon footprint.

LIQUID DEATH

Going all-in on the “murder your thirst” bit until it became culture.

DON'T BUY THIS JACKET



exercise

the radical move

What's one radical move your brand could make to prove your belief?

FASHION EXAMPLE

BELIEF

“Fast fashion kills the planet.”

RADICAL MOVE

Lifetime free repairs, even if it costs us sales.

FASHION EXAMPLE

BELIEF

“Mental health matters more than aesthetics.”

RADICAL MOVE

Cancel before/after transformations in all marketing.

FOOD EXAMPLE

BELIEF

“Kids deserve real food.”

RADICAL MOVE

Refuse to sell products with artificial colors, even if it limits distribution.

2.4

hack attention

key idea

Incumbents buy attention. Challengers hack it.

When you don't have the biggest budget, you need the boldest ideas.

Attention is a currency — and challengers know how to earn it.

Attention hacks (→) **high creativity, low spend.**

TAKEAWAY

You don't need a Super Bowl ad.

You need a smart, scrappy move that makes people stop and talk.

example
**influencers *before*
it was a playbook**

Gymshark

THE HACK

In 2013, while Nike was running massive ad campaigns, Gymshark sent free gear to YouTube fitness creators.

RESULT

Those influencers built their credibility and community — and Gymshark became their uniform.

WHY IT WORKED

They didn't chase mainstream celebs. They hacked culture by betting early on micro-influencers.



OTHER EXAMPLES

DOLLAR SHAVE CLUB

Viral launch video with millions in sales, budget = \$4,500.

ICELAND FOODS (UK)

Pulled their ad “Rang-tan” on deforestation, which then went viral as a banned ad.

LIQUID DEATH

Canned water disguised as beer instant social buzz.

exercise

the hacks

List 3 attention hacks you could try in the next 30 days.



EXAMPLES

FOOD BRAND

Partner with a gym for post-workout free samples.

APPAREL BRAND

Run a pop-up in an unexpected location (like a laundromat).

BEVERAGE BRAND

Drop a parody ad that calls out the category cliché.

2.5

build community First

key idea

Ads can buy awareness. Community builds loyalty.

Challengers know their biggest distribution channel isn't retailers or ads — it's their own fans.

When people feel like they're part of something, they don't just buy once.

They recruit others.

TAKEAWAY

Community isn't an add-on. It's a growth engine.
Build the tribe, and the sales follow.

example **community as strategy**

Glossier

THE PLAYBOOK

Glossier didn't launch products top-down. They listened to their community of readers (Into the Gloss blog) and co-created.

EXECUTION

Customers became marketers — posting, reviewing, and hyping new drops.

WHY IT WORKED

Instead of advertising to people, they made people part of the brand.



OTHER EXAMPLES

RAPHA (CYCLING BRAND)

Built clubs and cafés where cyclists gather, turning retail into lifestyle.

YETI

Turned coolers into a cult brand by anchoring in outdoor culture and stories.

PELOTON

Didn't just sell bikes, built an online tribe around instructors and leaderboards.

exercise

the superfans

Map your top 10 superfans. How could you engage them this month?



EXAMPLES

COFFEE BRAND

Invite your most loyal customers to test a new roast before launch.

FITNESS BRAND

Feature your top community members on social media.

SNACK BRAND

Create a private group where fans can help name your next flavor.

3.0

challenger tools & tactics



3.1

language as a *weapon*

key idea

Challengers know that words move faster than ads.

A single phrase can do more for your brand than a six-figure media buy.

Language builds culture — it's how movements spread.

When you coin a phrase, you control the narrative. The right words turn customers into carriers of your message.

TAKEAWAY

Language builds community faster than advertising.
Give people the words they need to spread your belief.

example
words *build* movements

“

Wow, no cow.

OATLY

Playfully sums up the mission in three words.

“

Kick sugar, keep candy.

SMARTSWEETS

The entire brand story in a slogan.

“

Think different.

APPLE

A call to identity, not product.

exercise

describe your worldview

Write one phrase your customers could repeat that instantly signals they're part of your tribe without describing your product.

EXAMPLES

COFFEE BRAND

“Ritual, not routine.”

FITNESS BRAND

“Strong minds, not just strong bodies.”

OUTDOOR BRAND

“Go further, stay wild.”

3.2

design as *signal*

key idea

Design isn't decoration — it's communication. Every detail signals who you are and what you stand for.

In crowded categories, sameness kills. Design is your loudest act of rebellion.

TAKEAWAY

Design is how you show belief before you say a word.
If your design fits neatly in the category, you're already losing.

example
communication design



RXBar

THE DESIGN

Ingredients became the design, no B.S.



Liquid Death

THE DESIGN

Tallboy cans and death-metal aesthetics made water look dangerous.



Glossier

THE DESIGN

Soft, clean minimalism and “millennial pink” made skincare feel approachable, not clinical.

exercise

if it feels safe, it's forgettable

Audit your design system — packaging, website, social.



ASK

Does it blend in with competitors?

Could someone recognize it from across the room?

Does it express your belief or just your logo?

EXAMPLE

If your product feels “safe,” it’s not signaling enough.

3.3

distribution *hacks*

key idea

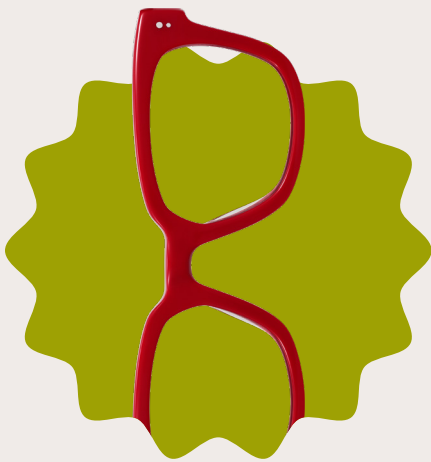
Challengers don't wait for shelf space — they find back doors.
Where you show up can say as much about your brand as what you sell.

Distribution is a mindset: go where incumbents can't or won't.

TAKEAWAY

Distribution isn't logistics — it's storytelling.
Go where your audience already lives, not where the industry expects you.

example
communication
design



**Warby
Parker**

Bypassed optometrists
to sold online, then opened
experiential stores.



**Red
Bull**

Didn't buy ads,
built its own media
empire through events.



**Liquid
Death**

Distributed through music
venues and tattoo parlors
before grocery stores.



exercise

go where they don't

Where is your audience already paying attention — but your competitors aren't?
List 3 unconventional places you could show up this quarter.

EXAMPLES

COFFEE BRAND

Sell cold brew at local barber shops instead of cafés.

SKINCARE BRAND

Partner with boutique gyms instead of beauty retailers.

RTD BEVERAGE

Sponsor pickleball courts instead of festivals.

3.4

culture *jams*

key idea

Challengers move at the speed of culture.

They don't wait for trends to trickle down — they jump in, remix, and make noise.

Culture jamming is about relevance. It's how you make your brand feel alive in the moment.

TAKEAWAY

Challengers don't just follow culture.

They shape it — by showing up where conversations are happening now.

example
when brands
jam **with culture**



Oreo

“Dunk in the Dark” during the Super Bowl blackout, real-time brilliance.



Crocs x Balenciaga

Turned “ugly” into fashion’s statement of irony.



Barbie (2023)

Collaborated with everyone — making itself the cultural moment of the year.

exercise

find your cultural moment

What cultural conversation could your brand join this month?
Look for intersections between your belief and what people are already talking about.



EXAMPLES

OUTDOOR BRAND

Join climate protests
“Less plastic, more planet.”

SNACK BRAND

Meme the Sunday Scaries
“Our fuel beats your burnout.”

DTC BRAND

React to pop culture trends
with your own spin.

3.5

product as *protest*

key idea

The boldest form of marketing? The product itself.

When your belief is baked into what you make, you don't need to shout — people see it, feel it, and talk about it.

Great challengers turn their product into a statement of values.

TAKEAWAY

Your product is your loudest message.
Make it say something that matters.

example
when products
take a *stand*



Patagonia

Ironclad Guarantee
and lifetime repair

=

a protest against
fast fashion.



Tony's Chocolonely

Uneven chocolate bar

=

visual metaphor for
inequality in cocoa farming.



Tesla

Over-the-air updates

=

cars that evolve
instead of expire.

exercise

make your belief tangible

How could your product or experience make your belief tangible?
Think about shape, packaging, materials, or rituals that communicate your story.

EXAMPLES

COFFEE BRAND

Package beans by farm name, not roast style.

WELLNESS BRAND

Include a “rest day” reminder card with every supplement order.

SUSTAINABLE BRAND

Make every return label double as a recycling envelope.

4.0
activation
& *growth*



4.1

from mindset to *momentum*

key idea

You've built your belief system, sharpened your strategy, and scored your mindset.

Now comes the hard part — living it. Being a challenger isn't a campaign. It's a daily operating system.

Growth doesn't come from more noise — it comes from focused conviction.

The best challenger brands act small, stay fast, and think big.

framework
move with *belief*

anchor in belief

Every idea starts with your manifesto.



prototype fast.

Test, learn, move. Don't overthink.



show up consistently

Momentum builds trust faster
than perfection.

example
belief at work



Liquid Death

Liquid Death didn't start with a full ad plan — just cans, merch, and relentless commitment to the bit.

Mid-Day Squares

Mid-Day Squares turned behind-the-scenes hustle into their best marketing engine.



exercise

live the belief

List 3 consistent actions your brand can take this month to live your belief, not talk about it.



4.2

build your challenger flywheel

key idea

Turn one great idea into momentum across every touchpoint.

The strongest brands don't grow linearly, they build a flywheel. Each move fuels the next:



example
flywheel



exercise

map your own flywheel

Start with your brand's belief, then write 3 actions that reinforce it at product, content, and community levels.

BELIEF

EXAMPLE

PATAGONIA
The planet comes first

BEHAVIOUR

EXAMPLE

PATAGONIA
Repair & reuse

BUZZ

EXAMPLE

PATAGONIA
Customers brag about old jackets

BRAND EQUITY

EXAMPLE

PATAGONIA
Trust and lifetime value

4.3

partner with *purpose*

key idea

Challenger brands don't collaborate to get clout.

They collaborate to get culture.

Partnerships are accelerators — they help you borrow trust and enter new audiences without losing your identity.`

example
communication *design*



Yeti
X
Howler Bros

Authentic outdoor
crossover, not mass retail.



Crocs
X
Balenciaga

Turned irony into
a global headline.



Glossier
X
Topicals

Shared values in
skincare diversity.

exercise

who shares your audience and your values

Write three potential partners and how each could help you grow relevance, not just reach.

A large, empty white rounded rectangle with rounded corners, occupying the majority of the page below the text. It is intended for the user to write their answers to the exercise.

4.4

create cultural *gravity*

key idea

Challengers don't chase trends — they create gravity. They stand for something so strong that culture bends around them.

Cultural gravity = when your brand becomes shorthand for an idea.

example
cultural pull in *action*

Liquid Death



Humour



Sustainability



Water as lifestyle,
not hydration

Apple



Simplicity



Design



“Think Different” still
defines creativity

Patagonia



Activism



Outdoor brand
becomes environmental
conscience



exercise

make culture orbit you

Write the word or emotion you want your brand to own in culture.

ASK: When people see us, what should they immediately think or feel?

4.5

your challenger *roadmap*

You've got the mindset, the playbook, and the scorecard.
Now it's time to put it in motion.

action framework

- 1 CHOOSE YOUR FOCUS AREA**
Mindset, Strategy, Tools, or Activation.
- 2 PICK ONE**
Pick one move you can implement in the next 30 days.
- 3 BUILD ACCOUNTABILITY**
Assign an owner, set a date, and measure impact.

example copy

If your lowest score was culture **then** host a pop-up or collab that sparks conversation.
If your weakest area was design **then** audit your packaging for category sameness.

4.6

from **playbook** to *action*

The brands that win tomorrow are the ones
brave enough to act differently today.

Don't just play the game.
rewrite the rules.

Download the full Challenger Toolkit (worksheets + templates).

OR

Book a Challenger Brand Session with Smaller Agency.

THE
CHALLENGER
Playbook

thank
you

NOAH BARLOW
NOAH@SMALLERAGENCY.COM

**smaller
agency.**