THOMAS RUCK

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Why Three Forces Beat a Thousand Touchpoints

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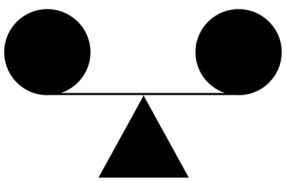
THOMAS RUCK helps companies find new paths to sustainable growth. Drawing from 25 years and various executive positions at the intersection of global consulting and creative innovation, he has guided executives across Europe in crafting winning transformation strategies.

He is also the Chief Strategy Officer of The Hotz Group, a brand-led value creation partner that designs and builds new futures for companies at strategic inflection points.

THOMAS RUCK

Growth Through Experience

Why Three Forces Beat a Thousand Touchpoints



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For Sally,
Lenny, Morris & Tara

“The purpose of business is to create and keep a customer.”

—PETER DRUCKER

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SETTING

PART 1

THE STAGE

Introduction

What This Book Is All About

There are two fundamentally different ways to grow.

The first is to compete for demand that already exists. You optimize reach, sharpen pricing, run campaigns that interrupt enough people often enough. You fight for share in a market you accept as given—with its established conventions, its inherited customer expectations, its familiar price anchors. You study what competitors do and try to do it better, faster, or cheaper. This is market *taking*. It works, but it's a game with a ceiling.

The second is different in kind, not just degree. Some companies don't compete within their market's rules—they rewrite them. They spot the frictions their industry has tolerated, the compromises customers have quietly accepted as inevitable, and they refuse to go along. They build a different world they stand for. A different experience they actually deliver. A different way of showing up. The result is that customers don't just choose them. They *prefer* them. And they keep preferring them, even when alternatives appear, even when a competitor sharpens their pricing or freshens their offer.

This is market *shaping*. And the companies doing it aren't operating in the same game as their competitors—they're playing a different one entirely.

They're in pursuit of something bigger than stealing a share of their competitors' business. This doesn't necessarily require inventing a new category from scratch. Tesla wasn't the first electric car. Oatly wasn't the first oat milk. Progressive wasn't the first car insurer. Nubank wasn't the first digital bank. What they did was something harder and rarer than an invention: they changed how *their* market worked—how it felt for customers, what it delivered and what it refused to. What customers could expect from it, and what "good" looked like inside it. Competitors couldn't simply run faster on the same track to stay relevant. They had to ask themselves what track they were even on.

That's what separates market shapers from market takers: not the size of their marketing budget or the cleverness of their campaigns, but the breadth and quality of the experience they've built. And that word—*experience*—is worth pausing on, because it's widely misunderstood. Customer experience is too often reduced to the moment of purchase, the quality of the helpdesk, the smoothness of an app. These things matter. But they're the surface, not the substance. What shapes a customer's preference—what creates genuine loyalty, willingness to pay, and the kind of advocacy that no campaign can manufacture—is something larger. It's the complete impression formed across everything a company *is*, everything it *delivers*, and everything it *says*. Not a touchpoint. A totality.

Growth through experience, in that sense, is the mechanism behind market shaping. And it operates through distinct forces—the specific dimensions of a business where that kind of experience is built, deepened, and held together. Companies that get all of them right don't just win more customers. They change the ground they're competing on.

Three forces determine whether you stay in the taking game or cross into the shaping game.

These forces are:

1. **Big Idea** — The overarching position and worldview that defines what you stand for and that runs through everything you do.

2. **Proposition Experience** — The tangible value and hands-on customer experience your products and services deliver.

3. **Communication Experience** — The way you communicate your brand, products, and services.

Getting to that totality—deliberately, systematically—is what this book is about.

What to Expect From This Book

This book has two distinct halves—and they work together.

The first is the framework. Part 2 builds out the *Three Forces Model* in full: what each force encompasses, what the criteria for strength look like, and how the forces interact as a system. It also presents something new to this edition: empirical evidence. Across several industries and dozens of companies, the same pattern surfaced with striking consistency—and the findings are laid out here in detail, along with a self-assessment that lets you place your own company in the competitive landscape. Part 2 is where the thinking is grounded.

The second half is a *collection of thought starters*. Part 3 draws on a rich collection of articles that appeared as columns in *Persönlich*, Switzerland's leading trade publication for advertising, marketing, media, and digital. They emerged from years of work with CMOs and other growth champions at leading companies across Europe. Added to this are fresh impulses from other thought leaders. In other words: *insights from the field, for the field*.

Each article is embedded in the framework but stands on its own—a focused provocation or practical perspective you can pick up, act on, and put back down. Organized around the three forces, the collection moves from foundational thinking through applied strategy to the organizational and partnership themes that determine whether good strategy actually gets executed. It also includes a few experience technology time capsules: a Metaverse strategy (still relevant if a virtual world will ever take off) and a chat with ChatGPT in its diaper days about AI in marketing (surprisingly evergreen and packed with lessons).

Does this book cover every possible growth strategy? No, of course not. But between the model, the evidence, and the applied collection, you have everything you need to diagnose where you are, understand what's driving or limiting your growth, and find the strategies most worth acting on.

The *User Manual* that follows explains how to navigate it all.

Now, let's turn these insights into action. Here's to a good read and, more importantly, knockout success.

User Manual

How to Make this Book your Growth Engine

Welcome to your guide for building strategic differentiation and durable customer preferences.

The two halves of this book—the Three Forces Model and the thought starters—are designed to be used together, in a sequence that takes you from understanding to action.

Here's how to work through the book:

1. **Learn & Prioritize** — Work through Part 2. Understand the model, follow the evidence, and take the self-assessment. You'll come out knowing your archetype and which forces need the most work—and with a clear sense of which thought starters in Part 3 are most relevant to where you are right now.

2. **Read & Reflect** — Pick a relevant thought starter. Read it at your leisure, let the ideas sink in. A few days later, check how well your company is already doing what's discussed. Where are the sticking points? Jot down initial ideas on what needs to be done.

3. **Decide & Act** — Determine who in your team tackles the issue. Brief them concisely, create space for action, and set clear next steps and deadlines.

The thought starters are designed for exactly this rhythm—focused, actionable, and independent enough to be picked up and put back down as your priorities shift.

The larger journey this book points toward, however, is a different order of magnitude. Genuinely building or reshaping the three forces architecture is a strategic transformation endeavor: understanding where your company truly stands, making deliberate choices about where to invest, and sequencing that effort in a way that compounds over time. Such a holistic experience transformation requires hands-on work inside the actual business—something a book, by nature, can only point toward.

Ready to start the journey?

GROWTH THROUGH EXPERIENCE
AI-CONVERSATIONS

Prefer listening over reading?

Experience the thought starters in a different way through this AI-generated companion series. Each article comes to life as an engaging conversation, deepening your understanding of the core concepts through natural dialogue.

Available on **www.GrowthThroughExperience.com** and on all major podcast platforms.

THE THREE FORCES

PART 2

MODEL

Three Forces, One System

How to Create Growth Through Experience

Loyal customers and long-term business growth—these aren't lucky breaks. They're rooted in sustainable preferences for your brand, products, and services. But how do these preferences come about? They don't just appear out of thin air—no, they're the result of a sophisticated interplay of three forces acting on customers and prospects.

These forces are also your growth levers—your three tools for creating sustainable differentiation. Each one contributes to directing demand towards your offerings and keeping it there. But they only unfold their full power when they work in concert: not as three separate projects, but as a system. A compounding architecture. Because when they reinforce each other, they don't just add up—they multiply.

Time to get to know them now:

Force 1:
The Big Idea — "Take a Stand"

The first force is the most foundational—and the rarest. Meet the Big Idea.

Think of the Big Idea as your company's organizing philosophy—a fundamental stance that goes beyond what you sell and speaks to why you exist and what you're changing in the world. And every company has a drawer full of candidates: a mission statement. A values wall. A purpose statement the communications team labored over. A tagline Marketing unveiled at the all-hands. But a Big Idea is none of these things. A genuine Big Idea is a *belief system* that drives the entire business—shaping strategy and value creation, inspiring employees, and giving customers something worth belonging to. The difference is profound: most of what's in that drawer is written for the lobby. A Big Idea is for the world.

And also worth clarifying at the outset: while the advertising world often uses the term "big idea" for campaign concepts—a memorable creative platform that drives a season of communication—the Big Idea in this model operates at an entirely different level. It goes beyond creative messages to shape the entire organization's direction, its propositions, and its long-term impact. A campaign runs its course. A Big Idea runs the company.

But the most powerful Big Ideas don't just describe a company—they describe a *worldview*. A particular belief about how value should be created, who it should serve, and what currently broken assumptions in the market need to be challenged. Southwest Airlines didn't just want to run a better airline. They believed that flying should be accessible to everyone, not just business travelers with expense accounts. That belief—directed squarely against the prevailing logic of the aviation industry—shaped every decision they made: pricing, culture, operations, and communication. It wasn't a campaign. It was a conviction.

This is the distinction that matters. Most companies compete. Companies with a genuine Big Idea *challenge*. Because if you

aren't putting something genuinely different into the world, what's the point of you?

But Big Ideas are not always born the same way. Some companies are built around one from day one. First Direct Bank, for instance, launched in 1989 with "Banking Without Walls" as its founding logic. There was no branch, no legacy infrastructure, and no compromise: the Big Idea was the business. Others arrive at their Big Idea more gradually, often without realizing it. When Howard Schultz acquired Starbucks in 1987, the company had been roasting and selling coffee beans for sixteen years. The Big Idea of "Sociability"—the belief that people needed a third place between home and work—only became explicit as Schultz began expanding the business. The conviction was always there in the experience he was building; it just took time to surface as a deliberate strategy. The origin story matters less than the eventual clarity. What counts is whether the idea, however it emerged, genuinely drives the business.

What the Big Idea Encompasses

The Big Idea operates at the strategic *foundation* of the Three Forces Model—it is the lens through which everything else is filtered. To understand what it encompasses, think about the kinds of decisions and domains it naturally governs:

Strategic positioning and competitive stance — Where you choose to play and what industry assumptions you are explicitly rejecting. The Big Idea answers not just "what market are we in?" but "what are we fundamentally changing about it?"

Brand purpose and company identity — The reason for being that employees rally around and customers join. But—and this is critical—only when it also manifests in concrete decisions, not when it lives on a poster in the lobby.

Business model choices — Sometimes the most powerful Big Ideas aren't expressed in advertising at all. They're hidden in how a company makes money, who it serves, and what it deliberately refuses to do. Progressive Insurance challenged the

foundational logic of the entire insurance industry: rather than pricing customers as members of demographic groups, they insisted on pricing the individual—based on actual behavior, not statistical averages. The tools they built were simply the expression of that deeper conviction. These are the Big Ideas that are hardest to copy, because copying the feature doesn't replicate the conviction.

Organizational architecture and culture — A genuine Big Idea doesn't belong to the CEO. It belongs to everyone. It restructures how a company organizes itself, who reports to whom, what capabilities it builds, and what operating model it chooses. First Direct didn't just hire differently—they built an entirely different operating architecture, recruiting service professionals from the hospitality industry rather than banking, and empowering frontline staff to override policies that frustrated customers. The idea was in the org chart, not just in the values. And ultimately, it becomes the culture: the shared set of beliefs and behaviors that define how people act when no one is watching.

Innovation direction and permission — A well-defined Big Idea tells you which new ideas are consistent with who you are and which ones aren't. It becomes the filter for what you build next, tactically and strategically. Netflix's belief that curated entertainment access matters more than ownership didn't just guide one product—it enabled a decade of strategic pivots, from DVDs to streaming to original content, all coherently connected.

One more note worth making clearly: *operational excellence is not a Big Idea*. Being the fastest, the most reliable, or the cheapest is valuable—but any competitor can match or exceed a performance level with enough investment and time. What they can't easily copy is a fundamental belief about the world and a business built around it. This distinction—between a company that is *better* and a company that is *different at the level of conviction*—is precisely what the Big Idea dimension of the Three Forces Model is designed to capture.

The Criteria: What Makes a Big Idea Genuine

Here's the honest truth: *most companies don't have a Big Idea*. They have well-written purpose statements, thoughtfully constructed values frameworks, and marketing positioning that sounds compelling. But scratch the surface and you often find something generic—a set of aspirations that could belong to any company in any sector. You could swap the company name for a competitor's and nothing would feel wrong. That's the first sign you're looking at a corporate platitude, not a Big Idea.

A genuine Big Idea must satisfy three criteria—all three, not one or two. Think of them as three stress tests. Pass all three and you have something real. Fail one and you have something worth building toward, but not yet a force strong enough to drive durable differentiation, preference and growth.

Criterion 1 — Radical: Challenge the Status Quo

A Big Idea takes a strong and clear position. It's *for* something—and explicitly *against* something else. Not against a competitor, but against an assumption, a convention, a way of doing things that the industry has simply accepted as normal. This is category norm rejection: the deliberate identification of an industry assumption and the decision to build a business against it. It's what gives a Big Idea its competitive edge, its energy, and its ability to attract people who share the same frustration with the status quo.

Again: Southwest didn't just want to be a cheaper airline. They were *against* the idea that air travel was a privilege. Duolingo wasn't just building a language app. They were *against* the assumption that quality education requires payment. Tesla didn't want to make a slightly cleaner car. They were *against* the belief that choosing an electric vehicle meant accepting something slower, uglier, and less desirable than a car enthusiasts would actually want—that environmental responsibility required sacrifice. They set out to prove it didn't. In each case, the radical stance is specific, directional, and in genuine tension with prevailing industry logic.

The test is sharp: *Would the incumbents have considered this wrong? Would they have said "that's not how this industry works"?* If yes, you're in radical territory. If the answer is "well, everyone's moving in that direction," you're looking at a trend, not a challenge.

This is what the *flip vs. polish* distinction captures—and it's one of the most useful diagnostic tools. A company that *polishes* improves what exists. Better service, slicker interface, faster delivery, friendlier staff. All valuable. None of it radical. A company that *flips* challenges what exists at a fundamental level—the pricing logic, the access model, the customer relationship, the underlying assumption about who the category is for. Progressive Insurance flipped the pricing logic of the entire insurance industry. Aldi flipped the supermarket model. Airbnb flipped the hotel relationship.

When assessing your own company: are you flipping something, or polishing it? Both have value. Only one is a Big Idea.

Criterion 2 — Social: Create Belonging

A Big Idea doesn't just attract customers. It creates *members*. People who identify with what you stand for, who feel part of something larger than just a sum of transactions. This is the social dimension—and it's what separates great brands from great products.

Look at IKEA. Their belief that good design should be accessible to everyone—not a luxury reserved for the few—was not only radical, it also created a very particular kind of customer relationship. People don't just shop at IKEA; in many ways, they *belong* to the idea of it. The trip itself has become a ritual. The affordability is a statement. The design philosophy is something customers share with genuine enthusiasm, not because IKEA asked them to, but because the idea resonates. IKEA Family, one of the world's largest loyalty programs, isn't held together by points and discounts—it's held together by a shared conviction about how everyday life could and should look.

Or consider Patagonia. Their customers aren't buying outdoor gear. They're joining an environmental movement. The company made its beliefs impossible to ignore—famously running their ad that said "Don't Buy This Jacket"—and in doing so, created a community of people who feel that buying Patagonia is itself an act of values alignment. You don't just own the jacket. You belong to something.

The social criterion matters because it's the mechanism through which a Big Idea generates the most durable form of customer preference: *identification*. When someone sees your brand as a reflection of who they are or who they want to be, the switching cost goes up dramatically. They're not just comparing features anymore—they're questioning their own identity. That's a powerful place to be.

The behavioral fingerprints of a truly social Big Idea show up in unexpected places. Customers defend the brand when it comes under pressure—not because they were asked to, but because the attack feels personal. Employees talk about the company with genuine pride, not because it's a talking point in their onboarding but because they believe in what they're building. And people display the logo not as a status symbol but as a membership signal—*this is what I stand for*.

But the opposite is equally instructive. When the American mass-market giant Target faced backlash over its inclusivity positioning in the lead-up to Pride Month 2023, there was no community of advocates to rally to its defense. The purpose-driven initiatives quietly crumbled, revealing that a purpose statement—however sincerely made and well-implemented—is not the same as a Big Idea that customers have truly made their own. Target dressed up in purpose. But it didn't have belonging. A Big Idea has both.

Criterion 3 — Tangible: Express It Through Actions

This is the criterion that kills the most Big Ideas—not because companies lack ambition, but because they confuse articulation

with execution. A Big Idea is only as real as the decisions it produces. If you can read the annual report and find the Big Idea, but you can't *experience* it as a customer or *feel* it as an employee, it isn't tangible. It's aspiration.

The tangibility test is unforgiving: *Would you know this Big Idea from experiencing the company, without reading a mission statement?*

Tony's Chocolonely is a vivid case in point. Their radical belief—that the chocolate industry's endemic inequality is not inevitable and must be challenged—isn't a line on the packaging. It's in the unequal division of their chocolate bars, literally shaped to reflect the unfair distribution of value in the cocoa supply chain. It's in their pricing model, their direct farmer partnerships, and their decision to open their entire sourcing model to competitors—packaging the full blueprint as the "Tony's Open Chain" so that any chocolate brand could adopt it. You can *taste* the Big Idea. That is tangible.

The same logic applies to Aldi. The belief that quality food shouldn't require a premium price isn't just a positioning claim—it's visible in every operational choice: the compact store format, the absence of national brands, the limited SKU count, the requirement to bring your own bags. None of this is accidental. Every decision has been shaped by the same underlying conviction. You don't need to read Aldi's mission to understand their Big Idea. You feel it the moment you walk through the door.

This criterion is also where a common misconception deserves a direct warning. Big Ideas don't have to be written down—they can often hide in business model innovations, operational choices, and the things a company consistently refuses to do, rather than in any brand communications at all. A company can challenge a fundamental industry assumption through its pricing structure, its service model, its distribution choices—without ever articulating that challenge explicitly in its marketing. When assessing your own Big Idea, look in the business decisions before you look in the brand manual.

YOUR FAST DIAGNOSTIC:

How Strong Is Your Big Idea?

The Swap Test is the fastest way to test whether you're looking at a real Big Idea. Take the claim—whatever your company says it stands for—and swap your name for a competitor's. Does the statement still work?

"We put customers first." Swap it. Works for everyone. Not a Big Idea.

"We believe technology should feel human." Swap it. Works for everyone. Not a Big Idea.

"We believe flying should be accessible to everyone, not a privilege of the few—and we've built our entire business model to prove it." Swap that into a legacy carrier. Doesn't work. That's a Big Idea.

The swap test has a zero-tolerance policy for generic language. If your claim could belong to any competitor in your sector, it isn't positioning—it's noise. And the bar is high by design: the rarity of genuine Big Ideas is precisely what makes them powerful.

If your claim fails the swap test, there are two deeper questions worth sitting with before you move on.

What are you explicitly *against*? Not a competitor—an industry assumption. If you announced your stance publicly, would your competitors feel uncomfortable, or would they shrug and say "so do we"?

Would customers notice if you disappeared from the market? Not miss your product—miss what you *stand for*. If the honest answer is "they'd just switch to the next best option," the Big Idea isn't there yet.

Clear on both? That's your Big Idea. Uncertain on either? That's your brief.

Force 2:
The Proposition Experience — "Deliver Value"

The second force is where strategy meets reality. Here's the Proposition Experience.

Think of the Proposition Experience as the totality of value you deliver—not just what you build, but what customers actually live through when they find you, choose you, use you, and decide whether to stay. The product specification doesn't capture that. Neither does the feature roadmap or the conversion metric reviewed on Monday morning—those are instruments for measuring what you've built, not what it's like to be on the receiving end. The Proposition Experience is what value *feels like* from the outside—the full arc of how customers get what they came for, from first contact to long-term ownership.

And here's the thing: you can build something genuinely excellent and still come up short. Many companies do.

The reason is a gap that runs through almost every industry, in almost every company. What businesses think they're selling and what customers are actually buying are rarely the same thing. A fitness app doesn't sell workout plans—it sells the feeling of becoming someone who actually shows up for themselves. A low-cost airline doesn't sell seats—it sells a holiday that previously felt out of reach. A coffee chain doesn't sell espresso—it sells an hour of belonging somewhere comfortable. In each case, the job the customer is hiring the product to do is broader, more human, and more situational than the product itself. When a company defines its proposition around what it has built rather than what customers are trying to achieve, it optimizes the wrong things—polishing features nobody weighs and missing the moments that actually drive the decision.

The second thing to understand is that even when companies get the offering right, the *experience of delivering* it is a separate bet entirely—and often a losing one. The two are not the same. A genuinely differentiated product can be delivered through a journey so generic, so friction-filled, or so inconsistent that the

differentiation evaporates before it reaches the customer. And conversely—as the best service brands know—a relatively standard offering can be delivered in a way so distinctive, so effortless, and so well-tuned to what customers actually need that it creates loyalty the product alone would never generate. The Proposition Experience encompasses both dimensions. Lose grip on either one and the force weakens.

What the Proposition Experience Encompasses

The Proposition Experience operates at the *delivery layer* of the Three Forces Model—it's where the Big Idea either proves itself through action or reveals itself as unsubstantiated aspiration. To understand what it encompasses, let's look at the full range of decisions and domains it entails:

Product and service design — The core of what you've built: its capabilities, quality, range, and coherence. But the question is never simply "is this good?" It's "is this distinctly better in ways that customers *notice and value* relative to the alternatives they're actually considering?"

Pricing and access model — How you've structured the exchange of value. Pricing isn't just a revenue decision; it's a proposition signal. It tells customers who you're for, what you believe value is worth, and what you're prepared to sacrifice to reach them. At one end of the spectrum, Aldi built its entire proposition on a pricing architecture that made a statement—quality food shouldn't cost premium prices—and every operational choice in the business exists to validate that claim. At the other end, Hermès doesn't just price its Birkin bags highly because of the high cost of fine materials or artisanal labor—the price, the waiting list, the required purchase history all *are* the proposition. The object is almost secondary to what acquiring it signals. In both cases, the pricing model speaks before the product does.

Customer journey touchpoints — Every interaction a customer has with your product or service: from first discovery through purchase, onboarding, active use, and renewal or replacement. This is where the offer either lands or leaks. Even a

strong offering can be undone at a single touchpoint—a frustrating signup flow, a confusing invoice, a support call that goes badly. The journey is the proposition for most customers, most of the time.

Ownership and lifecycle value — What happens *after* the purchase. For many categories—durables, software, financial products, healthcare—the post-purchase experience is where the bulk of value is either delivered or destroyed. Customers don't just buy; they live with what they've bought. Companies that design the ownership experience as deliberately as the purchase experience compound their value over time in a way that point-of-sale competitors cannot match.

Channel and distribution choices — How you've chosen to reach customers, and what that choice signals about your proposition. A direct-to-consumer model isn't just a distribution decision—it's a commitment: you control the experience, you own the relationship, and you bear responsibility for what the customer encounters. An indirect model offers scale but cedes control. Neither is inherently right, but the choice has consequences for every other element of the proposition.

Success measurement — This one is rarely listed alongside the others, and that's exactly the problem. Most companies measure how well customers are performing for *them*—sales figures, conversion rates, churn percentages, NPS. These are company performance indicators. What they rarely measure is how well *they* are performing *for customers*—whether the customer's problem was actually solved, how much time was saved, how the experience changed what was possible for them. The companies with the strongest Proposition Experiences tend to track both. They hold themselves accountable to customer outcomes, not just company outcomes—and they design their propositions around what they find.

One critical note worth making early: *product quality alone is not a Proposition Experience*. Being good—even excellent—at what you make is the baseline for competing in most categories. Quality is table stakes. The Proposition Experience asks a harder