

# THE POWER OF COMPETITION

## HOW COMPETITION, THROUGH THE POWER OF INVENTION, ENHANCES PRODUCTS, LIVES AND BOTTOM LINES.

This is the story of Aaron Avner, a farmer who grows excellent quality corn.

Every year, Avner won the award for the best-grown corn. One year, a newspaper reporter interviewed him and learned something interesting about how he grew it. The reporter discovered that Avner shared his seed corn with his neighbours.

"How can you afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbours when they are entering corn in competition with yours each year?" the reporter asked.

"Why sir," said the farmer. "Don't you know? The wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn and swirls it from field to field. If my neighbours grow inferior corn, cross-pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am to grow good corn, I must help my neighbours grow good corn."

This parable seems to go against current thinking trends. People want to win at any cost and, if having weak competitors helps in achieving this goal, then so be it. The end seems to justify the means in this school of thinking, but what has weak competition ever contributed to the advancement of society, the common good, apart from the promotion of mediocrity?

In the realm of individual sport, be it tennis, golf or track and field events, we cannot fail but notice that competition is the elixir that spurs true athletes to stretch towards levels of performance that seem beyond the grasp of human possibility. Usain Bolt, Tiger Woods, Roger Federer, Cristiano Ronaldo and Serena Williams are some of the few examples that would not have achieved what they did were it not for the handful of aspiring challengers, which spurred them on to greatness. Even if history is not so kind, it fails to remember and honour those who had the courage to finish second and third. The thing with competition is that your best effort's glass ceiling is called talent, a genetic lottery that separates the great from the greatest. If one cannot exceed inner potential, our role should just be to fulfill it and be content with that.

We are extremely grateful in our little industry of super automatic espresso machines to be constantly challenged by some great organisations. Companies that believe that quality

THE STRONG WILL ALWAYS SURVIVE WHILE THE WEAK WILL FADE AWAY. THE DEFINING FACTOR WILL NOT BE COMMITMENT, EFFORT AS ALL OF TODAY'S COMPANIES HAVE THAT.

matters, people who are willing to challenge the status quo – the historical domination of traditional machines, developing intelligent products and solutions, compelling us to strive towards even greater perfection in search of this elusive chalice we call the 'perfect cup'.

Technology should exist to enhance our daily lives, enabling us to focus on what matters most, as long as the master/slave relationship has been clearly defined upfront. Artificial Intelligence should never supersede what was created either through divine intervention or a giant blast. Artifice means a copy of the original and while copies can come quite close to the root, it could never usurp it. A replica painting could never match the original the same way a cover song fails to capture the passion, intelligence and spirit of its composer. A replica is nothing more than an accepted and honourable simile, a sort of half-truth, which whilst not a lie, is not a truth either.

The same paradigm exists in the coffee world. Machines are not there to replace the barista. They are there to complement them, providing greater consistency, productivity and connectivity. The barista can now remove their 'factory worker's' apron and replace it with a painter's easel, create new concoctions and engage in dialogue with other fellow humans, a novel approach in some of our current institutionalised coffee chains.

In my September/October 2018 column in *Global Coffee Report*, called 'The Misery of Choice', I refer to the competitive landscape of coffee shops. I suggest that in order to thrive, espresso houses have to reinvent themselves into a community, an eco-system that could provide the magic thread that links us all. It is my belief that the whole of the retails industry, in order to survive, will have to re-invent itself too and focus more on human matters at the expense of products. Environments that promote emotional touch points will prosper and replace clever structures and processes.

The components of success are often associated with products, but metal or plastic is often cold and devoid of emotion. It is the human touch that moves us into making decisions, engaging with life. The machine should be the tool – the instrument, which enables the artist to create rather than being the centerpiece, the defining matter of choice.

I now use an electric toothbrush instead of a manual one but it is still I who needs to do some of the work. However, if that vibrating head enables me to do a better and more consistent job, it is bound to save me time, pain, and money with my local dentist.

In a competition we have two choices: trash talk as in boxing, or let the results speak for themselves. I tend to compliment our rivals, as I know how much work it requires to excel in a competitive landscape. They deserve our unreserved respect and admiration for their commitment. It is they who compel our team each and every morning to drive innovation forward, to acknowledge pain as a friend and to seek perfection in all that we do.

But do we still want to beat them? The answer is a resounding "yes". We not only want to compete but win as well. However, we do not believe that the end justifies the means and that we should win at all costs. In order to excel, we need our competition to be strong and hopeful, and in my industry experience, they are. But I can see some of them wilting against the upcoming challenges while others are also thriving in the heat of competition. The law of nature will eventually prevail. The strong will always survive while the weak will fade away. The defining factor will not be commitment, effort as all of today's companies have that.

The magic thread will be talent in all facets of the work.

So it is with our lives and those who want to live meaningfully and well, to help enrich the lives of others. The value of a life is measured by the lives it touches, and those who choose to be happy must help others find happiness, for the welfare of each is bound up with the welfare of all. **GCR**



Kamal Bengougam says competition needs to be strong and hopeful in order to progress the industry further.