Marginal gains

Business owners should take account of the science of marginal gains to achieve optimal business results writes Paul Clapham

Business is awash with experts telling you how to do it better and, yes, I accept that to some extent I’m one of them. I’ve heard plenty of business owners complain that, while they’d like to follow a proven formula which promises success, they have no idea how to choose, and picking the wrong one is a route to failure not success.

‘Past performance is no guarantee of future results’ is a sound principle to remember. But, if you like an impressive record as evidence, how about this one? Sixteen gold medals across two Olympics, back to back victories in the Tour de France and a million people actively and newly involved in cycling on a monthly basis. All of this in a short period in a country where cycling was off the sporting radar a decade or so ago and where the national team was regarded as a joke. The above is the record of the performance director of the British and Sky teams, Sir David Brailsford.

Brailsford uses a method – the science of marginal gains. This is a holistic approach. He says it is far from being just about technology, which tends to get the highest profile. He cites, among many other factors, nutrition, good sleeping, the best massage gel. Not much misses the scrutiny of team Brailsford. He says, ‘Each improvement may seem trivial, but the cumulative effect can be huge.’

But what’s this got to do with running an opticians? Just this: as well as sporting organisations hoping to get his input, so too are global corporations looking to a fair wind behind the sporting arena has a fair wind behind it – people can see the results and hold them in respect. That said, you still need to translate it into the business environment – not everybody is a sports fan and equally not everyone can make the mental leap of ‘It helped Team Sky, it can help us’.

The management approach at Cycling GB is to analyse to a fare-thee-well all aspects of a programme. You would be entitled to say that you don’t have Brailsford’s budget, but you don’t need it, partly because your competition isn’t as tough as his and partly because you can focus on those areas for marginal gains you already know about. In essence, business owners do much of that in-depth analysis on a daily basis, without thinking of it in those terms and consequently don’t implement the results.

A key lesson that business owners should take on board from the marginal gains method is that there is no silver bullet thinking. It’s the aggregated improvements to be the big winner (that’s silver bullet thinking). It’s the aggregated gains that deliver results.

Stop looking for the big idea that will transform your business

Overnight change is unrealistic play a long game for sustained improvement

Develop the habit of asking yourself ‘How could I/we do this part of the job better?’

however minor ‘this part’ might be

Actively look for small improvements in all areas of the company’s activity

Set big targets by all means but chop them up into small pieces that people can understand and work with

Ask your staff; they will know of marginal gains that could be made in their part of the business, but they may well think that they’re so minor they’re not worth mentioning. Oh no they’re not!

Sell the simplicity of this approach to your staff: one more initial contact and one more follow-up per day is a small ask, but over a year it adds up to a lot of potential business

Get non-technical details such as personal presentation and product delivery the best you can

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Include the concept of marginal gains in staff incentives. If your recommendation is used, we give you £50, for example programme which is proven in the sporting arena has a fair wind behind it – people can see the results and hold them in respect. That said, you still need to translate it into the business environment – not everybody is a sports fan and equally not everyone can make the mental leap of ‘It helped Team Sky, it can help us’.

The marginal gains method

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Marginal gains haven’t. A key element of that

was the principle of individuals, from top to bottom of an organisation, taking ownership of their part in achieving a quality outcome.

Brailsford makes the same point for marginal gains: ‘Undoubtedly, the key thing is ownership. People don’t like being told what to do. Forget the dictate and control mantra. If you give people ownership over how they improve, that is the biggest game changer.’ I suggest that might more likely have come from a management guru than a sports coach.

(And that guru wouldn’t have 16 gold medals to support his case).

It’s a method not a theory

My personal take on this is that most of the effective people in an organisation go very cold, very quickly on any business theory that even hints at some deep philosophy. They like practical solutions. They like them better still when they are chopped up into little pieces that can implement progressively. Note that Brailsford refers to marginal gains as a method not a theory or a principle. I doubt there’s a business owner who wouldn’t like a bit more method and a bit less theory in his organisation. People also like any programme with tangible evidence of success. That is why any such

THE MARGINAL GAINS METHOD

British team Sky’s success in the Tour de France has been attributed to a marginal gains strategy

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