

# **Remarkabalize it:**

## **Six Lessons from the Food Network That Can Help Your Company “Kick it up a Notch!”**

**by Bruce D. Johnson**

Even if you're not a foodie, even if the thought of watching a “cooking show” repulses you, or even if your idea of cooking is ordering take out and throwing it in a bowl—you ought to be impressed by the incredible growth that the Food Network has experienced over the past decade. From its humble beginnings in 1996, on a cable station that they shared with the New Jersey Network, where they were only on from 1:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. in the morning—to a major cable network channel that is distributed to 88 million households, has five million website users, is viewed in over ten foreign countries, has close to a hundred million dollars in revenue, and has made rock stars and millionaires out of its TV celebrity chefs—you ought to be impressed.

But more than being impressed, you and I ought to be asking, “What can we learn from the meteoric rise of the Food Network? Are there any lessons that might help us do what we do better (whether that's launching a new product, positioning a current product or service, developing a new strategic initiative, or doing our current work better)?” Or to put it another way, “What can the Food Network teach us (regardless of what business or industry we're in—health care, finance, technology, manufacturing, real estate, etc.) about how to be more remarkable?” The answer is, “A lot!”

During the fall of 2005, one evening while I was channel surfing, I came across Emeril Live. Having never watched Emeril Legasse before, I paused for a moment to see what all the rave was about. Before long I wasn't just watching Emeril, I was watching Iron Chef America, then Molto Mario and Everyday Italian (my heritage is Italian), then Bobby Flay and Ina Garten and Dave Lieberman and Tyler Florence and Rachel Ray and Michael Chiarello, etc. Like millions of other people, I became hooked on the Food Network and became a fan—so much so that I'm even encouraging you to give it a try—which is what all of us as business owners and leaders long for—customers who remark to others, “You've got to check this out!” So, how did they do it? Well, here's my list of the top six lessons from the Food Network that can help your business become both more remarkable and profitable!

### **Lesson Number 1: Refuse to Do Anything Ordinary.**

What separates a chef from most everyday home cooks is that a chef keeps thinking of ways to change a recipe. If you ever get a chance to watch an Emeril Lagasse show, you'll regularly hear him shout out his trademark, “Let's kick it up a notch,” over and over again. Why? Because Emeril doesn't want to do a dish the same way it's always been done before. What he wants (just like every other chef on the Food Network) is to do it in a new, novel and more remarkable way.

In fact, it really doesn't matter what the dish is, (for example, let's take mac 'n cheese). A chef isn't about to make mac 'n cheese the same way most home cooks would (i.e. reach for the Kraft Macaroni and Cheese box). No, a chef asks, “How can I do this differently?” In the case of Rachel Ray, her mac 'n cheese recipe first changes the kind of noodle (ziti instead of elbow macaroni). Then she uses four kinds of cheese instead of just one (none of which looks like a packet of orange dust). Then she adds some Italian sausage and mushrooms, some garlic and diced tomatoes, some chicken stock, heavy cream, extra virgin olive oil and then finally, for a little extra touch, a teaspoon of tabasco sauce. Now tell me, this doesn't sound like your mother's mac n' cheese does it? No. Plus it tastes better—which is what remarkable does—it takes something ordinary and transforms it into something extraordinary.

This refusal to do anything ordinary is why every chef has their own take on “regular” recipes. For example, if you search the recipes on the Food Network website ([www.foodnetwork.com](http://www.foodnetwork.com)) for, let's say, jambalaya,

you'll find 32 different recipes from several Food Network chefs like Emeril (who has 13 different jambalaya recipes listed), along with recipes from Bobby Flay, Sara Moulton, Rachael Ray, Robin Miller, Graham Kerr and others. In other words, despite the fact that the name of the dish (jambalaya) is the same, the recipes are anything but the same. Food Network chefs simply refuse to be ordinary – they refuse to create ordinary meals, in ordinary ways, using ordinary products.

So as you look at your current project or work, how can you do what you do differently? How can you, “kick it up a notch” (à la Emeril)? How can you take something simple that you do, and make it sing (à la Rachael Ray and her mac 'n cheese recipe)? Remember, remarkability begins with a decision – a decision to not be ordinary. So why don't you make the decision and then review every project and/or service that your company or organization provides and ask, “Is this ordinary or not?” If it is, change it. If it's not, change it! As I like to say, “Friends don't let friends do ordinary.”

## **Lesson Number 2: Remember that Passion Begets Passion**

You don't have to watch the Food Network for long before you realize that these chefs really love what they do. You never get the impression they're thinking, “Hey, it's just a job.” Quite the contrary, you get the impression that they're thinking, “I love this.” Just watch and listen to someone like Mario Batali on *Molto Mario* talk about food from some particular province in Italy and you'll hear passion come through loud and clear. Mario literally drips passion for food. Or to put it another way, one of the things that drives the phenomenal growth of the Food Network is that the people who are out front are incredibly passionate about what they do

Now, the great thing about passion is . . . it's catchy. For example, as I watched the Food Network, the love and passion that these chefs have for food, aroused a hidden desire in me. For the previous 22 years, I had been so busy working that I never looked at food as more than . . . well, food. And I never looked at preparing food as more than a necessary evil, something that you had to do because you need to eat.

However, as I began to watch the Food Network, I began to see food in a new light – as a way to be creative and to demonstrate love to those for whom I'm cooking. Having caught this passion for food, I found myself starting to plan out meals, searching for the right recipes, trying new dishes, acquiring the right equipment and preparing anything but ordinary meals. For example, my wife and I recently had a night alone at home and decided to cook pan-seared salmon with a citrus vinaigrette, garlic mashed sweet potatoes with coconut milk and cilantro, and asparagus with a lemon vinaigrette (which sure sounds a whole lot better than a frozen dinner, right?).

But, it didn't stop there. Once I caught the passion for cooking from the Food Network, I noticed my wife was investing more time in cooking and searching out new recipes. When I asked her why, her comment back to me was, “What can I say, you inspired me.” Then my mother caught the bug – and now she's been inspiring other people from neighbors to her hairdresser to kick their recipes up a notch. Some of my friends are now starting to cook at a new level. And even my nephew, who's in middle school, is starting to watch the Food Network.

Passion begets passion. When people are passionate about something, it becomes catchy. So, as you take a look at your company and your work, what are you passionate about? Are your people passionate about what you do? Why or why not? If passion is low, then what is your plan to raise that level of passion? This is critical. If you're not passionate about what you do and what your company produces and/or delivers, then your people won't be. And if your people aren't passionate, then your customers won't be. And if your customers aren't passionate . . . well, then you're in trouble. Remember, rarely does remarkable ever proceed from exhaustion, indifference or just going through the motions. Remarkable proceeds from passion!

## **Lesson Number 3: Realize that Plating/Design Matters**

If you haven't watched a Food Network show, chances are you've at least seen some food photography somewhere along the line (maybe in a magazine or a newspaper). If you have, then chances are you've noticed that the food always looks so much better in those pictures, doesn't it? Why? Because chefs (and food photographers)

know that how food looks matters. We don't just eat with our mouths/tongues; we eat with all of our senses (sight, smell, touch, and sound – as well as taste). So chefs don't just think about how to cook the food, they also think about how to present the food as well.

Now, while every chef on the Food Network cares about plating, if you really want to watch the art of plating, then you have to watch Iron Chef America. If you haven't seen the show, it's a culinary battle between two chefs (and their respective two sous chefs) who are given a key ingredient that they don't know about beforehand (like crab or swordfish or potatoes or turkey) and then have to create five dishes using that ingredient in just sixty minutes. They're then scored on their creations by three judges using a scale where each chef can acquire up to 10 points for taste, five points for originality and five points for plating. Now, whether or not you like tilapia as an appetizer and a dessert, as well as a main portion of your meal is irrelevant – you have to at least be impressed with how each of the five dishes from each of the competitors looks.

But even if you're not watching Iron Chef America, every single chef on the Food Network makes sure that they use the right plate (shape, size and color) to complement the food they've prepared and that they've added a few little touches to make it appear better (often a little drizzle of a sauce around the plate or some herbs or spices sprinkled around the edge of the plate (and in the case of Emeril, you'll usually hear his other trademark sound as he completes his plating, "BAM!").

Now, if you and I were to describe this phenomenon in more strictly business terminology, we might say that, "Design Matters." In other words, customers don't just buy a product; they buy the packaging and the actual design of the product itself (or how the service is delivered). The best example of this is the iPod versus every other mp3 player on the market. Hands down, no other mp3 player has design down like the iPod. Why? Because Steve Jobs believes that design matters. And does design translate into money? Absolutely! While Sony just had their first losing year, Apple had its best year ever (profits were up 384% for fiscal year 2005).

So, how has plating/design affected your company? Is design a core value? Do you invest all of your time on creating a product and then only give design a thought at the last moment? If you want to learn from the Food Network (or Apple), make sure that design is an equal partner from the beginning of your product or service development. Why? Because design matters. So go back and evaluate every product and service you provide and ask, "Does the way this is designed sell and evoke raving fans who'll spread the message about this (product or service) by word of mouth?" If not, "Why not?"

## **Lesson Number 4: Never Forget that Differentiation is Everything.**

One of the first things you'll notice if you start watching the Food Network is that none of the shows is exactly the same. Each chef has carved out their own little brand/niche. Sandra Lee is about "Semi-homemade cooking" (70% store bought, 30% homemade). Rachel Ray is all about "30 Minute Meals," (creating a whole meal from start to finish in just 30 minutes). Bobby Flay is all about barbecue and grilling. Partyline is all about food for entertaining. Sugar Rush is all about desserts. Michael Chiarello is all about Napa Style cooking.

Giada DeLaurentiis is all about "Everyday Italian cooking" (meaning the kind of Italian cooking/food that most Americans would find palatable). Whereas Mario Batali is all about "Authentic Italian cooking" (meaning the kind of Italian cooking you would find over in Italy – differentiated by province in Italy since not every province in Italy cooks the same dish the same way). Dave Lieberman is all about how to cook great foods on a reasonable budget for young twenty somethings. And Tyler Florence does double duty as the guy who teaches new cooks how to cook on two different beginning cooking shows entitled, *How to Boil Water* and *Food 911*. Each of these chefs has their own brand/niche and specialty. It's not 40 shows about food that all look and sound alike.

Likewise in business, success is about differentiation. Customers need to know that the product and/or service that you offer is different/better than the alternatives. If your product and/or service is similar, then why should any customer choose you? One of the problems with similarity is that it breeds price wars. If two (or more) products are similar, why should anyone pay more for yours? This principle is true for every product and service. If what you offer is not differentiated in the minds of your customers, you're missing out on massive potential revenue.

So how are you different? If you're a tire shop just like every other tire shop, you're in trouble. Do your clients/customers know how you're different? Is that differentiation perceived by them to be worthwhile? And are they willing to pay a premium for that difference? Remember, if you want to capture market share and increase profits, you need to be differentiated in such a way that potential clients/customers seek you out and are willing to pay a premium for that product/service.

## **Lesson Number 5: Make it Easy to Use Your Products/Services**

One of the things I love about the Food Network is that they're easy to use—primarily because of their website. Years ago, if you were watching a chef on TV, you had to write down the recipe while the chef cooked (which was always a difficult thing to do . . . 'Did she just say 1 tablespoon or 1 teaspoon?") or you could wait until their cookbook came out. But, thanks to the internet, that issue is no longer a problem.

For example, if you were to go to the Food Network website ([www.foodnetwork.com](http://www.foodnetwork.com)) and click on the TV tab, you would be sent to the TV page. On the TV page, if you were to click on the TV Schedule, you would then see the schedule for that day. But, you wouldn't just see whose show is on at what time, you'd also see what they're planning to cook for that day. But you wouldn't just see what they're going to cook, you would also be given the option of clicking on the food item that you're interested in (let's say a chicken and smoked sausage gumbo). And if you clicked on that dish you'd instantly be transported to the recipe for that dish. Then, if you liked the recipe, you'd be presented with several options. You could add it to your recipe box online, you could email it to a friend or you could print it out in a full-page format, a 3x5 card format or a 4x6 card format. How simple is that?

In addition, if you scroll down to the bottom on the TV listing page, you can click on any day over a two-month time frame and see what someone cooked on that day (or will be cooking in the future). This was an especially helpful tool to me before Thanksgiving and Christmas. Since I knew that most Food Network shows were having holiday themes during the two weeks prior to those holidays, I simply perused through the dishes that were being prepared over the two weeks prior to those two big days and found tons of recipes to choose from. Finally, one last thing about the Food Network website that I love is having the ability to see what someone is going to cook on their show ahead of time so I can decide whether or not I want to watch that show. Or if I'm in a rush (or I missed a show) I can still easily access the recipes for that show. In other words, not only do the chefs make cooking appear easy, the connection between the Food Network website and the actual TV shows makes it easy for people like you and me to use the Food Network.

So, as you look at your business, how easy are you to deal with? Can your customers easily gain access to you when they need to (and especially not get stuck in voicemail jail!)? Is your website easy to work with? Can your customers/potential customers gain timely information on your website? And does your website promote your products and services well?

## **Lesson Number Six: Promote, Promote, Promote**

Emeril is not afraid to promote. His name is on everything (especially his cookware or clothing or staging). His show has a live band with great musical guests (whose CDs he's regularly promoting). He promotes the website ("We keep getting asked on our website, you know, that [www.foodnetwork.com](http://www.foodnetwork.com) thing. . ."). He promotes his restaurants ("At my restaurant in New Orleans, we make this dish . . ."). And he promotes other Food Network stars (like he might have Bobby Flay come on and do a little fun competition). In other words, Emeril isn't just a chef; he's a promotion machine—and who can argue with his results?

The Food Network is a great marketing machine. Publicists and marketers have done a phenomenal job. They find the right chefs and then make them successful—primarily through great promotion. The chefs (and their writers) write cookbooks. Then the chefs promote their cookbooks during their primetime slots. They also do the TV circuit and go to book signing tours (with great book placements at bookstores like Borders). The Food Network website promotes their chefs' materials, as well as other products—and often does so in very interesting ways, let's say by showing an iPIX slide show of a star's actual kitchen (with a couple strategic product placements

along the way). They cross promote with Food Network specials. And when they get ready to launch a new show, they plaster it in 30 second ads all over their own network and with prominent images on their website. In essence, the Food Network is one great promotional machine.

Now, this isn't a bad thing. If the product was bad, all the promotion in the world couldn't save it (like a bad Hollywood movie). However, the Food Network chefs really deliver (and not just for novice cooks like me, I know several chefs who love watching the Food Network as well). When you have a great product and/or service that meets a need in the marketplace, why not shamelessly promote it?

So, how are you doing at promoting what you offer? Are you using every promotional tool that you have in order to obtain the kind of success that you long for? Most companies and organizations I interact with are usually under-promoting, not over-promoting – which means that most companies could gain far more market share and profits if they would invest more time and energy in figuring out and then implementing a better promotions plan.

So how are you doing at implementing these six key strategies from the Food Network? Are all six a part of your business strategy and culture? I hope so, because every single business, organization, association, governmental agency, educational institution, non-profit and religious organization can benefit significantly by living out each of these six key strategies/lessons. If these strategies could take a 1:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. cable show on the New Jersey Network and turn it into a hundred million dollar business in a decade, my guess is that we could all learn a few things from them. Being remarkable really does matter. And the more remarkable your business (or organization or association or non-profit) is, the more you will grow, enlarge your market share, increase your profits, improve morale and wow your customers!

## The Six Lessons in Review

1. Refuse to do anything ordinary.
2. Remember that passion begets passion.
3. Realize that plating/design matters.
4. Never forget that differentiation is everything.
5. Make it easy to use your products/services.
6. Promote, promote, promote.

## Making it Real

1. Score yourself on each of the each of the six lessons (10 = High, i.e. we've got this one down).

a. Refuse to do anything ordinary.	1...2...3...4...5...6...7...8...9...10 (high)
b. Remember that passion begets passion.	1...2...3...4...5...6...7...8...9...10 (high)
c. Realize that plating/design matters.	1...2...3...4...5...6...7...8...9...10 (high)
d. Never forget that differentiation is everything.	1...2...3...4...5...6...7...8...9...10 (high)
e. Make it easy to use your products/services.	1...2...3...4...5...6...7...8...9...10 (high)
f. Promote, promote, promote	1...2...3...4...5...6...7...8...9...10 (high)
2. Which of the six did you score the highest (list two or three)?
3. Which of the six did you score the lowest (list two or three)?

4. What can you do to run with your strengths?
  
5. What can you do to shore up your weaknesses?
  
6. What is the number one thing you need to focus on to make your company (or organization, etc.) more remarkable?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What can you do within the next week to make sure you're moving in that direction?

**If you need additional help** in your pursuit of becoming a more remarkable company or organization, please feel free to contact me through one of the options listed below.

Bruce D. Johnson, President  
Make it Remarkable  
P.O. Box 243  
Germantown, MD 20874-0243  
301-602-0448 (w)  
240-536-9175 (f)  
[bruce@brucedjohnson.com](mailto:bruce@brucedjohnson.com)  
[www.brucedjohnson.com](http://www.brucedjohnson.com) (site)  
[www.brucedjohnson.net](http://www.brucedjohnson.net) (blog)

*"To help people and organizations grow by motivating, educating, and equipping them to create and deliver remarkable products and services, engage in remarkable work and live remarkable lives."*

**Remember: Friends don't let friends do ordinary!**