

The Rules To Breaking The Rules

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No one likes to be thought of as a conformist who's afraid to take a chance and break the rules every once in a while.

But breaking rules for the sake of doing so—or without at least a good understanding of what's at risk—can lead to bad decision-making and lamentable consequences.

Like it or not, there are some "rules" to breaking the rules, including when you should go for it and when you should toe the line. Before you go maverick, be sure the situation fits these criteria:

You Know Enough To Make A Good Break

When you know enough to realize that the rules don't make sense or they're bogging down productivity, it's often a good time to break them, says Mark McMillion, founder of Clarksburg, West Virginia-based [McMillion Leadership Associates](#), a management consultancy. McMillion, a West Point graduate and two-time combat veteran, doesn't take breaking the rules lightly.

But your expertise can supersede protocol that gets in the way of progress. If you're in a difficult situation with an irate customer, then it may make sense to do what you need to do to make the situation right and salvage a valuable relationship, he says. When you're experienced and knowledgeable, it's easier to see which rules are worth breaking, and how they can improve the overall environment.

You've Calculated The Risk

After Los Angeles-based inventor and speaker [Julie Austin](#) developed [Swiggies](#), water bottles that affix to the wrists, a good portion of her customer base included parents purchasing Swiggies for their children. While the children's market proved to be a good one, Austin also noticed running clubs and twentysomethings were also using Swiggies to hold boozy beverages during fun runs or parties.

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Austin says she had a choice: She could abide by the rules that said she couldn't go after both markets for fear of alienating parents. Or, she could carefully structure her marketing to be specifically targeted to each segment and go for it. After careful consideration and ensuring her marketing efforts were distinctly different from each other, she chose the latter.

Now, the partying segment makes up 30% of her growing business and has led to alcohol companies buying her product to emblazon with her logo, while still maintaining healthy sales as a children's product.

The Break Aligns With Your Values

Of course, no one is advocating breaking the law, but Austin says there's another guiding principle that should govern your rule-breaking: your gut. If a rule is telling you to do something that's against your ethics or morals—or if breaking the rule violates them—then act accordingly, she says.

"You stand out by breaking the rules with your business—doing things no one else will do," she says. "But you have to do it in a way that's true to yourself. Don't try to be something you're not."

You're Prepared For The Consequences

Chicago-based employment and labor lawyer Charles A. Krugel says you need to be familiar with industry laws and regulations before you get too ahead of yourself in breaking the rules. Being reckless when it comes to industry requirements can get you into very hot water, especially in tightly regulated industries. In addition, bucking industry norms by cutting corners can have devastating effects on your company.

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No one is advocating breaking the law or acting unethically. But even in morally sound situations, you need to think through the consequences of your actions and be prepared to own them, whether they go the way you intended or not he says. What is the potential downside of your action, such as lost revenue, fallout with employees, or other potential loss? Consider whether you're willing to take responsibility for what happens if things don't go as planned.

"In the United States, we have a lot of attitude to break the rules because our whole government was founded on rule breaking back in the mid-1700s. It's ingrained in us to go against the flow," Krugel says. "But don't hurt other people. Aside from hurting yourself, don't hurt others."