

# DOMINANT SELLING IDEA



**Finding The Difference that Makes *All the Difference***

The new eBook from David ID  
by [Bill Schley](#) • [Carl Nichols](#)

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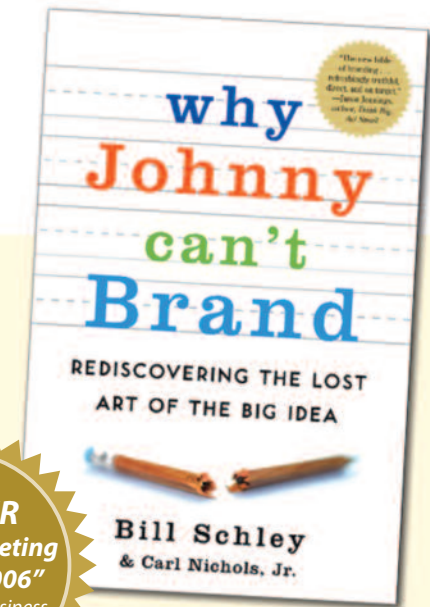
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Based on the award winning book,  
*Why Johnny Can't Brand: Rediscovering the lost art of the Big Idea*  
by Bill Schley and Carl Nichols (Penquin Hardcover)

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# INTRO:

## Your Business Class Ticket to a Great Brand.

Welcome to the first eBook in our series on creating great brands. And great sales presentations. Or political speeches. Or romantic soliloquies, or communication of any kind. Because at its core, communication's all about the same thing: finding the heart and soul of what you're trying to say.

If you want your message to come to life—especially in this new hyper-connected world—your core must be a very simple, special kind of idea. We call it a **Dominant Selling Idea**.

Just a few years back, before so many sharks were circling, it was considered a marketing ideal. But now your Dominant Selling Idea (DSI) is your lifeline. It was first practiced by the great advertisers on Madison Avenue (the former capital of advertising) decades ago to dominate the old world of TV and radio. But in the new world with billions of people broadcasting back and forth on digital networks, its *need is amplified tenfold*—for anyone who wants to be heard and to establish a brand, that is. It's your ticket. You won't want to leave home without it.



When we introduced the term “Dominant Selling Idea” in our award winning book *Why Johnny Can’t Brand: Rediscovering the lost art of the Big Idea*, (Penguin) we thought the DSI was such an improvement for most companies that branding would fall into place once they got it. No need for a sequel...

Yet, the digital onslaught has shown us there is a subsequent piece to the puzzle—worthy of its own book. It’s about the vessels of expression that carry your DSI from one mind to the next in the new era. They’re called *Micro-scripts* and that’s the subject of the next eBook in the series.

But before you can wield Micro-scripts with any kind of sales power, your Dominant Selling Idea must be firmly in place, mentally and physically. So relax, it’s a short flight. And like all flights, you need to start at the Departure Gate. Look up on the board for the non-stop to *DSI*.



# 1. ONE HEART, ONE SOUL:

## Dominant Selling Idea 101

**Question: How many hearts do you have?**

Not a trick question. Conventional wisdom says that we have *one*.

How many hearts can your brand or your idea or your message have if you want it to break through in this world? The answer is **One**.

Finding and nurturing this heart is the one and only heart of the matter. In branding, marketing and sales it's called your Dominant Selling Idea—*your DSI*. In challenging economies and the new digital world, the mere existence of this heart decides whether your brand's a Killer Whale or a Jelly Fish. Whether you're communicating en masse or face to face, the most successful brands and effective presentations have a DSI beating at the center.

*A Dominant Selling Idea is the **one** most unique, important and ownable advantage that you can claim that others don't—your single, best point of difference. It is brand positioning brought to it's sharpest, most specific edge.* A single big promise that is the big take away—what sets you apart from all others. Not two, not five features jammed into a paragraph. **One** attribute, one advantage that's most important to the target that you do best. *Safest tire. The dentists' toothpaste. The working man's beer. The only shoes that breathe. **One** thing.* That kind of thing.



## The One Item of Carry On Rule

Why is having **One** idea so important and not a long list features and benefits the customer can choose from? It's because of a DSI "heuristic" or Rule of Thumb we call the *One Item of Carry-on Rule*—the rule that says that in a world where we're bombarded by a trillion messages a day, people tend to remember one key thing about you if you're lucky enough for them to remember anything at all.



When you dump a pile of information on anyone, they'll simply pick out the one idea that's most important to them for whatever reason, and put it up in the overhead bin. All the rest gets left at the curb. That's because we instantly, instinctively surmise what we think is the heart of the matter and choose to retain it. There's simply too much other stuff to file for us not to prioritize in this way. Once upon a time, it was a matter of survival.

So it stands to reason as communicators, we'd want our customers to carry on the single most unique, important and own-able idea we can find—the one big thing that differentiates us from all the others.

A Dominant Selling Idea is simply this "one big thing" selling proposition that's focused on *one key difference* that makes you buy *this* vs. that. The tipping point that drives the sale. It tells the world, you're the *only*, the *most*, the *best*, or the *number one* choice in their price range.



## Everyone Goes for the Top Draft Choice

This idea of “one-ness” is really important for another reason. Because if you think about it, we never set out to purchase the second, third or fourth best solution to any problem. At the moment of purchase truth, we make a decision for only one product: the winner in our mind’s eye—the best in the most important metric in that category that we can afford at that moment. It can be any **one** of a hundred attributes: the *fastest*, the *healthiest*, the *most durable*, the *most reliable*, the *most attractive*, the *most sexy*, the *safest*, the *most prestigious*, the *largest*, the *strongest*, the *lightest*, the *best priced*, the *cheapest priced*, most *energy efficient*, the *most authentic*, the *softest* or the *hardest*. So in a world with endless choice and hyper-communication, with millions of features adding up to a barrage of sameness—our first order of business as communicators is to find the one unique, important and ownable “best” that sets us apart. It’s what puts buyers in action, to reach out for one item on the shelf, pick up the phone or get out of the chair.

***That will be your Dominant Selling Idea.***



## Where does “Positioning” Come In?

Your Dominant Selling Idea *is* your positioning, distilled to its sharpest, most clearly defined point. It demands an idea of value that is much more specific and disciplined and thought out than most positioning statements—based on a clear set of principles we’ll establish. If you have a DSI, it means you had the *courage* and the vision to make a choice to stand for one big thing, and thus penetrate the mind. Your other good features will support you by association.

## You can have all the great supporting attributes you want

We’re not saying that you won’t have a number of other excellent, attractive features and benefits that support the sale. All good products do. But the objective is to be an obvious standout in one attribute of highest importance to your audience. That’s your calling card that gets inserted with a tab sticking up in the file cabinet of the brain. Being thought of as “best” at something important to the customer is the *only* positioning worth having. If you’re not now the best in your category or specialty—you’ll need to define a new specialty to claim #1 in. Don’t worry—it’s done everyday in branding and we’ll show you how.

## 2. SEEING THE DSI'S ALL AROUND US

They're everywhere. You know them. And the more you look, the more a great number of brand communications will be conspicuous by their DSI absence. In the days when TV and radio were king, advertisers were brilliant at culling out and expressing the Dominant Selling Idea, many of which have lasted for generations. We all know these classics. The DSI is in **bold**:

**M&M's**... The little chocolate pellets, that come with a shiny shell in pretty colors so the **chocolate doesn't rub off and make a mess...**

**Wheaties**... cereal so nutritious, it **makes you a winning athlete...**

**Hall's** Throat Lozenges... the one's with **unique, nose clearing menthol fumes...**

**Timex** Watches... the most **durable watches...**

The **bold** part represents the one big idea.





## Wooooops—quick time out—

We need to make a quick distinction here between the Dominant Selling Idea and the *expression* of the Dominant Selling Idea—the subject of the next eBook...

*Wasn't your mind interrupting and tugging at you just now when you read the DSI's for those great brands? After M&M's, wasn't your mind saying "No, it **Melts in your mouth not in your hand.**" Didn't it shout "**Wheaties: Breakfast of Champions.**" And come-onnnn, everyone knows that "**Timex takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'!**" Because that's the way your mind remembers them and likes saying them.*

Folks, the phrases your brain wanted to sing like a familiar song were what we call *Micro-scripts*, that is, the pithy, easily repeatable expressions that were created to *express* those DSI's over 60 years ago. They wrote Micro-scripts like "**Breakfast of Champions**" to install their ultimate selling propositions—their DSI's in our brains. And it worked so well we couldn't uninstall them now if we tried.

In these famous cases, the fun, Micro-scripted expressions that they created were also used as taglines.

What's important to remember is that *no expression or Micro-script will create you a great brand without a Dominant Selling Idea at its heart, first and foremost. **The Dominant Selling Idea is the objective advantage or the difference itself. The expression comes later.***

Okay back to DSI basic training.

## The Smartest Marketers are Doing it Still...

Many criticize the modern purveyors of substance-less marketing communication— but there are still superstars who emerge with excellent, clear DSI's and have the meteoric market share to show for it.

Here are some current DSI based brands you've probably noticed:

**Splenda**—the *non-artificial low calorie sweetener*

**Geox Shoes**—The first shoes that have *ventilation in the soles*

**Kashi Products**—The *unique whole grain blend* in every product.

**Geico**—the car insurance that's *15% cheaper*

**Flowers.com**—the flowers that come *directly from the field* so they're fresher

These DSIs above are gift wrapped and handed to you on a silver platter, not only because they're simple but because they are relentlessly consistent. Their beauty is undeniably functional. For the most part, we can't even say their names without simultaneously thinking of the selling idea attached—and vice versa. We call that the gift that keeps on giving.



It is of no small consequence that these brand marketers—smart enough to choose and stick to a DSI for their products in the first place, also furnished their loyal users with succinct, Micro-scripted language to express their DSI's in a memorable and repeatable way—

**Splenda**—*made from sugar so it tastes like sugar* (rhythmic metaphor)

**Geox**—*the shoes that breathe* (a powerful visual metaphor).

**Kashi**—*7 whole grains on a mission* (specific, human quest metaphor)

**Geico**—*15 minutes saves you 15%* (specific, rhythmic time is money metaphor)

There's an amazing amount of selling information contained in every one. These are like pictures that say a thousand words because they're built on a Dominant Selling Idea.

## **Pharmaceutical Companies are particularly good at it these days.**

Whatever your feeling about the Pharmaceutical industry—since they were allowed to advertise direct to consumers a few years ago, they've been remarkable at classic, effective, key attribute differentiating. DSIs all...

**Nexium**—*the healing purple pill...* (heals acid reflux).

**Viagra**—*the #1 ED pill*

**Cialis**—*the 36 hour ED pill* (that also comes with two bathtubs in the woods)

**Lipitor**—*the #1 doctor recommended Cholesterol pill*

**Crestor**—*the cholesterol pill that lowers the bad, raises the good*

**Vytorin**—*the pill that lowers cholesterol from two sources—food and heredity*

**Ambien CR**—*the one that lets you go to sleep, stay asleep*

It absolutely, positively, still can and is being done by the savviest marketers who love the idea of owning a winning idea in the mind, and fusing that to the names of their products to automatically and consistently set them apart. Having a DSI is crucial. Saying it in Micro-script just makes it penetrate and stick even better.

### **You can spot DSI's in names**

If you have a simple and clear Dominant Selling Idea, it can appear in any form of expression—particularly in a great, evocative name that gives your DSI a head-start on contact. It's hard not to notice the DSI in these:

**Diehard Batteries**—*The most dependable car batteries*

**The Airblade**—*The only blade shaped, high-tech commercial hand dryer*

**Focus Factor**—*the pills that focus your memory*

**Destroyed in Seconds!**—*The reality show that shows great stuff blowing up*

**Princeton Longevity Center**—*Health clinic with check-ups that prolong your life*

**Seattle's Best Coffee**—*The coffee city's standard of excellence*

**Bare Naked**—*The granola with the most natural, unprocessed ingredients*

## Or it's Simply in the Performance

Not all products with a Dominant Selling Idea boast a great name or tag line. But every one *must* deliver great, consistent performance that proves the difference through tangible action if not words.

Volvo is the safe car. We've been saying it for years, but now, Volvo's become kind of newsworthy again because even though it hasn't advertised with a "safe" tagline for decades, in a recent survey, the century old company was still named by 70% of consumers as *the world's safest car*. The Dominant Selling Idea is kept going by people and mechanics, who talk about the famous "steel safety cage." Or the fact that Volvo has unilaterally been responsible for nearly all the big personal safety inventions in cars since its inception—from the three point seat belt to anti-lock brakes. And we just read they're keeping the legend alive by announcing a company wide mission to build an injury-proof car by 2013. That's a 100 year old heart that's still beating, folks.

Toyota by the same token, is "the car that doesn't break." Not a bad Dominant Selling Idea. We've never seen that in their tagline. We couldn't remember any of their taglines. But after polling all 17 of the Toyota owners we know and talking with the town's three local mechanics and hearing everyone lead with a version of the same idea—"they never come in for repairs," "They easily go 300,000 miles," "They don't break," "Only Honda's even come close in reliability," we've got the "best built most durable" idea in our heads and happily pass it on to others.

And Starbucks—the brand so many Gurus (used to) love to talk about, had neither a tagline nor advertising at all during its historic rise. The one whose DSI we’d describe as *“the best coffee for aspiring people”* created a comfortable coffee house atmosphere, European style coffee selection, and then *simply showed up* in your neighborhood. On every street corner. In malls and book stores. They served consistently good coffees. But also consistently expensive coffee (a friend calls it “Fourbucks”) which started undermining the brand’s DSI as they opened too many stores too quickly, and competitors like McDonalds offered darn good alternatives for dollars less a cup.

## **Visuals Can Express DSI’s, Too**

And then you can identify some of the most powerful DSIs in history by their picture worth a thousand words. The Marlboro Cowboy. You can think of that as a visual Micro-script. The brand’s DSI was *the smoke for the manliest of men*. Band-aids just showed the product sticking to an egg in boiling water. Tempurpedic mattresses show the famous hand print and the wine glass that doesn’t spill while the kid’s jumping on the bed.

## **A DSI in Every Product**

And finally—we’ve been telling clients for years: if advertisers could have the chutzpah to brand bottled water, air, sand or marriage—there’s a DSI in waiting in every company, product or service if you know where to look, no ifs, ands or buts. It takes no marketing budget, no national ad campaign, no nothing but some honest customer knowledge, belief in your product, and the courage to make the choice to pick yours. Some of the greatest in existence are found everyday in small town USA. In one local town we have the Madison Art Cinema, Café Grounded—a coffee shop that looks like an airplane hangar—and RJ Julia who became America’s preeminent independent bookseller.

# 3. THE FIVE INGREDIENTS OF YOUR DSI

Five ingredients enable your proposition to be a Dominant Selling Idea. It tells people you are:

**“Best at.”** It says you’re number one in your specialty—best choice for a specific need.

**Important.** What you’re #1 in has to be something that *matters*—something people really want or would want if they knew about it.

**Believable.** There has to be a unique, plausible *reason why* you claim the above that makes logical sense. It’s nothing if it’s not credible.

**Measureable.** It must be specific and obvious in all the ways you perform. It must be real in the walk, not just the talk in a way that’s totally aligned and consistent with all your claims.

**Own-able.** Not already taken by somebody else. It must be uniquely available to so you can stand for it.

Such an idea has the stuff to become the heart of the brand organism, and the foundation for effective, memorable expression that can succeed across any digital media.

Without a DSI at the heart, you end up with empty, engineless, self-serving communication with vague slogans like “A Passion for Excellence” or “You’ll Notice the Difference—” or invisible, useless corporate names like CQT Solutions. These could be from anybody. The differentiating potential you get by using a DSI like “the 20,000 mile oil change” is rather plain, isn’t it?

Now let’s go to the rules of thumb that govern the DSI.

## DSI Specified

In *Why Johnny Can't Brand: Rediscovering the lost idea of the Big Idea*, we introduced the Dominant Selling Idea and its core expression in simple, every day terms and home spun analogies. Even then, it wasn't simple enough to keep marketers on track. We've learned in the intervening years that a very few other rules make it easier to stay on the road, without letting go of the wheel and veering off, which is the natural tendency for most of us. Keeping a relentless focus is what finding and maintaining a DSI is all about.

First off, we'll officially define a Dominant Selling Idea this way:

**A DSI is your selling proposition reduced to one ultimate advantage:  
the “one item of carry-on” your customers would keep if they could just keep one.  
It's the difference that makes *all* the difference.**

Remember—it's not your list of advantages and attributes, all the good things you're capable of—it's the single most interesting part you can offer and no one else can. Amid all the same attributes you share with your competition, it's the tipping point of difference that tilts the buyer or persuades the shopper at the shelf to reach out for you. At the moment of decision, it's what you stand for in the consumer's mind. Your differentiator.

If you can fill in just one of these blanks in your category, you're potentially looking at your DSI. Your superlative attribute:

***The one that/with \_\_\_\_\_.* (Implies Only)**

***The Best at \_\_\_\_\_.***

***The most \_\_\_\_\_.***

***The Number One in \_\_\_\_\_.***

Then, you have to vet for the other ingredients. Is your superior attribute of key importance to your audience? Is it believable for you to say it? Is it true—do you prove it every time without fail? And lastly is it own-able, or already taken by someone else?

Calling it your brand’s “DNA,” as some do—is too delicate and ethereal. It’s got to be solid, physical, flexible yet unbreakable. It’s more than an *essence*. It needs weight, heft and power. It’s the super connector. It is going to be your beating heart.

# 4. THESE ARE YOUR DSI RULES OF THUMB

## 1. We get *One Item of Carry on*.

If you're not yet convinced of this most important DSI rule, here are some other good reasons you should. As humans, we have a love affair with the number one—with anything that comes in first, the leader, the best—and very little that comes after. That's why we famously can remember the tallest mountain in the world, the first man on the moon, our first kiss—but almost never the second. And third or fourth? Fuggedaboutit. We have one God and seek to be at one with ourselves. We reward winners out of all proportion to their talent over the second place finisher—even when they win by .0001 second as they often do in the Olympics.

We remember what we care about and we prove day in and day out that the thing we care about is #1, literally and figuratively.

There are two DSI lessons here: if people love whatever is number one better than all else in the universe, then there is only one position in any category to claim that's worth a damn. We must be number 1, the best, the gold medal winner in whatever category we inhabit. And if we're not, if someone else is already #1, we have to *invent a new category* to be the best in. We adjust our specialty. If there are already three regular dentists in town, become *the children's* dentist and you'll be instantly set apart. The other lesson is that if people are going to remember one thing—make sure it's a very special kind of idea. One with five ingredients...

## 2. Test for Five Ingredients

Test to see if it's a Dominant Selling Idea by checking off the 5 ingredients. It's only a DSI if it's:

- Best at.
- Important.
- Believable.
- Measureable.
- Own-able.

## 3. The Universal Paradox

Even if people wanted long lists of features and benefits to remember instead of one all important idea, it wouldn't work because a barrage of information—what most marketers throw at customers hoping something will stick—simply can't penetrate the human mind. In times of stress or uncertainty, our brains discard information and shift to “one reason decision making” to solve problems. That's why the **Universal Paradox** is so universal. In *any* communication: *The narrower you focus, the wider your message goes. The fewer things you say in each speech, the more you are heard. The more specific you are, the more general recognition you'll get.* So, those of you who can make a choice, who can pick a specialty to be best in—to “win the gold medal in,”—are far more effective at achieving recognition overall.

Being number one in safety like Volvo, brings with it reams of other positive associations. About quality construction, about superior technology, about corporate caring and responsibility and so on. This rule leads naturally to important corollaries:

## 4. Simple Always Wins

Simple beats difficult. Simple beats complicated. In practice and perception. Simple can be remembered, repeated, recommended and replicated. Simple means obvious. Simple means easy. Easy never lost to hard. The simple message wins.

## 5. Specific is Terrific

It's the difference between "low prices" vs. "*Everything 50% Off!*" The difference between "good athlete" and "*High School All American.*" Ivory is 99 and 44/100% pure. As we'll see a little later—specificity is the metaphor writer's trick, the color added, the emotional trigger, the stuff of truth that supercharges ideas in the brain.

## 6. The 3 R's: Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

There is no heart without repetition and reinforcement. That means for an idea to become a DSI, it has to be repeated not only by you but even more importantly—by others. You can't just be the brand police. They have to want to repeat it. Inside the organization your people have to understand, believe it, like it, be proud of it. Outside, it has to be important enough, easy enough and like-able for one customer to want to tell another and another.

The exact expression, especially peer to peer will vary, just as in the telling of any joke or story. What holds it together is the spine.

## 7. Other Peoples Heads are all that counts

By definition, a prospective Dominant Selling Idea we come up with in strategic discussions is just a strategy. Then when we advertise it, it's just an *invitation* to outsiders to think of our product the way we'd like them to.

To be a true working DSI, it has to be resident in your targets' heads. It has to be lodged in other people's heads or its useless—a paper DSI, not a real one. Many organizations go around assuming their Dominant Selling Idea is one thing, then find with a little research that what they stand for in the minds of others is all together different. It's not always positive. In fact, it can sometimes be your dominant *un-selling* idea (we often hear people refer jokingly to Nieman Marcus as “Needless Mark-up”).

So you never establish a DSI in other people's heads just by saying it—you must say it and *do it*. Actually that would've been a great tag line for Dominant Selling Ideas: *Just Do It!*

Wonder if it's taken...

### **Words of Wisdom: The Answer Is Right in Front of your Nose**

Finally—this is so characteristic of DSI's in our 25 years of finding them, we have to mention it here. When clients ask us to search for their Dominant Selling Idea, the first place we look is to the obvious, the simple, the DSI that's been staring the client in the face for years but he's too close to see. And 98% of the time—again, that's a 25 year average—that's right where we find it.

We tell you this not only to give you confidence that your DSI is likely to be very close at hand, but also to reinforce the notion of simplicity. Don't expect it to be brilliant or complicated when you see it or there's a good chance you'll miss—you'll fly right over the truth and waste a lot of precious time.

We'll practice this mindset when we get to the practical steps for determining your DSI a little later on.

Here are a few others we found just by driving down Rte 1:

The *fastest outboard engine*, the *real New York style bagel place* (in Bangor ME), the *unbreakable line of laptops*, the *highest mileage hybrid*, the *online dating website for lawyers*, the *lowest priced retailer*, the *car rental company that picks you up*, and the *Shorline's shoulder surgery specialty group*.

We hope you're seeing that it's not brain surgery. It's brain *singularity*.

## Pop Quiz

Okay, here's the end of chapter quiz. If this had been a presentation and we asked, "so—what's the one big takeaway that you could repeat tomorrow," you'd answer:

*"The DSI commandment! We have to find our..."*

- A. Superbowl commercial**
- B. Clever tagline**
- C. Really hot spokes model**
- D. Dominant Selling Idea**

Since we're on the honor system, the answer is **D**.

For most organizations, finding and embracing a Dominant Selling Idea is a pretty big deal. You've got the *heart* of your brand, the ultimate defining difference in whatever it is you sell. Without it, it's nigh impossible to become a distinctive brand in this world. And it's more than that. It's an idea around which employees can rally, customers can focus, and decisions can be guided.

That puts you way ahead of most companies, in this new world, or any world.

### ***Remember the Rules that Govern DSIs (In this order):***

***1. The One Item of Carry on Rule***

***2. The Five Ingredients Rule:***

**Best at, Important, Believable, Measureable, Own-able.**

***3. The Universal Paradox***

***4. Simple Always Wins***

***5. Specific is Terrific***

***6. The 3R's: Repeat, Repeat, Repeat***

***7. The Other Peoples Heads Rule***

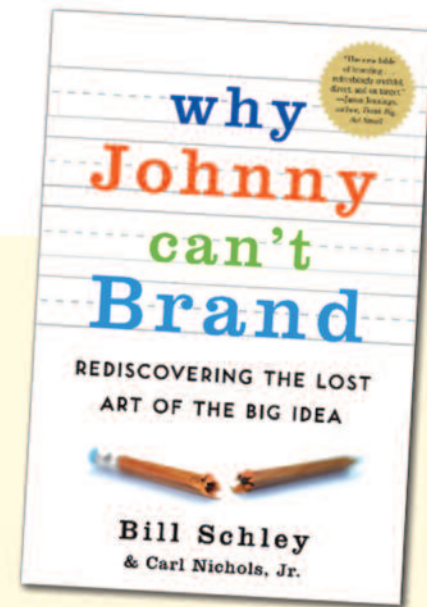
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You can purchase the complete, practical, 263 page guide: *Why Johnny Can't Brand: Rediscovering the lost art of the big idea* at Amazon.com or by contacting us at [www.davidid.com](http://www.davidid.com). It takes you step by step through *all* aspects of things like naming, creating brand stories, taglines and doing basic research so you can discover *your* true DSI in about 8 weeks or less!

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