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STORIES FROM THE FIELD

The Man Who Understood the Customer

A bar that tasted like cardboard, 500 folding tables, and a friend who knew exactly where the decision gets made.

Joe Worden

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The Man Who Understood the Customer

A story about a bar that tasted like cardboard, five hundred folding tables with adjoining lean-tos, the exact spot where decisions get made, and the friend that made it real.

For Bernie Freeman

October 15, 1962 – October 15, 2025

Assistant to the President

Questions this paper answers

- How do we make a useful interaction more valuable than another promotional message?
- Why does the moment we offer help matter as much as the help itself?
- How do we give value before asking a prospect for commitment?

From the Author

In my ongoing effort to share stories about unique marketing views, I crafted a piece about a guy who wrote the book on understanding the customer. I wrote this story for one reader. Bernie Freeman. The plan was to finish it, call my old pal, and read it to him over the phone and catch up, so he could fix the numbers and laugh at what I got wrong. Fighting my own battles, I waited too long. I learned today that Bernie Freeman died on October 15, 2025. It was his 63rd birthday. I guess the Man upstairs thought the news shouldn't hit me until I was ready? With that in mind, I think the news may have come too early.

The Story

Field marketing never gets the credit. The folding tables and lean-tos never make the case studies. This time they do. What follows is the story he never got to hear, and it ends with the dash that nobody saw.

Stay for that. He earned it.

The Wall

Somewhere past mile 20 of a marathon, the human body runs out of stored carbohydrate. Runners call it hitting the wall. Cyclists call it bonking. Physiologists call it glycogen depletion, which is like calling a four-alarm house fire a simple combustion. The legs turn to concrete. The brain, which

runs on the same fuel, starts rationing, and a person who has trained for years finds themselves negotiating with a higher power about the distance to the next aid station.

Hold that moment. Every decision in this story happens inside it.

That very wall found Brian Maxwell at the 21-mile mark of a marathon he had to quit, and Maxwell was no hobbyist blowing up in a charity 10K. In 1977 he was the third-best marathoner on the planet, a 2:14 man, the top qualifier for a Canadian Olympic team that didn't get to go to Moscow. When a runner that good gets stopped by his own blood sugar, he doesn't chalk it up to a bad day.

He holds a grudge.

Maxwell took the grudge home to Berkeley, where his girlfriend Jennifer Biddulph was studying nutrition science at Cal. With a friend named Mike McCollum and $55,000, they started cooking in their apartment kitchen, and in 1986 they began selling what came out of it: the PowerBar, available in Chocolate and in something called Malt-Nut.

The Worst-Tasting Revolution in Retail

Outside magazine later described the product with the affection it deserved: "Rubbery and full of multisyllabic ingredients, PowerBars tasted a bit like cardboard but undeniably started a revolution."

Every rule of consumer packaged goods said this product would be dead by Christmas. It tasted wrong. It chewed and tasted like a water-softened phone book. It arrived when America wanted its food to taste like dessert, without shelf space or an ad budget. The founders sold it by mail order, thirty-nine dollars for three dozen, advertised by flyers tucked under windshield wipers at races. They packed the boxes on the porch between classes.

And it worked. Bike shops became the channel, and before long the phone rang in the other direction. "We'd have stores calling us to place an order," Jennifer remembered. Eventually, the gooey little bars even found their way into any and every sports specialty shop with an interest in endurance fuel, as well as military training. Along the way, the product would eclipse $150 million in annual revenue, while creating an entirely new category of health supplement.

Success? The marketing textbooks still have no explanation. Decision science gives us a way to interpret it. To see it, you have to stop looking at the product and understand where it showed up.

Which brings me to Bernie.

The Ranger

I knew Bernie Freeman my entire life. We grew up together, played junior golf together and then our lives did what lives do. While I went to college, he inked up for 10 years of hands-on education of the decisions people make under duress. Bernie was an Army Ranger. From 1982 to 1992, he got the Army's full curriculum: Ranger School, Demolition, Airborne, Jumpmaster, and Jungle Expert. And Bernie developed a habit of graduating first or second in nearly everything they ran him through. By the end he was the kind of instructor other services borrow, including the kind that got invited to the team reassessing how the Navy SEALs train their elite teams.

With an introduction to the effects of glycogen depletion and the value of constant fuel, Sergeant First Class Freeman took off the uniform and went to work for a company selling sticky brown bars. He came in as employee number eleven, or maybe thirteen, depending on who is telling the story... early enough, either way, that his stories included mixing product in five-gallon mayonnaise buckets in the Maxwells' garage.

His title was Assistant to the President. So was everyone else's. PowerBar ran stock and profit sharing through the whole company, warehouse included. Many read it as California cute. Bernie read it as doctrine: nobody here is staff, decisions get made wherever you happen to be standing, so make sure you are standing somewhere useful.

Bernie stood everywhere. From 1992 to 1998 he assembled and ran national field marketing for North America: twelve regional offices in the US and three in Canada, more than five hundred independent contractors, and the athlete and team relationships he selected, structured, and guided across the major leagues, colleges, and events. It looked more like a military force than a sampling program.

We caught back up in 1992. I was starting a marketing company while he was planting his feet at PowerBar. With his usual generosity he pulled me into a number of PowerBar marketing initiatives. I got to see him think and watch the machine run from up close. He was smart, scrappy, and always-on. I have many incredible memories of the things we did and what I learned, but one weekend at an Indy car race in Portland really stands out. Bernie and his team had negotiated a car sponsorship paid entirely in product. A quarter of a million dollars in bars, in a deal that opened distribution in a country the brand hadn't cracked yet. That's field marketing at Bernie altitude. Cash stays home, the bars do the work twice.

Part two: the race required us to hike into the venue loaded down with gear. The walk was long, the gear was heavy and the day was hot. Somewhere along the way I voiced my complaints. Bernie turned around and gave me the look. Not a word. Just the face an Army Ranger issues to civilians who have never experienced real challenge.

I shut up and smiled the rest of the way in. He didn't have to say it.

We're Not Candy

Bernie stories traveled the way stories about certain men do, which means the best ones often lack clear verification. This one came to me from the people closest to it, and I'm passing it along as exactly what it is: unsourced folklore, the kind a brand only earns when it means something.

When PowerBar hired its first six-figure executive, the team took the new man out for drinks. Somewhere in the evening, the executive opined that the product that would pay his salary was just a fancy candy bar. Bernie warned him. The man kept going. Bernie hit him once, at the table, and as the story is told, welcomed him to the most passionate brand he would ever experience, adding, for clarity: we're not candy.

The next morning Bernie walked in to resign. Maxwell and the executive were already there, waiting. They laughed and told him no chance, and the executive, to his everlasting credit, said: lesson learned. But next time, how about not hitting me to get a point across.

Set aside the HR implications, considerable even by 1990s standards, and listen to what the punch was defending, because it wasn't Bernie's pride. A candy bar is a snack. A PowerBar was race equipment... by athletes for athletes... fuel for the worst mile of the most important day of somebody's athletic life. Bernie enforced that three-word distinction the way he enforced everything: with total commitment, and on at least one legendary evening, a closed fist.

The Doctrine: Show Up Where It Hurts

Here's what the standard 1990s playbook would have done with PowerBar: license a jingle, buy ratings points, fight Snickers for an end cap, and sample little cubes on toothpicks at Costco.

Here's what Bernie's army did instead: set up folding tables at marathons, centuries, and triathlons, and put free product into athletes' hands, so that when their bodies asked the only question the product could answer, the answer was already stuck to their bike frames and jersey numbers.

They called it "point of sweat" marketing. Nobody I ask remembers who coined the phrase, but I know who believed it the most. Bernie was a triathlete and a cyclist himself; he'd met the wall personally, which is why he never confused the folding table with a promotion. It was an aid station.

A folding table at mile 18 doesn't register anywhere marketing keeps score. Nielsen can't see it. One kid with a box of bars might touch a few hundred athletes if he were lucky, and a media buyer would not be impressed. But the math misses the impact: every point of contact was mid-decision, at the mile where the deciding gets done.

What the Free Bar Was Buying

Engagement is one of the most abused words in marketing, so let me define it the way Bernie practiced it: the deliberate sequence of interactions that helps a decision maker remove friction, reduce uncertainty, and guide toward commitment.

Clicks, likes, impressions, foot traffic: all of that is activity, and each plays a small role in the larger process. Judged as activity, Bernie's efforts barely registered. Judged as uncertainty reduction, it was the most efficient engagement machine I've ever seen, and I've spent a career looking.

The science only needs the shape. The gift: value given freely, no invoice attached, is a concrete demonstration of usefulness a skeptic can test. The timing: at mile 18 there's no fight for attention, because the athlete is asking one question with their entire body, and the answer is in their hand. And the masterpiece: an athlete tries the free bar on a training day, because the oldest commandment in endurance sport slams the door behind them. Nothing new on race day. Whatever fueled your training fuels your race. One free bar, handed over at the right mile, can become a repeat purchase a competitor cannot easily displace with a coupon, because the customer's own risk management does the retention.

No white paper has ever closed that fast.

The Category Was the Receipt

By the end of the 1990s, mid-race fueling had gone from eccentric to mandatory. Aid stations changed. Jersey pockets changed. Athletes taped bars to their bike frames to eat at 25 miles an hour, which means the product's most mocked attribute, that industrial stickiness, had a purpose. Bernie helped lead an entire category, helping purveyors of sports nutrition understand the value of the behaviors PowerBar taught one athlete at a time.

In February 2000, Nestlé bought the company from its kitchen-table founders for $375 million. Then, slowly, the machine that reinforced and extended the brand was traded for a machine that acquires brands. Headquarters left Berkeley. The bar marched deeper into the grocery aisle, purchasable but no longer handed to anyone. Competitors appreciated the gift of the open door and gladly joined the party. In 2014 Nestlé sold PowerBar to Post Holdings. A cereal company.

There are business-school reasons for the fade: portfolio strategy, channel economics, taste. But the symbolism is hard to ignore. The company that invented the point of sweat retreated to the point of sale. It stopped standing where the decision was taking place, trading it for where the transaction takes place. The category kept growing. It just grew around other names.

Bernie's people would have understood on sight. We're not candy. Until, one grocery aisle at a time, it was.

Your Buyer Has a Mile 21

Every B2B buyer bonks. It arrives as an audit notice, a blown covenant, a security breach at 2 a.m., a board member asking the question nobody in the room can answer. Uncertainty spikes, attention narrows to a single burning question, and whoever is standing there holding something useful gets a hearing no advertising budget can buy.

> *Sometimes we just solve problems so people can sleep better at night.*
>
> — Bernie Freeman, from the philosophy he wrote for his own consulting practice

It's the doctrine, translated for buyers whose races happen at desks. Most marketing shows up where attention is cheap and uncertainty is low, and books the activity as engagement. Bernie showed up where it hurts. Where his brand was a solution. When the doctrine fit on a folding table.

The Moral, Filed Under Reciprocity

The decision science gives us a useful way to read what Bernie Freeman ran off folding tables with a Ranger's read of the terrain: the decisive ground is wherever the customer is suffering. You must get there first, providing the solution, while asking for nothing. While the professors were trying to prove it, the Ranger had already deployed it.

And he kept deploying it. Following his run at PowerBar, he joined Campus Concepts, where he took college intramural sponsorship from "Sponsoring intramurals? What the hell are you talking about?" to co-marketing programs generating millions for Clorox, Kellogg's, Nike, Nestlé, Unilever, and Pepsi. He did it with an eight-person team that covered four hundred campuses. Intramural sports have no broadcast, no stars, and no tickets to sell. They're nothing but points of sweat. Bernie got there first.

Somewhere out there is a sixty-year-old triathlete with a garage full of race medals and a vivid memory of the fuel a stranger handed him at mile 18 in 1994. Nobody ever advertised to him. Nobody had to. That's engagement. Everything else is distribution.

Field notes drawn from company histories, contemporaneous and retrospective reporting (including Outside magazine, 2015), a 2023 interview with Jennifer (Biddulph) Maxwell, Bernie Freeman's own professional record, and the author's memory, which is the only source the Bernie stories ever needed.

Author's Note

You know the plan by now; I told you at the start. What I never explained is why the call didn't happen. I lost some years to fights I had to win at home, and I let the phone calls slide, telling myself the way we all do that there'd be time once the dust settled.

There wasn't.

Bernie traded a formal education to support our country. Along the way he developed marketing instincts instead, and a sense for real-time execution that no degree I've ever encountered could issue. I'm not sure the industry understood how good he was. I did. Every single fucking time I heard his voice.

He finished the way he lived, on his own terms: a little reclusive, up in Alaska, taking on marketing and branding work when he needed some cash or some intellectual stimulation, in about that order.

He loved his dogs past all reason. He called them his doggers.

So this is the call, pal, later than I ever meant it to be. You were right about all of it. Show up where it hurts. Give before you ask. And whatever you do, don't let anybody tell you it's candy. Thank you for the education and most importantly, the friendship. I am going to miss you.

Rest easy, Ranger.

Bernard Wayne "Bernie" Freeman Jr.

October 15, 1962 – October 15, 2025

I am unable to find the official obituary when Bernie died. This one is unofficial, written by a friend who waited too long, and it will have to do.

Bernie Freeman was born October 15, 1962, and grew up in Richland, Washington, where he graduated from Richland High School with the Class of 1981. He gave the United States Army the next ten years, serving across the mainland United States, Central America, the Caribbean, South Korea, and Hawaii, and leaving in 1992 as a Sergeant First Class. He finished at or near the top of nearly every school the Army ran him through, Ranger School, Airborne, Jumpmaster, Jungle Expert,

and Master Fitness Trainer among them, and closed his service teaching the teachers, as a Train the Trainer instructor for the Navy SEALs and the Army's own schools.

He joined PowerBar out of the Army, employee number eleven or thirteen depending on the telling, with the title Assistant to the President. From 1992 to 1998 he built and ran the company's North American field marketing organization, twelve offices in the United States and three in Canada, twenty-one direct reports, more than five hundred independent contractors, and the company's professional-athlete relationships, and in doing so helped teach an entire sport how to fuel. The billion-dollar category that followed owes him more than it ever knew. At Campus Concepts he did it again, building college intramural sponsorship from a punchline into more than $8 million of programs for Fortune 100 brands across four hundred campuses.

He was a triathlete, a cyclist, and an accomplished golfer. He spent his final years in Alaska, taking on marketing and branding work when a project earned his interest, his doggers close at hand.

Life is short. Live it, feel it, be in it. Bernie got exactly sixty-three years, door to door, and he filled them: soldier, teacher, marketer, athlete, friend.

The next time you're standing in front of a wall of bars and gels, in a grocery store, a bike shop, or a race-expo tent, remember the guy who helped stamp the PowerBar brand on every serious endurance athlete in the world.

He never needed you to know his name, but now you do.

Related reading

Decision Science: Reciprocity and Value.

How-To: How to write a first outreach email.

Process: Engagement Strategy.