What Would You Do?

Jack Boudreaux and Priscilla Knight, marketers with Grove Industrial Supplies, had just ordered lunch when a wave of laughter came from the next table. The group, four marketers from Lasky Industrial Products, Grove's arch competitor, went on to discuss Lasky's trade show strategy for the National Industrial Conference & Expo—by far, the biggest show for their industry. Boudreaux and Knight ate in silence as they listened to everything their competitors had to say. The group never even noticed them.

When Lasky's marketing team left the restaurant, Boudreaux smiled and said, "Looks like it's time to adjust our plan."

Both companies' marketing teams were in Atlanta for a small, regional show. Boudreaux and Knight had to work fast—there were only three months until the national show. Their goal was to mimic Lasky's plans—from handing out bags and T-shirts to having a professional wrestler sign autographs—but to far outdo them. After preparing a comprehensive guerrilla marketing plan, Boudreaux and Knight worked nonstop to pull it all together.

The show was a big success. Grove bags and T-shirts were everywhere. The wrestler they hired to "man" their booth was a bigger name than Lasky's, and his appearance at Grove's customer party doubled the expected attendance. Leads jumped threefold over last year's show; on-site sales grew 7 percent.

Boudreaux and Knight were thrilled. But their boss, Marketing Director Julia Shertzer, wasn't.

Although Shertzer couldn't attend the show, she heard all about it from her counterpart at Lasky. Shertzer is a stickler for original thinking. Stealing ideas is taboo. Previously she had fired one marketing executive who had stolen a tagline from a competitor (he used it in an ad before the competitor's new campaign launched).

All things considered, Shertzer is now unsure how to handle the situation. Does she fire them? Praise them, but with a warning? Or is there a better solution?