

With Our Eyes on the Future and Our Grip on Change

By Albert S. Frank, LL.B.

In a recent trip to a small library I glanced at the business shelves and quickly found fourteen recent books about change – a stack about two feet high. No doubt there were other books about change; these were just the ones that leaped out at me.

Those books are being written because people have noticed that things are changing, and are wondering how to cope.

Expect Change

The law is always changing, and change seems to be accelerating. Statutes change, procedures change, and judicial opinion changes. Indeed, one judge of the Supreme Court of Canada has even commented, in effect, that he does not take legal precedent – the decisions and reasoning of judges in other cases – very seriously.

Nor are business procedures stable. Many people remember that executives used to dictate their documents to secretaries who would take the information down in shorthand and then type it up. Then the dictation was to a recording machine. Now executives share the typing with the secretaries by doing much of their own typing on a computer. Some executives are even experimenting with dictating to a computer equipped with voice recognition software.

Your computer is obsolete. How do I know?
Because it was already obsolete when you bought it.

Things are changing. Things will continue changing. Expect it.

Expect Unexpected Change

If present trends continue, I shall be very much surprised.

Is the trend really your friend? Only if you know that the trend might end.

Years ago my father, a medical scientist, pointed out to me that the highly reliable trend as to the increasing need for iron lung machines was permanently punctured by the invention of the polio vaccine. The pet rock was hot until it sank like a stone.

Some trends are cyclical. In fashion, skirts keep getting shorter until they get longer, and keep getting longer until they get shorter. Higher energy prices cause increased conservation and increased energy production, causing lower energy prices.

Some trends keep on going, like the trend towards increased scientific and technical knowledge. This in turn spins off innumerable and unpredictable social and business changes.

In his book ***The Poverty of Historicism*** the great 20th century thinker Karl Popper argues that there cannot be a true science of history that could predict the future. One of his points was that society is changed by scientific and technological discoveries. You cannot predict future scientific and technological discoveries because in order to predict them with certainty you would have to already know the science and technology that you are predicting.

You can study every trend with a magnifying glass. You can spend your life consulting with futurists. But even so, the future will surprise you.

The point of expecting change, and expecting unexpected change, is not to predict the future but to improve alertness. Perhaps you can be one of the early people in your industry to see the changes that are already happening. I would hate to still be denouncing tanks as newfangled nonsense while a tank drives over my cavalry horse.

Where to Look For Strategies

If we cannot predict the future and prepare ourselves accordingly, how are we and our clients supposed to figure out what to do? Here are four possibilities.

Find out what your competitors are doing. They may be on to something.

Find out what you are doing – it might not be what you think. This is why companies hire mystery shoppers – customers might be getting a very different experience from what

management thinks. If you will forgive a plug for my sister, Tema Frank of Web Mystery Shoppers extends this concept by doing marketing analyses of web pages.

Make a vigorous effort to encourage ideas from the less experienced people in the organization. Their very lack of deep knowledge of how things have been could make them more able to notice what is new. Take their ideas seriously even if the ideas seem poorly reasoned, poorly researched, and poorly expressed.

A detailed analysis might show that some product, service, or approach is doing surprisingly well. Without waiting to figure out why – things might change again before you figure it out – put more resources in what seems to be working so well, and see what happens.

Reaction Time

Many of the business books about change are really promoting strategies for improving the reaction time to change. Part of this is getting better at figuring out what to do, which is what the above points are for.

Another part is getting faster at implementing change. This is what “business at the speed of thought,” “learning organizations,” and various other ideas are all about. There are many structural and psychological ideas for changing a business – Eliyahu Goldratt in the book ***Theory of Constraints*** even suggests the use of the Socratic method as a way of getting a desired change.

But however you do it, I suggest that making sure your business can react quickly to change is a vital task. Unlike reliably predicting the future, it is even possible.

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