

# Going With the Flow Innovative Way To Grow

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*"What we call 'progress' is the exchange of one nuisance for another nuisance." — Havelock Ellis*

This new, post-boom economy seems dreary, doesn't it? When the bubble burst, it left a sticky blue film of if-onlyness over the country.

What I miss most is that marvelous competition among companies trying to hire employees. Oh, how quickly we lurched from "signing bonuses" to signing "severance agreements." And then there's the business news, where the nightly stories went from back patting to pat-downs.

What's next? We can only hope that the next geek god is at work on the next Internet. Till then, what comes after e-business? I suppose it's f-business, where "f" is for "flow."

Looking back, we now see that the Internet wasn't a religion after all—just another church. When I heard Malcolm Gladwell speak last year—he's the author of "The Tipping Point"—he suggested that the cell phone is having a greater effect on how we live than the Internet. To test that premise, ask yourself: If you had to give up one of the two, which would you choose?

But back to f-business. Retail Watch, a publication of McMillan/Doolittle, reported a Williams Group study of how the Internet interacts with other consumer options—i.e., with retail stores and catalogs. The results show the flow of customers across channels:

- Of those who visited a chain's retail store, 25 percent then went to the chain's online site. A nearly identical percentage started online, then went to the physical store.

- With catalogs, the interaction is far greater—of those who shopped a catalog, about two-thirds then went online.

As channels flow, so does money. Having multiple channels is a selling feature for retailers: The research found that among those who use both a retailer's store and online site, more is spent at the store (\$600 more per year). So the Internet is not going to kill off stores. Instead we see how beautifully the market economy integrates a new technology into the mix.

As for the office, the flow economy is busy making the Internet

less annoying and more helpful.

Steve Birchfield of The Automation Centre is implementing "second-generation messaging" systems. He points out that "most of us spend more time with e-mail than in the car or in most rooms of the house." So his products are intended to automate as much data flow as possible, including e-mail. One of the products has a feature with the charmingly honest name "AutoNag." It's for people who are responsible for, say, making sure expense reports are turned in. The system sends reminders only to those who haven't yet sent in their reports.

But what I liked best was the idea of changing e-mail distribution. Instead of sending e-mails to everyone in the company, you'd send them to an "online folder." Then, once a day or once a week, everyone is sent a single e-mail, describing what's new in the folder. At that point, you choose what you want to read. Further, Birchfield's company creates online bulletin boards around given subjects, so you can go to those and read what everyone has said about a given corporate topic. The goal of all of this is admirable: "To let you work when you want to work."

So we can see that in the aftermath of the flood of information released by the Internet, the economy is now given the chore of cleaning up, of building channels and reservoirs and generally improving flows.

For a moment in economic history, technology became the end, not the means. But with the inevitability of gravity, capitalism ground away the magic and got down to the self-interest. In business, the sentence "Look at what this can do!" is incomplete, missing the final two words that pull it through the ear and into the wallet: "Look at what this can do for you!" That's the old, new and future economy. ♦



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