

Book Value

McLuhan for managers: New tools for new thinking

By Mark Federman and Derrick de Kerckhove
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Businesspeople do not have the time to ponder a seemingly impenetrable future.

Yet, success and even survival often depend on the ability to forecast or see into that future. Marshal McLuhan was one person who developed a way of thinking that could do just that.

McLuhan was the University of Toronto professor who coined “The medium is the message” and the “global village,” forcing people to perceive the world in a completely new way. His thinking continues to influence how we look at technology, the media, and their present and future effects on society and business.

McLuhan’s works by themselves are very difficult to interpret and apply. However, all is not lost.

In eight short chapters, Mark Federman and Derrick de Kerckhove courageously interpret McLuhan and his perception for the businessperson. They introduce a way of thinking that businesspeople can apply to forecast and weigh the future, contextualize the potential significance of elements or ideas, and relate them to their present operations. Armed with this insight, applying McLuhan’s perception to a business challenge becomes possible.

With any method of thinking, there are no absolutes. There are only relatives. Readers must take the time to read and re-read these eight chapters in order to apply them within the context of their situation.

Becoming aware of new sometimes very obscure elements in familiar situations, identifying their context and effects in different situations to explore their potential, while not losing sight of that familiar situation is the key to understanding and exploiting McLuhan.

Being able to looking at that element itself, not simply as that element, but as a potential new factor as spawning new situations with their own possibilities and effects is the leap that must be made in order to apply McLuhan’s perception process.

Understanding and exploiting what the technology can do without getting stuck on the technology itself is a practical application of this.

Palm Pilot’s success and the Apple Newton’s failure illustrate McLuhan’s perception process. The Palm Pilot and the Newton used similar technology and software, but the Newton had no defined applications. It was a piece of technology tossed “out there” with no focus, no message.

However, the Palm Pilot with its practical applications had a message. The Palm pilot transcended being a piece of technology and became a concept and its message became a whole new medium.

Prescient people spun the Palm Pilot into a billion-dollar industry that embraces both the hardware and software dimensions of cellphones, RIM’s, handheld multi-media computers and the Internet’s instant communication.

Business people who can freely embrace and exploit McLuhan’s way of perception and thinking would fulfill McLuhan’s fondest dreams.

-- Mike Brassard