

# Value user over technology, new book says

June 13 2006

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Brilliant technological innovation is good, but only as good as the market. New technologies fail financially when they fail to take into account how users will react to them.

That's the crux of Pip Coburn's new book, "The Change Function: Why Some Technologies Take Off and Others Crash and Burn," out June 26.

Coburn, who spent several years as a technology strategist for UBS Investment Research, said he realized this problem about two years ago, while stepping off an elevator.

"I was thinking about all those IPOs that came to my door over the years," he said. "I always felt a sort of resentment as they came to me for money."

"It dawned on me, as I pictured them with their folders full of slides," he continued. "They would carry about 36 slides, and only one or two would deal with the user. That's what's been my resentment."

Coburn said the technology industry has let its success go to its head, to the point where companies sometimes believe that if they make a technologically innovative product, consumers will flock to it regardless of its usefulness.

"The technology industry has demanded that users get in sync with the technology," he said.

"The Change Function" posits that you can figure out how successful a technology will be in the market by answering two questions: "What is the crisis that this technology is solving?" and "What is the perceived pain of adoption?"

When the benefit to users to having the technology to solve a problem does not outweigh the pain of learning and getting used to the technology, it will not succeed. Coburn cited the tablet PC as an example.

"Society is very keyboard-oriented and very comfortable with that," he said. "Yet the tablet PC is all about being able to write. Bill Gates keeps insisting that people want to write."

Coburn also mentioned the Segway motorized scooter as an example of a company that expected people to take to a great new innovation even though the need for the product is not there.

"The technology is absolutely brilliant," he said. "And Segway went to the venture capitalists saying 'China has real problems with pollution and crowding. This product will solve everyone's woes.'"

"Venture capitalists looked at it at a macro level. I want to know who the first 2 percent of people who will buy the thing are."

While the Segway still flounders in the market, the same technology applied to wheelchairs produced a wheelchair that can climb stairs.

"There is a crisis there, in the wheelchair market," Coburn said. "When someone comes to me, I assume the technology is going to work at some point. I wonder, are consumers ready for the thing you're delivering?"

In addition to filling a need that users will want to fill, a new innovation

needs to minimize the pain of getting used to the new technology, as Coburn discusses extensively in the book. One of the key factors is ease of use.

"People don't want manuals," he said.

He noted the mobile phone as an example of a well-planned technology that was made with a form similar to an already-established product.

"It looked like a phone," he said. Coburn said that the flat-panel display television should be similarly successful since everyone is already familiar with the television.

"The Change Function" references Malcolm Gladwell's "The Tipping Point," which focuses on when something unique becomes common. Coburn said that Gladwell's book was helpful in developing his own ideas.

"Gladwell gave a lot of us an easy way to think about something we witness all the time," he said.

While Gladwell focuses on a tipping point, Coburn writes about the "point of idiocy," which is the point where a person would feel like an idiot if they did not adopt a common technology.

"If you had to admit at a cocktail party that you don't do XYZ, you'd be embarrassed," Coburn offers as an example of the point of idiocy.

He said that the point of idiocy develops from the natural peer pressure in society.

"Trends are very powerful, but we don't contemplate them as adults," he said.

Coburn tipped laptop computers as the next technology that will reach the point of idiocy. He said that while laptops comprise just 30 percent of the PC market now, they should be up to 70 percent within five years, as desktop PCs die out.

"People will feel like idiots for buying a product that you have to go to," he said.

Coburn said that while the technology industry is starting to stabilize after the manic 90s, users' habits are continuing to be shaped as people figure out what they actually want to use.

"To me, this period right now is more interesting than six or seven years ago," he said. "People are interacting with technology differently."

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