

Three Big Technology Blunders

At the end of last month's newsletter, I made mention of the Apple i-Phone4 flap. It was a problem, but in the range of blunders, it is but a tiny speck. There have been far greater missteps made by some very big and well-respected companies, and doubtless there will be more. After all, corporations are run by humans, and we all make mistakes. The key is how well did the company recover and fix their blunders? The following is my personal list of the three biggest blunders made by tech companies.

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Three Big Tech Blunders

Tech Blunder #1: Microsoft wasn't ready for the Internet

Microsoft has a history of looking far ahead and trying just about everything when it comes to technology, and that includes software and hardware. An early failure was DOS4. The successor to the reliable DOS3.3, DOS4 was badly coded, and hastily released without proper testing, (some would say NO testing) and caused data loss and disk failures for all who used it.

Then there was the Windows "Bob" interface. "Bob" was supposed to be a simple, easy menu system for novices applied over the WindowsME menu system. Both proved to be failures, but the "Bob" menu system was particularly annoying. The question-and-answer method required you to answer multiple, sequential questions to get a task done, and there was no "skipping ahead". Yep, you had to answer the same questions over and over, even if you knew the underlying menu system. Everyone who tried it, hated it. Interestingly, the young product manager who developed "Bob", Melinda French, never suffered the consequences. Shortly after the "Bob" debacle, she traded the surname "French" for "Gates". That would be the same "Gates" as Bill Gates, CEO.

Some might say Windows Vista has been Microsoft's biggest blunder... perhaps. However, my vote for Microsoft's biggest blunder was that they almost missed the Internet revolution. In 1991, just as the Internet was made available to the public, Microsoft had no products that addressed how to use the Internet at all. No e-mail, no browser, nothing. It would take until 1995 before internet-ready products were launched, and even then one of them would prove a failure. MSN, the Microsoft Network, was supposed to compete with other closed-end subscriber systems like AOL and CompuServ, but the free and open Internet beat them all. AOL and MSN were re-launched years later and survive today not as networks, but as email providers and news/entertainment websites. Microsoft recovered very well, and today is far bigger and well -adapted to the Internet Age. Even so, that 4 year gap still stings, as Microsoft legacy products continue to need patches to plug security gaps that never were anticipated because Microsoft just was not ready for "that Internet thing" to catch on as fast as it did.

Tech Blunder #2: Google Can Do No Wrong

True or False: Google can do no wrong. Answer: False, Google can do plenty wrong.

Google has made many blunders, but I admire their "let's try it" attitude, and their refusal to be embarrassed by flops. I guess that's why they have "Beta" listed as the version number on everything. Here's a few "Betas" that can be classed as blunders:

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Google Answers: Google tried hiring about 500 persons who were experts in several fields, and excellent researchers. The theory was internet users would pay to have a topic researched. Bad theory, especially since Google is a search engine company, duh. Why pay if the best free search engine in the world is at your fingertips?

Google Catalogs: Thinking that having a listing of every product in every catalog with comparison pricing would be cool, Google launched their "Catalogs" service. A logical assumption, but the execution was incredibly ridiculous. They used scanned pages out of paper catalogs... a logistical nightmare, and the scanned pages were replete with errors induced by the scanning process. Not to mention copyright infringement by the publishers of those catalogs. What were they thinking?

Google Local: Again a logical theory that did not pan out. Because the Internet is so vast, a simple search for pizza might return results from across the globe, but all you want is your favorite local pizza place to deliver. Google Local solved that problem by implementing a two-box search. In the first box, you typed what you were looking for, and the second search box, you typed where you wanted to look for it. Nobody used it. Google later blended the technology into their Google Maps and Google Earth program, and now when you search for a place, you can view what's nearby.

My vote for biggest blunder is **Google X**. Beyond the implications of what "X" means in other contexts, Google "X" was a series of menu icons supposed to mimic the Apple OS-X icon menu bar, and it did indeed mimic it very well. Well enough to draw Apple's ire and its lawyers to demand in very unpleasant terms for Google remove the icons, or else. The icons disappeared posthaste.

Tech Blunder #3: Xerox PARC Invents stuff that sits on the shelf...

This is my vote for the biggest tech blunder of the century, perhaps of all time. Xerox was, and is, a copier company. But it could have been bigger than IBM, Google, Apple, Cisco, and Microsoft combined. PARC stands for **P**alo **A**lto (California) **R**esearch **C**enter. Xerox PARC invented a few interesting gadgets... like the computer mouse, the graphical icon interface, laser printers, a personal computer named "Alto", Ethernet networks, and resolution-independent markup language. Have you ever seen any of these products with a Xerox label on them... No! Xerox failed to capitalize on any of these inventions, leaving it for others to get rich.

For example, a young college student named Steve Jobs toured PARC and saw the mouse, the graphical interface and the Alto personal computer. Jobs later launched Apple, and had several Xerox engineers collaborate on and contribute their work to the Macintosh computer. Hewlett-Packard got wind of the laser printer, and the rest is history. One Xerox network engineer, Bob Metcalfe, got so frustrated with inventing things that went nowhere that he quit Xerox and formed 3Com. It quickly became the top Ethernet network equipment supplier for many years. Adobe Systems saw the wisdom of the resolution-independent markup language - Adobe's PostScript and Acrobat PDF product lines are built upon that markup language.

Had Xerox capitalized on any one of these inventions, they would be the major player in that category. If they had capitalized on all of them, Xerox would be the ultimate tech company of all time. Certainly Xerox is still one of the biggest and best copier makers today, but they could have, should have been so much more.

If you want to avoid technology blunders, or have questions, or comments, or just want to debate about these or any prior topics in my newsletters, please call me at the phone number below, or contact me by email. Thanks for listening!

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