

# Change Takes Time

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I did it. Finally. After years of bellyaching, standing in line, and frustration, I finally did it... I bought my movie tickets online.

For those of you sitting in New York or Bombay or London who have been buying your tickets online for years now, I apologize for my tardiness. After all, I seem like the perfect candidate for online ticket sales: relatively young, heavy Web user, early adopter, gadget freak. If I'm not buying tickets online, then who is?

And that's exactly my point.

See, for years I've been suffering through standing in line at the theater, hoping against all hope that I'm gonna be able to get tickets to the show I want. My friends and I would show up, shove our way up to the front, and then wait for the word to come down from the ticket taker. "Here you go!" became my favorite phrase as he or she handed us the tickets.

Over the years the number of movie goers has increased rapidly, specially in a city like Bombay where you have a mix of Bollywood and Hollywood and with Bollywood becoming more organized in all aspects, hence attracting people ranging from the teeny boppers to the affluent class, buying tickets ahead of time became vital. You just couldn't get in to see anything but "Freddy Got Fingered" or "Battlefield Earth" without advance tickets. So I headed for the Web.

So why'd it take so long for me to do this? I've been thinking about this question a lot. After all, if somebody like me took so long to buy tickets online, aren't there a lot of other, less techno-savvy folks out there who also haven't bought their tickets online? And why stop at tickets... aren't there a lot of things that people aren't buying online even though it's a lot easier (and many times cheaper) to do so?

You bet there are.

One look back at the lot of dot-bombs over the past year will show you that many, many, many people aren't buying stuff online even though doing so is probably faster and easier than going to a mall. And it's not just stuff that people aren't buying. There are a lot of examples of well-meaning companies offering services online that nobody ever takes advantage of. The question is, Why?

Maybe because we haven't thought of it.

Yup, that's what held back my online ticket purchases for a long time. I just never thought of it. Or, if the urge did tickle my fancy, I quickly suppressed it. Why? Because many times my experience of buying online wasn't easier, wasn't faster, and simply didn't work. I didn't really believe it would be as easy as it turned out to be.

And I don't think I'm alone. People are still waking up to the possibilities of the Web. It's just going to take time to change long-standing habits.

Let's look at the proliferation of online pet stores in the past few years. From a demographic standpoint, it made perfect sense: There are lots of affluent, wired pet owners with little time, right? That was the assumption. (You can say the same about online groceries, too.) It made perfect business-school sense. But as the carnage of Pets.com and others shows us, the reality is far different. While Pets.com and others spent money like drunken sailors trying to "build brand" through advertising, people were slow to buy, slow to change their long-ingrained habits of buying their pet food in the grocery store. And before sales materialized to support the wild ad spending, Pets.com (and lots of other e-commerce players) went broke.

Does this mean that the concept itself is bad? No, not at all. It's just that it didn't happen at the speed that the pundits and planners thought it would. And that's a valuable lesson for all of us to learn about doing business on the Web.

The Web's just another channel, not the be all and end all of commerce. And it's another channel that requires us to change our behavior if we are to use it. I've spent probably 10 years or so buying my tickets at the theater, and it took several years of Web usage to change my behavior. And now I'm not going back.

I have to believe that our target Web audiences aren't that different from me. The Web will may, after all, change everything... given enough time. It took television years to become the marketing force it is today. Heck, it took filmmakers decades before they even thought about moving the camera during filming! The Web is no different.

While technology changes quickly, people change very slowly... but they will change, provided that there's real value to be had by changing their behavior. The rise and fall of the dot-coms isn't so much an indication of the inability of the Internet to be a viable sales or communications medium; rather, it's an indication that it's going to take time for people to fully integrate it into their lives to the point that it becomes second nature. We're not there yet, but we're on the way.

So what do we do in the meantime?

- First of all, don't retreat. Keep moving forward with Web initiatives. But don't think that they're going to solve all your problems. People still have many ways of getting to your company. Use the Web as a channel, recognizing its limitations and realizing that there's no magic involved. In the end, it's people who use this stuff. And people don't always perform according to plan.

- Second, keep experimenting. We're still in the earliest stages of the revolution. Test, see what works for you (not what some pundit swears will work), and remember what you've learned. The only way we're going to move forward is to learn from our mistakes.

- Next, know your audiences. And I don't mean just know their demographics in the aggregate. Get out there and talk to them. Find out what they do, not what they say they do. Observe. Learn. Figure out where they come into contact with your company, and then craft experiences that address those points of contact. Maybe it's the Web... maybe it's in the local newspaper. You won't know until you actually talk to them and find out.

- Finally, be patient. Pace yourself. People aren't going to change overnight. But if you keep offering

something of real value, they will eventually come over to you.

Just don't expect it to happen tomorrow. Change takes time.

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