

TITLE: "THE PROBLEM WITH BEING AHEAD OF YOUR TIME"

by Tim Bryce

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Since 1971: *"Software for the finest computer - the Mind"*

"Consumers prefer to be spoon-fed changes with teaspoons."

- Bryce's Law

INTRODUCTION

Not too long ago Panasonic's corporate slogan was, *"Just slightly ahead of our time."* It was catchy and it inferred their products were on the cutting edge of the industry. There was only one problem with this, as Panasonic found out, people feel uncomfortable using products ahead of their time. Consequently, their slogan was changed to, *"Ideas for Life."* But this essay is not so much about slogans as it is about marketing products ahead of their time. The marketing graveyard is full of fine examples of products that were introduced and considered ahead of their time:

- Sony's Betamax video recorder was introduced in the mid-1970's and was well regarded as a superior and quality product over its competition. The VHS format ultimately unseated the Betamax though, not because of superior quality but primarily due to cheaper costs. In less than ten years Betamax was gone.
- Xerox's Star computer was introduced in 1981. It was also a quality product that was ahead of its time, featuring a Graphical User Interface (GUI) that was copied by Apple, Microsoft, and just about everyone else.
- The GRiD Compass 1101 computer was released in 1982 and is the first true laptop as we understand it today, with a sleek design that included a screen that closed on top of the keyboard, a built-in modem, bubble memory, and it ran on batteries. But the product wasn't cheap and sold for upwards to \$10,000 making it prohibitive to purchase for the average business person. Even worse, it didn't support the IBM PC architecture making it incompatible with popular programs of the day.

- IBM has also had its fair share of products that were ahead of its time and met premature deaths; including their Token Ring LAN which was ultimately supplanted by Ethernet. IBM's PS/2 line of computers was introduced in 1987 as a means to recapture the PC market. The PS/2 included a proprietary "Microchannel Architecture" which, although advanced and sophisticated, led to its demise from competitive "open" offerings. And finally, we have IBM's OS/2 operating system which was also introduced in the late 1980's and was the first 32-bit operating system for the PC platform. OS/2 was miles ahead of everything else (and arguably still is). Nonetheless, its strengths became its weaknesses as it was deemed too sophisticated for the average user; this coupled with aggressive marketing by Microsoft and incompetent marketing by IBM led to its doom.

LESSONS LEARNED

What can be learned from these experiences? Three things:

1. A product doesn't have to be superior in order to dominate a market; all that is required is just a little marketing hustle. You have to remember, the consumer believes all products of the same ilk are essentially the same. If it comes down to technologically superior features or cost, the consumer will always take the cheaper product. Advanced features are nice, but the consumer must believe they are warranted and add value to their lives.
2. For broad market acceptance, the product must be built on open standards. This was the hard lesson IBM learned in building its products.
3. Consumers prefer to be spoon-fed changes with teaspoons. It takes real visionaries to adopt new ideas and, unfortunately, they are few and far between. The consumer wants simple solutions they can easily assimilate. Remember, most people are afraid of major changes of any kind.

Let's also recognize that being first in your field is not easy in that you are ultimately inventing and cultivating your own market place. Inevitably you will make marketing mistakes along the way which copycat competitors will leap on. Further, they will offer inferior products at a greatly reduced price. We have seen this time and again in the I.T. industry alone.

The only true benefit of being the first in your field is that you have the market to yourself, at least for a while.

(continued on page 2)

(continued from page 1)

During this period of time you should rake in as much money as possible, refine your product, and expand the market as much as possible. And if you're making money, you can be sure competitors won't be far behind.

"PRIDE"

Our company has learned these lessons the hard way. The "PRIDE" Methodologies for IRM were first introduced in 1971, beginning with our Information Systems Engineering Methodology (ISEM). And by doing so, MBA created the methodology market. I could go on and on as to all of the concepts and innovations we introduced, e.g., first commercial methodology, first to take an engineering/manufacturing approach, first data dictionary, etc., but suffice it to say people said we were years ahead of our time.

The competition wasn't far behind either, as other commercial methodologies were introduced as well as structured programming techniques and data dictionary systems. I could easily argue how "PRIDE" was superior in so many ways, but as I mentioned before, consumers are not really interested. Instead, they selected cheaper alternatives which were implemented badly. Regardless, they thought they had purchased a bargain.

Based on legal advice, we originally sold "PRIDE" as a proprietary product requiring the use of a nondisclosure agreement to be made privy to its contents. This was both good and bad. It was good in the sense it allowed us to protect the product from misappropriation (which was tested in a court of law), but it was bad in the sense we were handcuffed from disseminating information on how it worked. While MBA was restrained from public disclosure our competition propagated their products through the media. So much so, that "PRIDE" faded from public view.

As the first in the industry, we made our money early on and invested a lot of it back into the product in the form of research and development. Consequently, "PRIDE" evolved into a much larger product that now tackles issues such as Enterprise Engineering and Data Base Engineering. Frankly, it became more robust than the average person could assimilate which is one reason why, in 2004, we finally put it in the public domain through the Internet.

As I have written in the past, the market has changed considerably over the last 35 years since "PRIDE" was introduced. The people have changed, the technology has changed, but the problems haven't, e.g.; the back-

log of user information requirements has gotten longer, not shorter; systems still lack integration; companies are plagued by redundant information resources; lack of documentation; fire fighting is still the common mode of operating; projects come in late and over budget, etc.

Recently, I was giving a "PRIDE" presentation to a startup company with some rather young analysts and programmers who are not as well versed in the history of the industry as I am. All they knew was basically what their college professors and instructors had taught them. I didn't do anything fancy, I just explained the basic "PRIDE" concepts such as Information Driven Design, Standard System Structure, Layered Documentation, the System/Data Relationship, IRM, etc. I kept it simple and to the point and this perplexed one of the attendees who approached me after the session and said, *"I have been attending a lot of seminars and conferences lately on these subjects. I learned more in the last three hours than from all of the sessions I attended over the last five months. Where have you been?"*

Naturally, I was flattered by his comments but explained how the industry lost its way over the years and is only now trying to reinvent systems theory. I told him there was really nothing new or magical in developing systems, so long as you demand precise terminology and clarity of concepts. I said, *"Don't look for cryptic solutions, there is no panacea. The best solutions are the simple solutions."*

As I traveled home I thought about the comments made by the class and considered where "PRIDE" stood in relation to the rest of the industry we created. By staying the course "PRIDE" may not be the best known methodology out there, but it is still light years ahead of the industry. Such is the price of being ahead of your time.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned, "PRIDE" has evolved into a substantial body of work which is one reason why we went public with it. By itself, there is enough material to make a full college curriculum out of it. And hopefully this will happen.

You can find "PRIDE" Methodologies for IRM on the Internet at:

<http://www.phmainstreet.com/mba/pride/>

(continued on page 3)

(continued from page 2)

You can also purchase the "PRIDE" eBook and Audio Book at:

<http://www.phmainstreet.com/mba/pridebk.htm>

But the other reason we put "PRIDE" in the public domain was to establish an open standard thereby overcoming one of the deficiencies I mentioned earlier.

"PRIDE" is still way ahead of itself. It will probably always be so. But as we celebrate our 35th year of business I have come to realize that "PRIDE" is so old, that it is new to those people who were born after it was introduced. As Milt liked to say, *"The original and still the best."*

END

About the Author

Tim Bryce is the Managing Director of M. Bryce & Associates (MBA) of Palm Harbor, Florida and has 30 years of experience in the field of Information Resource Management (IRM). He is available for training and consulting on an international basis.

"PRIDE" Special Subject Bulletins can be found at:

<http://www.phmainstreet.com/mba/mbass.htm>

They are also available through the "PRIDE Methodologies for IRM Discussion Group" at:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mbapride/>

You are welcome to join this group if you are so inclined.

The "Management Visions" Internet audio broadcast is available at:

<http://www.phmainstreet.com/mba/mv.htm>

Also, be sure to read Tim's Blog at:

<http://blogs.ittoolbox.com/pm/irm/>

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