

A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

Path dependence is our business but it can also break our business

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Path dependence can break our business if we carry on with ways of working that are no longer useful in the face of a better way.

The QWERTY keyboard doesn't make much sense. It did once; it was designed to make typing easier. When typewriters were manual, typing was limited largely to professional typists who used all their fingers for touch-typing.

Mad Men depicted the typing pool perfectly. In media, if you were important, your fingers never touched a keyboard. The overwhelming majority of typists were women, and usually men never touched a typewriter in an ad agency.

The QWERTY keyboard had two main benefits. It was constructed to ensure that manual

keys didn't get stuck on each other. And the design ensured that the most frequent letters used were in the middle of the board and accessible. Ps, Qs and Zs were outliers.

There won't be many readers out there who used an old-fashioned typewriter. Electric typewriters became mainstream in the 1970s and '80s and once they were in use the old problem that QWERTY solved was already reduced. Manual typewriters were hard on the fingers, especially the pinkies. If you had to reach with your little fingers to the keys at the edges, it could hurt.

Touch-typing requires typists to rest their fingers in the home row (QWERTY row starting with "ASDF"). The more strokes there are in the home row, the less movement the fingers must do, thus allowing a typist to type faster (without keys sticking), more accurately, and with less strain to the hand and fingers when typing on a manual keyboard.

Everyone uses a keyboard. Few people learn touch-typing. QWERTY keyboards live on however, due to the phenomenon of "path dependence".

This is where something that is first to market becomes standard and advantaged even if other better options are available or usage conditions change.

The economist Brian Arthur thinks the supremacy of the internal combustion engine in the last century is another example of path dependence. The investments in infrastructure meant that cars ran on petrol even if there were better alternatives much earlier than the current shift to hybrid and electric.

Path dependence is one of the reasons that big brands thrive. We're used to Brand X, so we carry on buying it, even if another better option is available. Revitalising a brand therefore in the light of new competition is crucial to fend off challenges to path dependence in a category. Building memory structures for a new brand, to create a path dependence – that's our business in comms too.

Path dependence is our business. It can however also break our business if we carry on with ways of working that are no longer useful even in the face of a better way.

A competitive review is often the task of a new planner. She may be instructed to carry it out according to a tried and trusted way of working. If she feels that the generation of 97 charts and little insight is not that productive she will not be the first junior planner to think so. She may well remain silent and continue to create PowerPoint decks that reveal little other than late nights and a burgeoning expertise in chart generation.

If it isn't interesting, if there isn't insight, it should be redesigned and challenged.

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