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The collapse of dot coms shouldn't mark the death of innovation



BY JIM CARROLL

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I'm typing this article as the swirl of the dot-com death march continues to envelop the business world.

It's been an amazing ride. Just over a year ago, people were intoxicated by the dot-com fragrance. The collective hallucination engendered by their aroma caused people to believe that companies that had but a few hundred thousand dollars in revenues could be worth several billions of dollars.

Fortunately, the market crash and dot-com collapse have returned a sense of sanity to the business and investment community. And yet, the business world now stinks with the stench of dot-com death. The smell of recession is in the air.

With every breath, people are losing something important: their willingness to take a risk and to innovate. Venture capitalists, burned by the collapse of their investments, have turned their backs on the technology industry and may not return for some time. In the corporate sector, e-commerce visionaries are hiding in the back rooms, nervous to suggest to their corporate bosses that an online strategy should still be pursued. Business leaders are too shell-shocked by collapsing share prices to even dare mention the Internet in their annual reports.

We need oxygen. We need creativity. We're in the depth of the Internet winter, and the stench will be with us for a long time. Gosh, it's so bad, say the media, that one would believe we will never smell the flowers again, because it seems that someone has stolen the flower bulbs right out of the ground. The Net has simply been a fad.

Consider a report in the U.K.'s *Guardian* from last December: "The Internet might end up looking in hindsight a lot like CB radio: initially a cult among specialists; a sudden, skyrocketing surge in popularity, and then, well...not much, really. Mentioning one's e-mail address at the better sort of party, it seems, might one day be as déclassé as loudly informing the assembled gathering of one's CB call sign."

The Internet. Ah, it was all but a dream, the CB radio of the 1990s. We're now in the 21st century, and the Internet is, well, just so 20th century.

The smell of rot has also descended upon the world of digital marketing. Layoffs, client cutbacks, the return of the naysayers. No Webhead dares suggest that we try to plant a bed of flowers. Simply cleaning up the garden and doing some yard maintenance is all that is acceptable in this era in which innovation seems to be dying. I find this incredibly sad and think that we will soon be paying the price for suffering too long from the hangover of the dot-com collapse.

Do you remember the rush you felt when you first heard of the "Amazing Fishcam" back in 1994? It was new, it was innovative and it was fresh. It brought a sense of excitement to the marketing professionals who heard about it. Indeed, history was born back in '94, when one of the first employees of Netscape made available through his Web page a picture of his fish that was updated every few minutes.

It was a completely useless Web page, but it captured the imagination of the world. And it proved that fresh thinking could result in innovative ways to draw people to a Web site. And yet it is that type of fresh thinking that few people will want to try in today's period of doom and gloom.

No one wants to take a risk, because the climate around us is so ugly. This is a terrible thing, because digital marketing works. If our goal is to use the Internet to draw attention to a brand, company, project or product, then the fact remains that a Web site has become an integral part of the way that we market.

I still believe that innovation and out-of-the-box thinking always results in new ideas that have staying power. Webcams have become an integral part of many marketing campaigns. I still think that the StellaCam, with its live views of bars around the world (www.beer.comstellacam), is a brilliant piece of work, and that over time it will come to be recognized as something that provides a unique and lasting marketing hook.

But ask yourself this: in today's environment, would the person who dreamed up the StellaCam have much luck if they tried to sell the idea? Probably not, since innovation and risk taking in the world of marketing aren't as acceptable today as they were yesterday. The fallout of the dot-com collapse has meant that conformity is good, innovation is bad, and we dare not do anything that steps outside of the box.

This is, if you think about it, a terribly bad thing. The marketing industry is one that has prided itself on originality. And the world of marketing was one of the first to grasp the power of the Internet.

After all, the early Internet seminars weren't about e-commerce; they were about "marketing on the Internet." Don't forget that back in 1994, it was marketing pioneers who were the busiest in trying to comprehend the power of this remarkable new tool. They first aggressively got the corporate sector involved with the Internet, long before other corporate groups latched on to it.

But now, as the naysayers have their day, it seems to me that marketing professionals are losing their edge. In these dark days, it's all too easy to panic and to stop exploring the power of digital marketing.

The fact is, innovation is a good thing. Yet we are at a low point and must work hard to ensure that we can dig out. Marketing agencies must continue to support digital marketing professionals. Clients must continue to experiment with edgy new forms of Web campaigns. Rewards must come to risk takers.

And everyone has to fight hard to stay outside of the box, rather than jumping in like everyone else.

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