



## In Search of the Obvious

### The Antidote for Today's Marketing Mess

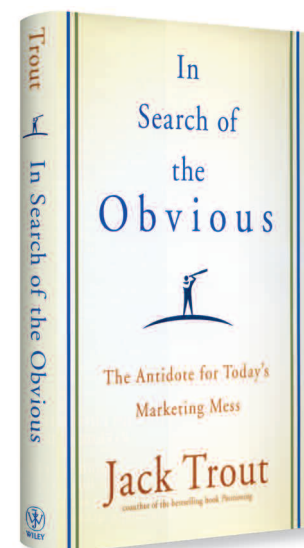
#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Business is in an era of killer competition. At a time when the function of marketing is of critical importance, marketing itself is in a mess. Despite all the attention paid to branding, an increasing number of business categories are sliding into commoditization — fewer and fewer of the brands in these categories are well-differentiated; they live in their categories but don't own a meaningful idea that makes them unique.

Jack Trout breaks through the mess of modern marketing by noting that marketers need to be searching for that simple, obvious differentiating idea — one that cannot be found in segmentation strategies, data mining or search engine optimization. This obvious idea will help solve any marketing problem, and it will do so with no jargon, no numbers and no complexity. If an idea is obvious to you, it will be obvious to your customers: That is the reason it will work so well.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Five essential guidelines from the greatest book on marketing ever written — one you've likely never heard of.
- How to identify and contend with the barriers to obvious marketing, and who must lead the effort (hint: Start right at the top).
- How the Internet can overwhelm you and your customers, and what to do to about it.
- How to use your competition to market your products more effectively.
- How to find the right direction to a streamlined, simplified, more robust approach to marketing.



by Jack Trout

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: IN SEARCH OF THE OBVIOUS

by Jack Trout

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## In Search of the Obvious

The best book on marketing is one that was written over 90 years ago, in 1916. It is only 40 pages long, it contains no jargon or graphs or complex research. In fact, it's more like a pamphlet. The book is titled *Obvious Adams: The Story of a Successful Businessman*, written by Robert R. Updegraff.

Why is this book so great? Because the search for any marketing strategy is the search for the obvious. Consider the dictionary definition of the word "obvious": easy to see or understand; plain; evident. Interestingly, when presented with a simple, obvious strategy, many clients are not impressed. They are often looking for some clever, not-so-obvious idea.

Updegraff warned of this reaction when he wrote, "The trouble is, the obvious is apt to be so simple and commonplace that it has no appeal to the imagination. We all like clever ideas and ingenious plans that make good lunch-table talk at the club. There is something about the obvious that is — well, so very obvious!"

Updegraff lists five guidelines in the search for the obvious.

***The First Test of Obviousness: This Problem, When Solved, Will Be Simple.*** The obvious is nearly always simple — so simple that sometimes a whole generation of men and women has looked at it without even seeing it. Whereas an idea is clever, ingenious or complicated, we should suspect it. It probably is not obvious.

***The Second Test of Obviousness: Does It Check With Human Nature?*** If you do not feel pretty certain that your idea or plan will be understood — and accepted — by everyone outside your office or realm of influence, it probably is not obvious. These people will see it in its simple reality, uncomplicated by professional or techni-

cal knowledge and free of the inhibitions that grow out of experience.

***The Third Test of Obviousness: Put It on Paper.*** Write out your idea, plan or project in words of one or two syllables, as though you were explaining it to a child. If the explanation becomes long, involved or ingenious, then it very likely is not the obvious. No idea, plan, program or project is obvious unless it can be understood and worked by people of average intelligence.

***The Fourth Test of Obviousness: Does It EXPLODE in People's Minds?*** If, when you have presented your idea, outlined your solution to a problem or explained your plan, project, or program, people ask, "Now why didn't we think of that before?" you can feel encouraged. Obvious ideas are very apt to produce this "explosive" mental reaction.

In many instances, from that moment on, the whole matter appears to be settled, without further explanation or argument. It is just too obvious to need prolonged consideration. If an idea or proposal does not "explode," if it requires lengthy explanation and involves hours of argument, either it is not obvious or you have not thought it through yourself and reduced it to obvious simplicity.

***The Fifth Test of Obviousness: Is the Time Ripe?*** Many ideas and plans are obvious in themselves but just as obviously "out of time." Checking the timeliness is often just as important as checking the idea or plan itself.

Sometimes the time may have passed, definitely and irrevocably, in which case the obvious thing to do is forget your idea. In other instances, its timeliness may be ahead, which calls for patience, plus alertness. Next to the first test — the simplicity requirement — the timeliness test is perhaps the most important check on the obviousness of a plan or program.



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## Common Sense Is Your Guide

Abraham Lincoln offered some brilliant advice on figuring out what to do: “You must draw on language, logic and simple common sense to determine essential issues and establish a concrete course of action.” Unfortunately, business executives often leave their common sense out in the parking lot when they come to work.

Common sense is wisdom that is shared by all. It’s something that registers as an obvious truth to a community.

Simple ideas tend to be obvious ideas because they have a ring of truth about them. What’s obvious to you is obvious to many. That’s why an obvious answer usually works so well in the marketplace.

To think in simple, commonsense and obvious terms, you must begin to follow these guidelines:

- **Get your ego out of the situation.** Good judgment is based on reality. The more you screen things through your ego, the farther you get from reality.
- **Avoid wishful thinking.** How things go is often out of our control; good common sense tends to be in tune with the way things are going.
- **Be better at listening.** Common sense by definition is based on what others think. People who don’t have their ears to the ground lose access to important common sense.
- **Be a little cynical.** Things are sometimes the opposite of the way they really are. That’s often the case when someone is pursuing his or her own agenda. Good common sense is based on the experiences of many, not the wishful thinking of some. ●

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## What Gets in the Way of the Obvious

There are forces at play that don’t make the search easy or sometimes even possible. They tend to obstruct clear thinking. Some forces are external. Some are internal. They all are things of which you must be aware. Forewarned is forearmed.

### The Search Begins and Ends With the CEO

If top management isn’t involved, chances are you won’t get anywhere in your search for the obvious. It is increasingly difficult for CEOs to digest the flood of information out there and make the right choices — but

it can be done.

The trick to surviving is knowing *where* you are going. That’s because no one (the board, your managers, your employees) can follow you if you don’t know where you’re heading.

If there’s one lesson about the search for the obvious that real leaders need to understand, here it is: *Success or failure is all about perceptual problems and opportunities in the marketplace. And it’s all about understanding that the perceptions in the mind of the customer are where you win and lose.*

You have to stay focused on adapting to the mind of the prospect, not trying to change it. The more you understand the minds of your customers or prospects, the less likely you will get into trouble.

Today, thanks to intense competition, mistakes are felt in a matter of months, not years. To survive, a CEO has to assume the final responsibility of what gets taken to the marketplace. After all, his job is on the line.

### Marketing’s Big Problem: Wall Street

The only thing that’s obvious to Wall Street is money. Here’s the problem: Wall Street creates an environment that encourages bad, sometimes irrevocable, things to happen. The economist Milton Friedman once said, “We don’t have a desperate need to grow; we have a desperate desire to grow.” The desire for growth is at the heart of what can go wrong for many companies. Growth is the byproduct of doing things right. But in itself, it is not a worthy goal.

When you consider that people do damaging things to force unnecessary growth, you can say that pursuing growth can be a crime against the brand.

### No Time to Think

With the business and political worlds getting more complex and difficult and people tied to cell phones and BlackBerrys, having quiet time to sort things out and figure out what to do is fast disappearing. Finding the obvious requires time to think.

We have become a world of reactors, not thinkers, at a time when good thinking is so desperately needed. We all have to recognize this problem. Then, people have to work hard not to let themselves get overwhelmed with information, much of which is of little use in making important decisions. Ignore it. Don’t read it. Don’t listen to it.

The best weapon we all have against too much information is our common sense. Trust it and use it. If you follow this advice, you’ll find that solving the problems will get easier. ●

### McDonald's Gets "Back to the Obvious"

A few years ago, when McDonald's sales and earnings were flat, then-CEO Jack Greenberg rolled out something called a "New Taste Menu"—a complex collection of 44 items to be rotated by franchises. All this did was slow down operations, turning fast food to slow food, with all the expected complaints.

Greenberg's replacement, the late Jim Cantalupo, replaced the new menu with a "back to the obvious" campaign, driving home the need for cleanliness, quality and upgraded products. As he said, "We've taken our eyes off the fries." The result was newfound success.

### The Internet Can Be an Obvious Problem

The search for the obvious requires clarity of thinking. But in today's connected world, it is increasingly difficult to think clearly. Business complexity is fed by the ever-increasing amount of information that is being piped into the business world in as many ways as Silicon Valley can invent. There's no escaping what David Shenk described in his book *Data Smog*, the "noxious muck and druck of the information age."

Currently, information processing accounts for half the gross national product. A lot of it ends up on paper that someone has to read. It isn't helping matters. Today business managers are expected to read 1 million words per week.

A study in Australia indicated that the human mind can only process four variables at a time. Once this number is exceeded, the mind goes into "tilt" and we have to begin again. Today's high-tech communication tends to generate more variables than we can handle. It's information overload. Our minds are like a computer's memory and our disks are full.

Some people even believe that information overload will become a medical problem. How can we reduce information right now, in order for our minds to operate at maximum efficiency and speed? Here's how to fight through the fog while trying to see what's happening.

The first challenge is to acknowledge that you can't absorb everything you think you need to know, then you'll be able to prioritize, delegate, and just let things slide. As you limit content, you'll learn to savor it more. Get started by spending two hours deciding what sources of information and intelligence are critical for you and

your business ("must-read" periodicals, Web sites, etc.). Boil it all down to the highest-quality stuff and read that first. Cancel or get rid of what's only marginal.

### Beware of E-mail

E-mail's greatest virtues are that it's cheap and fast. Those are also its biggest dangers. Too much data clamors for conscious attention. It all wants to evolve into information and then knowledge. Just deciding what to ignore takes intellectual effort, and, inevitably, the quality of the work suffers. Here are some tips for dealing with always-on technologies like e-mail:

- Decide by what's in the header whether you'll actually open and read e-mail.
- Don't put your e-mail address on your business cards.
- Open e-mail only at set times — perhaps when you start work or at the end of the day.
- Send brief responses; this discourages people from writing long e-mails.
- Unless you're retired, ask friends not to forward trivia, chatter, jokes or other junk. ●

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### Advertising People Can Be an Obvious Problem

Most advertisers and their agencies involved in Super Bowl advertisements are creating advertising designed to entertain, not to sell. You could say they are all on the same wasteful page. It's all about getting laughs or generating shock value. It's about theater, not marketing.

Their defense will be that if you love their commercial, you will love their product and you will buy it. But history has pretty much declared that premise as wrong.

Consider the beer business. No one has poured as much money into Super Bowl ads as Anheuser-Busch. Over the years, we've seen Clydesdales playing football, frogs talking, funny gag after funny gag. Has it helped sell beer? Actually, the beer business has been flat and declining for years.

### Media and Buzz

So why do companies spend \$2.7 million for 30 seconds of Super Bowl ad time? First of all, there is the *media factor*. All the media has piled on to write endlessly about all these commercials. They write as if they are reviewing movies or plays. Was it funny? Did it offend someone? Did their readers like it? Never a question about whether it offered a reason to buy the product.

Next, there is the *buzz factor*. With the arrival of the

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Internet, everyone wants to see his commercial talked about as it lives on in Web-based campaigns. But what are people talking about? Not the product or why it's different. They are talking about the gag.

It's worth asking if the advertising industry has lost touch with the meaning of advertising. If you look at a dictionary, the definition is "to call public attention to, especially in order to sell." So, there it is, the role of advertising is not to entertain, it's to sell. And don't fall prey to the argument that people won't pay attention unless you entertain them. If you have an interesting piece of news or a pretty good reason to buy, you can get people to stop and listen to what you have to say. ●

### Marketing People Can Be an Obvious Problem

*The Wall Street Journal* reported that Peter Brabeck, the departing CEO of Nestlé, put the company on a diet. He discovered that the food-maker was churning out 130,000 variations of its brands and 30 percent weren't making any money. He launched an aggressive plan to jettison weaker brands and simplify the organization.

Nestlé faces a predicament that haunts many companies that have acquired other companies to a point that these companies are almost impossible to manage. When you're into dog food, chocolate, baby food, ice cream, coffee, and on and on, you can easily see the problem.

The obvious has to line up with the perceptions in the customer's mind, not go against them. What people inside the company perceive as improvements often cause confusion inside the mind of the prospect.

Once you've gotten a brand up to altitude, your watchword should be "steady as she goes." A brand can only stand for one thing in the mind, and the more things you try to make it stand for, the more the mind loses focus on what it is. Endless variations do long-term damage to a brand or a company.

### Brand Schizophrenia

Powerful brands have distinct personalities: Duracell's batteries last a long time; Dove contains cleansing cream. But every dominant brand can fade if it falls prey to multiple personality disorder.

General Motors mucked up its brands over decades of endless line extensions. Mercedes-Benz has done it in less than one decade. Once a company abandons its brands' distinctive personalities or positions, it's just a matter of time before confused customers start to drift away.

There are ways to execute line extensions without

confusing, and losing, your customers. What these strategies share is rigorous attention to the brand's position — consumers' sense of the brand's distinct, overarching identity. BMW, for example, has been "the ultimate driving machine" for decades, an identity that transcends the company's multiple product lines. Managed carefully, a good position is timeless.

What you have to fight off is the tendency for marketing people to tinker with a brand, noting that a marketing person rarely arrives at a new assignment and says, "Things look pretty good; let's not touch a thing." ●

### An Obvious Look at the Marketing Process

Peter Drucker once said, "Because the purpose of business is to create a customer, the business enterprise has two — and only two — basic functions: marketing and innovation. Marketing and innovation produce results; all the rest are costs. Marketing is the distinguishing, unique function of the business."

Today, when top management is surveyed, the order of their priorities is finance, sales, production, management, legal and people. Missing from the list are

### How to Fix the Ad Industry

- **Step 1: Get back to strategy.** Forget about emotion, bonding, borrowed interest or show business. In simple terms, agencies have to be able to help establish the point of difference for a brand. Forty years ago, it was called a *unique selling proposition*. In more recent years, it was called a *position*. In all cases, it's why a customer should prefer your product over the many other choices out there.
- **Step 2: Dramatize the strategy.** The role of a good creative person is to take the strategy and dramatize it in a way that better involves the prospects. In a way, you are dramatizing the reason to buy. It could be a product demonstration or a dramatic solution to a perceived problem. Whatever it is, it captures people's attention while you deliver your sales message.
- **Step 3: Do away with awards.** Nothing does more long-term damage to the industry than making creative folks think that they are making movies rather than commercials. Besides, clients are on to the facts that awards are there to help agencies get more accounts, not for helping clients get more business.

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marketing and innovation. That's because as the years rolled on, rather than learn about marketing and innovation, executives started to search for role models instead of marketing models.

How do you find the proper direction to lead those following you? To become a great strategist, you have to put your mind in the battlefield of the marketplace. You have to find your inspiration down at the front, in the ebb and flow of the great marketing battles taking place in the mind of the prospects.

The following is a four-step process to pursue:

**Step 1: Make sense in the context.** Your message has to make sense in the context of your category. It has to start with what the marketplace has heard and registered from your competition. Get a quick snapshot of the perceptions that exist in the mind of your customers and determine your perceptual strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of your competitors.

**Step 2: Find the differentiating idea.** Look for something that separates you from your competitors. The secret to this is understanding that your differences do not have to be product-related. There are a number of different ways to differentiate a business beyond just focusing on your product.

**Step 3: Have the credentials.** There are many ways to set your company or product apart. The trick is to find that difference and then use it to set up a benefit for your customer. To build a logical argument for your difference, you must have the credentials to support your differentiating idea, to make it real and believable. Demonstrate your differences.

**Step 4: Communicate your difference.** If you build a differentiated product, the world will not automatically beat a path to your door. Every aspect of your communications should reflect your difference — your advertising, your brochures, your Web site, your sales presentations. This gives customers something to latch onto and run with, especially if it's obvious.

### Marketing Simplified

The notion of a differentiating idea requires some thought. What kind of idea? Where do you find one? To help you answer these questions, use the following definition: *A differentiating idea is a competitive mental angle.*

This kind of idea must have a competitive angle in order to have a chance for success. There must be an

element of "differentness." It could be smaller, bigger, lighter, heavier, cheaper or more expensive. It could be a different distribution system. The idea must be competitive in the total marketing arena, not just competitive in relation to one or two other products or services.

Second, a differentiating idea must have a competitive mental angle. Competitors that do not exist in the mind of the prospect can be ignored. A competitive mental angle is the point you must leverage to achieve results. But an idea is not enough; to complete the process, you need to turn the idea into a strategy.

### Turning an Idea Into a Strategy

A strategy is not a goal. It is a *coherent marketing direction*. A strategy is coherent in the sense that it is focused on the idea that has been selected.

Second, a strategy encompasses *coherent* marketing activities. Product, pricing distribution, advertising — all the activities that make up the marketing mix must be coherently focused on the idea.

Finally, a strategy is a coherent marketing *direction*. Once the strategy is established, the direction should not be changed. ●

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## Some Help in That Search for the Obvious

Everybody is after everybody's business. Because of this fact of life, the key to survival is to start every marketing plan with your competition in mind. It's not what you want to do; it's what your competition will let you do. Here are some survival tips:

- *Avoid a competitor's strength and exploit its weaknesses.* When a competitor is known for one thing, you have to be known for something else. Quite often, a competitor's built-in weakness is the something else you can exploit.
- *Always be a little bit paranoid about the competition.* One of your competitors is probably in a meeting figuring out how to nail you in some way or another. You must constantly be gathering information on what your competitors are planning. Never underestimate your competitor.
- *Competitors will usually get better, if pushed.* Companies that figure they can exploit a sloppy competitor make big mistakes. They ridicule their competitor's product or service and say they can do things better. Then, lo and behold, their big competitor suddenly improves and that so-called advantage melts away.

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- *When business is threatened, competitors aren't rational.* Survival is a powerful instinct in life and in business. When threatened, all rationality goes out the window.

### Solution Versus Direction

When problems arise, whether they are in marketing, politics or life, everyone looks for a solution. We have all been programmed to solve problems with solutions. Often, though, looking for a solution is a fool's errand. There is no easy solution for complex problems. What there is instead is an obvious direction. The reason is that often there are too many variables in a situation — competition or personal agendas or disruptive technology or, in diplomacy, country interest.

A longer-term direction is a lot more flexible because it gives you some maneuvering room to deal with change and unpredictable events. Often just knowing where you are going is the best you can do in a difficult situation. It also is the essence of a good strategy.

### Leadership: A Powerful Differentiator

Leadership is the most powerful way for a company to differentiate a brand and to establish the credentials of a brand. Credentials are the collateral you put up to guarantee the performance of your brand. Also when you have leadership credentials, your prospect is likely to believe almost anything you say about your brand because you're the leader.

Powerful leaders can take ownership of the word that stands for the category. You can test the validity of a leadership claim by a word association test. If the given words are computer, copier, chocolate bar and cola, the four most associated words are IBM, Xerox, Hershey's and Coke.

An astute leader will go one step further to solidify its position. Heinz owns the word *ketchup*. But Heinz went on to isolate the most important ketchup attribute. "Slowest ketchup in the West" is how the company is preempting the thickness attribute. Owning the word *slow* helps Heinz maintain a 50 percent market share.

When you do get on top, make sure the marketplace knows it. Too many companies take their leadership for granted and never exploit it. All this does is keep the door open for competition.

### Coping in a Changing World

A fundamental mistake that big, successful companies often make is to see themselves and their reputations far beyond the way the world is willing to see them. The corporate feeling is, "All I have to do is put my well-

known name on the product and the world will buy it."

No they won't, especially if you're horning in on someone else's specialty. And besides, the world also loves an alternative. So if you're sitting there all alone, enjoy it while you can, because as soon as an attractive alternative comes along, you're going to lose some business. ●

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## Some Obvious Ground Rules

Your obvious strategy has to sound right if it is to explode in people's minds. The mind works by ear, not by eye. A picture is *not* worth a thousand words. If you looked at just the pictures in almost any magazine or newspaper, you would learn very little. However, if you read just the words, you would have a pretty good idea of what was said.

### Law of the Ear

In spite of the evidence all around us, communications people suffer from "wordophobia," a morbid fear of words. Without the words on the package or the graphics on the screen, pictures in a TV commercial have almost no communication value. But add sound (words) and the "picture" changes.

If pictures alone make no sense, how about sound alone? Strange as it may seem, sound alone in a television commercial usually carries an easily understood message. Most classic print advertisements illustrate the same principle. The visual alone makes almost no sense. Naturally, a print ad with both pictures and words is more effective than either the words or the picture alone. But which is more powerful individually, the verbal or the visual?

According to respected psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, "There is evidence from controlled laboratory studies that shows that when you present a list of words to people, and you present it either auditorially, say on a tape recorder, or you present it visually, say on slides, people remember more words if they hear the words than if they see them."

### The Verbal Driver

The verbal should be the driver, while the pictures reinforce the words. All too often the opposite is the case. First off, printed words should carry the sales message. Cute or confusing words bring nothing but trouble. Second, headlines should *sound* good as well as look good. The rhyme and rhythm of the words can be powerful memory devices.

Finally, pictures need a very quick explanation; other-

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wise, they will distract readers. “Stopping” people won’t accomplish much if they look but don’t read.

### Law of Division

Over time, a category will divide and become two or more categories. The marketing arena can be viewed as an ever-expanding sea of categories. A category starts off as a single entity — computers, for example. But over time, the category breaks up into other segments — mainframes, minicomputers, workstations, PCs, laptops, etc. Each segment is a separate, distinct entity. Each segment has its own reason for existence. And each segment has its own leader, which is rarely the same as the leader of the original category.

Instead of understanding the concept of division, many corporate leaders hold the naïve belief that categories are combining. *Convergence*, *synergy* and *corporate alliance* are the buzzwords in the boardrooms of America.

This doesn’t happen. Categories are dividing, not combining. The way for the leader to maintain its dominance is to address each emerging category with a different brand name as General Motors did in the early days with Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick and Cadillac.

Timing is also important. You can be too early to exploit a new category. But it’s better to be early than late. You can’t get into the prospect’s mind first unless you’re prepared to spend some time waiting for things to develop.

### Law of Perception

Marketing is not a battle of products; it’s a battle of perception. All that exists in the world of marketing are perceptions in the minds of the customer or prospect. The perception is the reality.

Truth is nothing more or less than one expert’s perception. And who is the expert? It’s someone who is perceived to be an expert in the mind of someone else.

Marketing people focus on facts because they believe in objective reality. It’s also easy for marketing people to assume that truth is on their side. If you think you need the best product to win a marketing battle, then it’s easy to believe you have the best product. All that’s required is a minor modification of your own perceptions. ●

## The Future Is Never Obvious

Some of the most costly mistakes in business can be attributed to companies trying to predict the future. History is littered with bad predictions in all aspects of life:

- A 1979 *Business Week* article noted, “With over 50 foreign cars already on sale here, the Japanese auto industry isn’t likely to carve out a big slice of the US market.” This, of course, turned out to be wrong.
- Coca-Cola Chairman Roberto Goizueta predicted in 1985 that the New Coke would be “the most significant soft drink development in the company’s history ... the surest move ever made.” It turned out to be the most significant bomb in Coke’s history.
- Roger Smith, chairman of General Motors, predicted in 1986 that “by the turn of this century, we will live in a paperless society.” Roger got it wrong.

You cannot predict the future and if you try, chances are you will be very wrong. So your search for that obvious strategy should be based on what is happening today.

### Why Prediction Is Difficult

What makes predicting so difficult? There are three reasons:

- **Technology.** Unforeseen inventions can quickly change the status quo.
- **The human condition.** People’s habits change very slowly, which is why the future often looks like the past.
- **Competitors.** Competition can rear its ugly head with new ideas that disrupt old ideas.

While a company sees the value of a strategy for today’s and tomorrow’s business, it isn’t so sure it will hold up all the way into the future. It wants an idea that will be able to accommodate some future yet-unformulated plan.

Finding success today is what you must first worry about. If you do that, your chances of having some money to spend on tomorrow will be greatly enhanced. ●

### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *In Search of the Obvious*, you’ll also like:

1. ***The New Positioning* by Jack Trout.** Trout updates the concept of positioning he first wrote about in 1969 and offers his definitive words on what remains one of the biggest ideas in business.
2. ***Differentiate or Die* by Jack Trout.** This book is an in-depth exploration of the most successful differentiation strategies: what they are; how and when to apply them; and how they can help stand out and above the rest.
3. ***Kotler on Marketing* by Philip Kotler.** The legendary marketing professor delivers the fundamentals of marketing. This book is a classic.