

The Long Tail Wags Broadcasters

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In my previous column (“A Tall Tail of the Long Tale,” June 13), I discussed how modern technology now enables businesses to focus on niche products (the tail of the popularity distribution curve) rather than being preoccupied only with blockbusters (the head of the curve).

While the long tail is becoming universal, it is particularly relevant to the radio industry, which traditionally focused on the head. Using a wide variety of delivery options, audio enthusiasts now select choices that are only of limited interest within the larger culture. Eventually, listening tastes become a collection of individual niche interests: customized preferences.

What changed during the last few years? A song track still has to be composed, performed, recorded, edited, produced, packaged, stored, distributed and then discovered by those with an interest in its unique properties. But if all of these stages become commodities, at a trivial cost, then markets can profitably service the tail of the popularity distribution.

There are thousands of talented musicians who would love to quit their day job. Since a personal computer becomes a recording studio for anyone with modest skill, time, and resources, production costs are minimal. Distribution over the Internet is essentially free, and search engines allow us to find even the most obscure objects. The entire chain now has no intrinsic cost. Even if the average song quality is relatively low, there are likely to be many gems in a pool of 10 million tracks.

Although the RIAA has asserted that kids steal music using the Internet to avoid paying for copyrighted media, many of these kids are motivated by the desire to participate in the long tail. When visiting a friend’s web site, a teenager hears some cool song. The desire to add it to his collection is irresistible; he wants to be cool too, and he wants it *now*. Sharing files satisfies a need for immediate gratification. Kids post their favorite music on their web site, which becomes a personalized version of Google. If you like this song, you will like my other choices, just download them now and listen.

Most kids are simply oblivious to legal issues when given the opportunity to share a cool song with their friends. Except for popular songs from famous artists, nobody can distinguish between a song that is being freely distributed and one that is under strict copyright. For example, when my son, who wants to publicize his singing talent, posts a song that he created, its legal status is unknowable by anyone who visits his site.

The dramatic shift in the balance between scarcity and commodity changed the context for everyone. Craigslist has replaced the newspaper's function of classified ads with a no-cost way of buying or selling goods and services. Netflix provides access to millions of obscure movies. Blogs become customized newspapers. Everyday a new service or object is added to the unstoppable advance of long tail niches.

The search function is the last and most critical stage in taking advantage of a long tail. How does one find something among millions of choices? When I discuss the ideas from an obscure book in my *Last Word* articles, I am providing the search function: finding and applying ideas that you might not otherwise have found among thousands of publications.

Similarly, broadcast programmers would do well to think about their balance between two distinctly different types of services: (a) finding unusual songs in the long tail, and (b) saturating the airwaves with blockbusters from the head.

Traditional terrestrial radio has been locked into distribution scarcity that prevents participation in the tail. The number of possible frequency channels is very limited. Satellite radio addresses this with an increase in channels, and even HD radio might make a dent. But ultimately, the Internet will be king because it has more potential capacity than any of the alternatives. It can "narrowcast" to ten listeners in the tail at little cost. If narrowcasting ever becomes truly portable, and if the Internet remains free, it will become an even more aggressive competitor.

The only viable path for broadcasters is to embrace those technologies that combine the best features of the head and tail. Can broadcasters take advantage of the fact that for every revolution there is a counterbalancing reaction? A return to the "good old days" is not possible, but broadcasters can follow the universal dynamic of change: thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

Why is a synthesis inevitable? First, consider some related questions. What social forces make listeners aware of what they want? Do they have the time and energy to look for the perfect song, shirt, dinner, or vacation? Programming an iPod takes work even if every song was available at no cost. There might be new music genres that would appeal to many listeners if they had the time to find them.

When teenagers want clothing that matches the norms of their elite subculture, they are allowing someone else to determine their taste. With the freedom of the long tail comes the burden of managing your tastes. The reactive force is simply the burden of always exercising the freedom to have exactly what you want.

Chris Anderson, who publicized these concepts in *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*, mentions a self-limiting process for those who are faced with a long tail, which he calls the Paradox of Choice. The conventional wisdom is that having more choices is always better.

In a study at Columbia and Stanford Universities, researchers found that when faced too many choices, consumers are less likely to buy a product than when faced with a limited number of choices. When presented with a table that contained 6 types of jam, 30% of the customers purchased one, but when faced with 24 types, only 3% made a decision to buy one. And with too many choices customers were less satisfied with what they selected. As choices grow, the corresponding psychological burden also grows; liberation is replaced with debilitation. A human limitation replaces a technical constraint.

As the battle of head and tail continues, terrestrial broadcasting should focus on the new equilibrium, however it will evolve. The head will never return to its kingly status of 1950s, and the tail will never conquer the world. Technology unleashed a genie that has no intention of returning to the bottle. Historically, neither listeners nor commercial organizations had the problem of managing the tail. That is no longer true. Technology changed the rules because manufacturing, storage and distribution no longer have an intrinsic cost.

Terrestrial broadcasters have the opportunity to reposition their added value within the context of this new equilibrium. A combination of terrestrial broadcasting, web streaming, and email lists are likely to be part of the new balance between head and tail.