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The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More

By Chris Anderson

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The Internet has changed from a communications tool available to a small number of academics to a worldwide medium for commerce and information. Initially, business learned from the academics, but perhaps now the research community can benefit from some of the consumer-driven developments.

Amazon and other online retailers are discovering that there is a substantial amount of money to be made from a vast number of books, music tracks and other items that were unprofitable or impractical to make available in physical stores. This trailing distribution of less-popular content was first described by Chris Anderson as The Long Tail in an article for *Wired* magazine in October 2004.

In this book, also entitled *The Long Tail*, Anderson further explores the business and cultural opportunities emerging due to the availability and discoverability of huge amounts of entertainment and information online. Anderson's primary audience and context for this book is business, and his main examples are drawn from a small number of major American Internet-centric content distribution services including Amazon.com, the Rhapsody music service, iTunes, and NetFlix DVDs-by-mail.

But the book also examines related Internet developments in order to understand the multiple factors working to make the Long Tail possible. In the electronic world, availability may be easiest of all – the marginal cost of providing a new music track is essentially zero, if one's system is already storing millions of tracks. However, having provided new offerings, next an audience must come, somehow discovering content far beyond the heavily promoted hits they are most familiar with.

Anderson refers to this as “*connecting supply and demand*, introducing consumers to these new and newly available goods and driving demand down the Tail.” He suggests that other consumers may be a major force in this introduction, through reviewing, tagging, and otherwise pointing the way to previously unheralded content.

Some of this content will be mainstream works that have fallen out of awareness, or that may be better known in one corner of the world than another, perhaps leading a new reader to gleefully consume the 1889 best-seller *Three Men in a Boat*. But, using the example of the amateur astronomers who observed Supernova 1987A, Anderson also

argues that inexpensive, widely available technology is enabling many individuals to participate in areas that previously were the purview of professionals. Consumer-created opinion articles, digital photos, audio programs and video journals all add to the new marketplace of ideas.

Although this is primarily a book for a business audience, the author has done substantial research and analysis and refers to some earlier thinkers. However, in the chapter “The New Producers”, I was surprised that there was no reference to Alvin Toffler, whose concepts of the rise of amateur production and consumers-as-producers (which he termed *prosumers*) were presented several decades ago, notably in his 1980 book *The Third Wave*. Also, an examination of the role of amateur readers in the creation of the *Oxford English Dictionary* could have usefully contextualized the discussion of “The Wikipedia Phenomenon”, in which many amateur contributors collaborate to produce encyclopedic articles.

The Long Tail concept may also be extended outside the realm of entertainment content. Anderson does this briefly, but still remains primarily in the Internet and software domains, looking at the applicability to the business of eBay and Google, amongst others.

I certainly found it striking that this explosion in online content comes at the same time as the world is experiencing substantial reductions in species diversity and in that core aspect of culture: spoken languages. If the Long Tail effect could help to address this diversity crisis, it would certainly be invaluable for world culture. It seems to me that perhaps Russian scientist Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov, travelling the world in the early 20th century amassing a vast collection of plant seeds, was an early explorer of the Long Tail of plants and that organizations such as Seed Savers Exchange are already Long Tail businesses.

From a scholarly communication perspective, librarians, publishers and academic institutions have much to gain from the ideas in this book. While scientific content such as datasets and peer-reviewed papers is being produced at a breathtaking pace, there are still gaps in terms of availability and discoverability. Techniques used to explore previously difficult-to-obtain music tracks, obscure books, and unexpected content relationships can be adapted to enable researchers to discover less-cited but potentially useful data and papers.

Richard Akerman is at the Canada Institute for Scientific and Technical Information, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0R6 Canada.

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