

Roof Consulting in the Digital Economy

By JIM MAYBEE

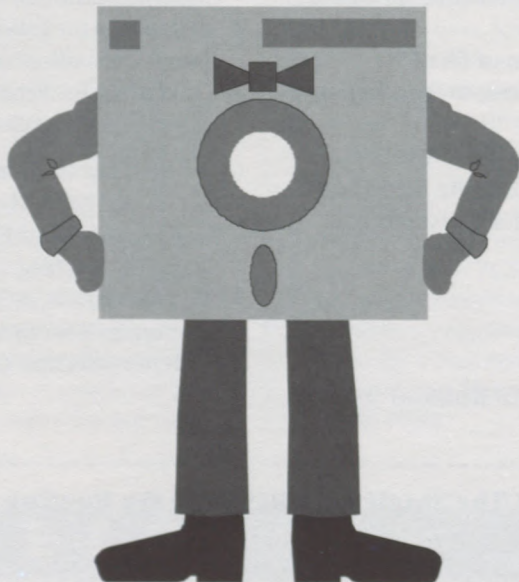
IT'S NO LONGER NEWS THAT WE ARE SURROUNDED BY CHANGE—POLITICAL CHANGES, ECONOMIC changes, global markets, rapid advances in computing, a thing called the Internet, and five year-olds that are computer literate! A new world seems to be emerging, and yet some days it all seems like a lot of hype. We still operate our businesses based on old values of delivering quality services for a reasonable price.

And yet...perhaps something dramatic is going on!

In this article, we'll look at some of the changes underway that will alter our economy and our society in ways that will affect all of us. We'll take a look at some "leading edge thinking" from several authors, and conclude with some comments about how you can not only cope with these changes, but how you can seize new opportunities for improving your business and your profits.

I'll start by telling you my conclusions. We are in the midst of a fundamental transformation of our economy that is appropriately compared to the agricultural and industrial revolutions. We're not talking about small changes or even rapid changes in how we do things, but rather in doing entirely new things in entirely new ways. At the start of the Industrial Revolution, those who had the vision to understand what was going on and the business sense to capitalize on their understanding became wealthy. I believe that we are once again presented with great opportunities as we restructure our entire economy!

In his book, "Being Digital," Nicolas Negroponte characterizes a major shift in our economy from "moving atoms" to "moving bits." A "bit" is the fundamental unit of storage in a computer. A lot more than information can be encoded into bits. Photographs, movies, music, works of art, CAD drawings, and roof budgets can all be digitally encoded. A lot of this information is still placed into a physical form for delivery. We use music CDs. We create paper reports for our roof inspections. But this is changing. E-mail is becoming commonplace. Internet WEB sites are a standard part of advertising.



The physical forms are going to be displaced by direct communication links. Roof condition reports will be delivered over the Internet. Specifications will be hosted on your WEB site. Tendering, purchasing, invoicing, and payment will all happen electronically over the Internet.

This all stands in contrast to the "old economy," based on manufacturing and moving atoms—cars, ovens, and toasters. The "new economy" is much more elusive and abstract, moving through wires and satellite links, in place of trucks, trains, and planes.

A quote from "The Digital Economy" by Don Tapscott puts these changes into an historical perspective.

"Today we are witnessing the early, turbulent days of a revolution as significant as any other in human history. A new medium of human communication is emerging, one which may prove to surpass all previous revolutions—the printing press, telephone, television, computer—in its impact on our economic and social life. Interactive multimedia and the so-called information highway, and its exemplar,

the Internet, are enabling a new economy based on the networking of human intelligence."

It is interesting to note that the subtitle for Tapscott's book is "Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence." There are many risks. The open and largely unregulated communication made possible by the Internet can be used for pornography and messages of hate as well as delivery of quality educational materials, or enhanced business operations.

James Martin quotes from Shakespeare in the preface to "The Great Transition"

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on
to fortune.
On such a full sea we are now
afloat,
And we must take the current
when it serves,
Or lose our ventures."

James Martin has authored over 100 books on computer technology. "The Great Transition" is a 495-page, comprehensive analysis of new ways of doing business, integrating new technologies with new thinking about using our human resources in creative ways.

Okay, so there's a lot going on! What's a consultant (or any of us) to do?

First, I must admit that all of this impending change can be a burden. The basic task of running a business and running our lives in the turbulent '90s can be a daunting and stressful task without additional pressures of impending changes that may threaten our businesses. I also believe, however, that it's "sink or swim" time, and if you choose to "swim," then you may start to discover new opportunities and the excitement that comes from a prosperous and growing business.

Of course, every roof consultant is unique. There are many different strategies. There are many market niches. I offer the following as food for thought. There is no "magic process" that will apply to all. There is, however, an undeniable change underway. Those who ignore these changes will wake up some day, wondering what happened—to use the Ross Perot analogy, "How come no one's buying our buggy whips?"

1) Get involved! Think about it! Get into an "opportunity" mindset

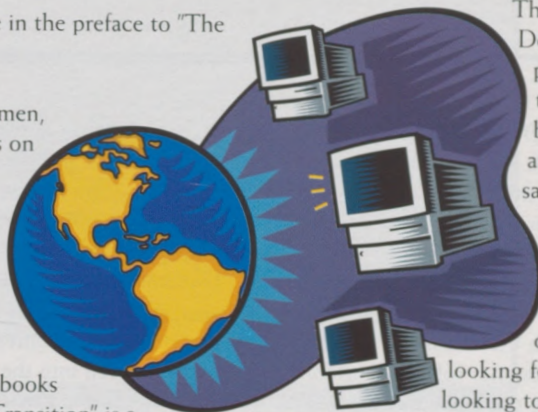
The first step is to start thinking about the digital economy. Think about the role of information in your business. Think about how you could improve the services you provide your customers through better access to information. What if your customers could access complete information on their roofing assets, over the Internet, with the information on your computer, kept up-to-date by you? What if they could e-mail you a leak report and know that you'd take care of it? No phone tag! No hassle!

2) Enter the Digital Economy. Crawl. Walk. Run.

Do something digital! Get on the Internet. Start using e-mail in place of fax. Don't get caught up in the technical details, but focus on the big picture, and keep a business focus. If you can't see how something will help your customers or improve your business management, it's probably not worth pursuing. Don't learn technology for its own sake. Keep customer focused and market-driven. If a supplier talks to you in "techno-babble," find a new supplier!

3) Understand outsourcing and electronic partnering.

The cover page of *Inc.* magazine, December, 1995, featured electronic partnering on the cover, with a subtitle of "How to lock in customers by linking computers." Outsourcing and partnering are two sides of the same trend. Competitive pressures force companies to focus on their core competencies. Facilities management and maintenance is not a core competency and is getting outsourced. Many corporations are



looking for more than consulting, they are looking to completely outsource responsibility for effective facilities maintenance. The more comprehensive your services are, the better positioned you are. If you have partnered with other suppliers to deliver a complete problem resolution service, then you're ready to "catch" the outsourcing requests.

Electronic partnering is essential in such relationships. In order to operate as an integral part of your customer's business, you need systems for instant information access and exchange.

4) Change your business strategies. Be a leader. Own the market.

Regardless of your role in the roofing industry, your business is going to change or die within the next five years. Anticipate the change imperative. Lead the industry. Deliver the information services your customers demand—or better yet, deliver services they didn't even know they could get. Make money!

In conclusion, I'd like to wish you a successful ride into the new economy and the next millennium.

About The Author



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