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Decision Support Systems

Volume 51, Issue 4, November 2011, Pages 884-893

Carrying your long tail: Delighting your consumers and managing your operations

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2011.02.007>

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Abstract

The growing ability to sell a wider range of goods, in smaller quantities, while still making a profit, is now widely called a *long tail* strategy. Profiting from greater product diversity represents a real change in optimal business strategy, which is based on real changes in customer behavior. Many firms *want* to develop long tail strategies, avoiding competition in mass market *fat spots*, and harvesting the superior margins available through selling in market *sweet spots*. Sweet spot offerings resonate with customers, allowing customers to find what they truly want and to avoid compromises; consequently, customers pay more while remaining happier with their purchases, and firms earn more and are more profitable. Evidence from earlier recessions suggests that in an era of excess capacity and pressures on consumers to find the best possible prices, competing through resonance offerings may represent an important source of protected profits. And yet, carrying a long tail and selling into sweet spots requires new

skills, both for locating targets of opportunities and for controlling costs.



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Keywords

Long tail; Community content; Resonance marketing; Operations

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Eric K. Clemons (clemons@wharton.upenn.edu) is Professor of Operations and Information Management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. His education includes an S.B. in Physics from MIT, and an M.S. and Ph.D. in Operations

Research from Cornell University. He has been a pioneer in the systematic study of the transformational effects of information on the strategy and practice of business. His research and teaching interests include strategic uses of information systems, the changes that IT enables in the competitive balance between new entrants and established industry participants, transformation of distribution channels, the structure and governance of the IT functional area, and the impact of IT on the risks and benefits of outsourcing and strategic alliances. Industries of focus include international securities markets and financial services firms, consumer packaged goods retailing, and travel. He specializes in assessing the competitive implications of IT, and in managing the risks of large-scale implementation efforts. More recently, he has begun studying blogging and social media and the challenges to applying current antitrust law to online business models.

Dr. Clemons is the founder and project director for the Wharton School's Sponsored Research Project on Information: Strategy and Economics Within the Program for Global Strategy and Knowledge Intensive Organizations. He participated in the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in February 2009. He is currently a member of the editorial boards of the Journal of Management Information Systems, The International Journal of Electronic Commerce, and Electronic Commerce Research and Applications. Dr. Clemons has 36 years' experience on the faculties of Wharton, Cornell, Harvard, the Indian School of Business, and Singapore Management University, and consulting experience in the private and public sectors both domestically and abroad.



Paul Nunes is Executive Director of Research at the Accenture Institute for High Performance based in Boston, Massachusetts. His research has focused on business and marketing strategy, with particular attention paid to the evolution of consumer behavior and marketing channels. He is coauthor of the award winning book, "Mass Affluence: 7 New Rules of Marketing to Today's Consumers" (Harvard Business Press 2004), and has written numerous articles and book chapters on marketing and business strategy, including a dozen contributions to *Harvard Business Review*. His research has

appeared in many other business journals including *MIT Sloan Management Review*, *Conference Board Review*, *Strategy and Leadership*, *Optimize*, *ComputerWorld* and *Wired*, and his work has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USAToday*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Chicago Tribune*. He is Senior Contributing Editor at *Outlook*, Accenture's journal of thought leadership, and he was recently awarded a U.S. patent for his method of improving a company's innovation processes.

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