

Stand still, go extinct

Leading a “re-startup” in a never-normal business world



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Marc's a mentor capitalist in disruptive startups and category creators, business thought leader, and Hall of Fame dealmaker. *Forbes* identified his unorthodox book, “The Soul of the Deal,” as one of the 25 M&A books every CEO, founder and business owner should read. He created and taught UC Berkeley's “Street Smart Startups” course. Marc co-founded software company Within3, was initial EVP of LA's Divergent3D (leap-frog technology rebuilding the U.S. industrial base), and is a long-standing Rex Foundation and Rock Hall board member.

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If the pace and magnitude of AI-driven transformation have you struggling with intellectual vertigo, you're not alone. You're alive. Gone is a predictable Newtonian world of stable assumptions, experience-based forecasts and gradual adaptation to change. New industries, customers and competitors arrive with dizzying velocity. Successful products and businesses are becoming commoditized or obsolete.

We're in a permanently unstable, “quantum business” environment in which uncertainty is a given and assumptions are never static. Prediction is mere probability. Relentless technological innovation, coupled with equally unstable geopolitics, alters industry ground rules weekly. Tariffs? What tariffs?

By 2030, no one will remember when AI wasn't fully integrated into their business and decision-making process. AI must become the definitive strategic lens for re-examining and re-imagining every business.

Sales 101 principles won't change. You'll still need a great customer value proposition. But it will be designed for ever-evolving customers reacting to the same unstable universe as you. Where will they be? How will they find you (and vice versa)? If products aren't AI-search friendly, they won't be found or bought.

How and why will customers buy? Machine-logic-driven bots will increasingly shape B2B purchasing decisions by looking analytically for best price, terms and quality. Relationships and emotion aren't in their DNA. AI doesn't play golf.

CEOs can see and respond to legacy competitors' changes. Their invisible competitors will be AI-native startups built for an AI world, unencumbered by legacy personnel, systems, distribution channels or thinking.

Successful middle-market companies were once nimble, hungry, driven startups. Become one again. Your best

path forward is adopting your company's original mindset. Manage as if you were a re-startup without inherited boundaries or limitations.

Pretend you're starting from scratch today. Identify your ideal operating model, value proposition, competitive advantage and customer. How many humans and how many AI agents populate your org chart?

These uncomfortable questions require imagination and courage. They surface consequential operating and strategic questions, not technology issues.

People are less likely to challenge comforting assumptions than threatening ones. We see what we want to see, not what's clearly in front of us. We resist seeing or responding to unpleasant facts.

Ambiguity and uncertainty lead to doubt, which leads to inaction. Humans hate change. Who wants to push back on what's worked before or cannibalize their own business?

Fight complacency. Past success no longer reliably predicts the future. Embrace paranoia and intellectual humility.

Winning leaders welcome AI as opportunity more than obligation. Lead by personally using AI as a thought partner, not a tool. Personal commitment creates trust and credibility letting you to demand your team question every business assumption with fresh eyes.

Recruit key advocates within your company. Make an AI-centered viewpoint integral to managerial instincts and corporate thought. Make it your first thought, not an afterthought. Tone and tenor, speed and urgency, start at the top. You cannot wait for bottom-up adoption.

Paraphrasing W. Edwards Deming: Change isn't compulsory. Neither is survival. You have choices. Fortune favors the brave. CEOs who act with conviction will be remembered as generational leaders. Those who don't, won't. ●