STORY BY
SCOTT STEINBERG

HOW TO FUTURE-PROOF YOUR BUSINESS

Learning to evolve can keep your company thriving

I N AN AGE of accelerating change and disruption, why do some companies consistently thrive and become stronger over time? It's because top performers inherently design products, services and solutions to be more flexible, resilient and adaptable. In an ever-changing world, winners don't achieve longevity by attempting to deliver buzzier products or piggyback on rising fads. Rather, they embrace principles of agile learning, predictive analysis and rapid-fire pivots. Even more importantly, they cleverly engineer their products to be more modular and elastic, building these offerings to evolve and scale from day one.

The trick to building durable brands isn't to attempt to predict the future with 100-percent accuracy. Instead, it's learning how to embrace the idea that in an uncertain world, flexibility is the essence of future-proofing.

By way of illustration, cities such as London and Paris didn't thrive for centuries because the architects of the past could precisely envision how future generations would live. Rather, they remained thriving metropolises because neighborhoods and layouts were easily expanded on and modified as needed, and structures and spaces within them easily repurposed for each successive generation. Likewise, companies such as Google, Microsoft and Amazon don't attempt to offer a single, game-changing solution meant to exist in perpetuity. Instead, they experiment constantly, learn rapidly, and pivot fluidly, evolving core products and services over time while also building upon them.

In the face of unexpected events, it's also important to embrace the concept of graceful degradation: designing teams, systems and solutions that can continue to function, even partially, under severe stress. Just as YouTube videos can continue to play at lower resolutions even when Internet speeds drop, so too should capabilities continue to function under duress. In other words, the more adaptable you can make a solution, the more capable of bouncing back, no matter what the future brings. After all, as the Covid pandemic reminded us, the companies that emerged stronger from the global shutdown weren't those that had built the most efficiently optimized production processes or cost-conscious supply chains. Rather, it was those who had built modularity into these systems, allowing them to reconfigure manufacturing, transportation and distribution approaches as needed. As Charles Darwin noted in his 1859 classic, *On the Origin of Species*, it's not the "strongest" organizations and individuals that proliferate over time, but rather the most adaptable.

Thankfully, you too can design more

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Award-winning professional speaker and management consultant Scott Steinberg has served as a strategic consultant to more than 3,000 leading brands. He is the coauthor of the new book *The Shape of the Future: How to Design for Disruption, Plan for Uncertainty and Adapt to Whatever Tomorrow Brings.* **His website is FuturistsSpeakers.com.**

future-proof companies, products and services just by adopting a few simple shifts in strategic thinking:

Apply Force Multipliers. Look for areas where you can leverage preexisting data sets or audience participation to help you bring more resources to solve a problem. Rather than tackle every challenge yourself, consider the following: Could you institute inside-out approaches by sharing custom data and inviting third parties to leverage it in new ways? Or by implementing outside-in strategies, could you invite contributions from the broader community?

Constantly Experiment and Pivot. Build adaptive capabilities into your core culture and operations from day one. Create safe spaces for adjusting based on what you discover about your system's behavior. Make the best decision at the moment, then update as more information is gained.

Design for Degradation. Actively work to design plans and operations that are built in such a way that they can continue functioning even when individual parts fail. Create flexible processes that allow your organization to adapt quickly during disruptions rather than break down completely. Also, know what strategies to implement if something goes haywire.

Employ Points of Leverage. As you redesign your business, concentrate on areas where minor shifts in culture can transform entire approaches. It helps to examine situations from multiple angles, looking at both current circumstances and future implications.

As you can see, finding success isn't about delivering perfect products and services every time. Rather, it's about applying systems-based thinking to craft solutions that are designed to grow more capable through repeated usage. When the right circumstances come along, you're ready to capitalize on them.

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