Concept

Shooting Ahead of the Duck

How to make sure you don't lose too many feathers when it comes to technology.

I've built interactive media for *Newsweek* since 1989—from laserdiscs and CD-ROMs to AOL, Prodigy, and now half a dozen Websites. One of the biggest lessons I learned was when we began to produce documentary CD-ROMs in 1993. Back then, CD-ROMs looked like a potentially important interactive medium, and we publishers collectively lost many millions of dollars proving they weren't.

In 1993, the personal computer world was just making the transition from the DOS operating system to Windows. Although Windows had been around for a while, it was so buggy that users were slow to adopt it. It wasn't until version 3.1 that anyone took it seriously.

That was right when we were planning our CD-ROM series, and, after much debate, we decided to write our discs to run on DOS, rather than on Windows. There were far more DOS computers than Windows; our developers already knew how to program for DOS. The only downside was that it was more complicated for users to run multimedia CD-ROMs on DOS than on Windows.

So, we launched on DOS, and immediately ran into huge technical support problems and unhappy customers. At the same time, Windows took off and was suddenly a viable market. But we'd already spent all of our development money on DOS.

So, for the next three years, we had to publish with the older technology and all of its support headaches. If we had bet on Windows, our lives would have been far simpler.

The lesson: When you're spending significant money on technology, shoot *ahead* of the duck, not *at* the duck. You'll live with your decision for longer than you think, and it's better to let the market catch up with you than be stuck at the end of the parade.

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