

# The Dawning of the Age of Just OK

## (Not Everything Worth Doing is Worth Doing Well)

by Howard A. Tullman

Tom Peters may still be searching for excellence (or just sitting on the sidelines watching as his exemplars continue to implode one after another)...

...Jack Welch and his new wife may still be hawking his “Be the Best or Don’t Bother” blather from the back pages of an increasingly anorexic Business Week (which, by the way, is now typically thinner than either Costco’s coupon compendium or Best Buy’s Sunday supplement)...

...but all across the country, as millions of businesses of every size and shape struggle to survive, they’re coming, out of necessity, to terms with a reinvigorated concept and a much more useful and meaningful mantra:

### **Enough is Enough.**

*You cannot do it all or have it all—so get your act together, keep your head down, and try to just do a few of the right things really well.*

Easy enough to say – hard to execute day-in and day-out – without throwing out the baby you’ve so painstakingly built with the bathwater and bilge you can certainly live without – and it’s a a very, very slippery slope to boot.

You’ve spent years telling your people that excellence is all that matters and that there really is a right way to do almost anything, and now you’ve got to change your tune. The core values don’t change, but the transition from “Let’s do it all” to “Let’s do it smart and small” takes some getting used to.

To get it right and to succeed (which may not mean much more at the moment than surviving and keeping your best employees and customers close), you’ll need to retrain your people, rewrite your rule book (or maybe just throw it away) and spend the time it’s going to take to get it right. And it’s not that easy to slow down and concentrate today even if you weren’t constantly trying to put out fires and jumping all day long from one crisis to another. But it couldn’t be more important to do just that and to do it now.

Just because these kinds of adjustments and course corrections seem more and more obvious to you every day and essential for every business doesn’t really make the process any easier or make it a given that your employees (old and new) understand or appreciate the severity of the situation. You’ll discover that you have to repeat the new messages over and over – to be obsessive and aggressive in insisting on new behaviors – not just smiles and lip service. And you need to be careful not to confuse a clear view of where you headed and where you need to be with a short time or distance to get there. We’ll all be at this for quite a while. It’s going to be a bumpy ride with a lot of scrapes and bruises along the way, but it’s clearly going to be worth the trip. Besides, you don’t really have a choice.

So how should we be thinking about the problem? Where do we start? These are questions that will take months and years for businesses to ultimately answer. Their respective approaches will be as different and diverse as the companies themselves. Nevertheless many of the solutions will have some common elements and that’s all we have the time and space to address today and, no pun intended, it’s enough to get you started thinking about your own situations.

*Just do a few of the right things really well*

*Figure out the most critical business objectives, how they’ve changed radically in the recent past, and how your methods of addressing and dealing with them need to change as well*

The severely-depressed comedian Steven Wright is fond of saying that: “Everywhere is walking distance if you have the time.”

Of course none of us does. If anything, making the time to do the things that need to get done and done right is one of our greatest challenges. Time is really our scarcest resource and it means that while we can do pretty much anything we want, we can’t do everything. We’ve got to focus our finite and shrinking resources and our limited attention span and energies on

doing just a few of the most important things for our businesses. We need to do what we can and do it all in the very best way possible.

This is not about money. It’s also important to avoid trying to do things cheaply or hurriedly. Quick fixes, cosmetic makeovers, something for everybody, or sacrifice sales just won’t work. These are just examples of putting more lipstick on the pig. It’s not going to be easy but we’re all going to have to learn to say “No” to a lot more things than we used to.

We’re going to have to make some sacrifices and compromises. We will encounter unavoidable necessary evils which might be OK as long as we make it very clear to everyone exactly what we’re choosing to do and why.

The first rule is to keep the business alive and moving forward—the marketplace and the economy may slow the pace—but if you’re careful and selective, at least you won’t be shooting yourself in both feet at the same time.

The real trick is to figure out just what the most critical business objectives are, how they’ve changed radically in the recent past, and how your methods of addressing and dealing with them need to change as well.

Here’s where things get interesting: I’m willing to bet that the simple changes I’ve listed below (with a couple of examples) apply to your business (whatever it is) sight unseen. The only question is whether you’ve taken the time to ask yourself how these things have changed your own business and what you need to do about it.

So let’s get started, but before we do, I need to make one disclaimer and one request.

I’m just the reporter here and some of the things I’m going to say may be harsh overstatements, gross generalizations, ludicrous simplifications, or maybe even wrong (although I seriously doubt that), and I don’t want you to think for a moment that I necessarily agree with where and the way these things are going. I mostly don’t, but that’s not going to keep them from going the way they’re going and rolling right over all of us.

So don’t blame me, the messenger, and don’t get distracted by the hyperbole. I guarantee you that elements of these changes and trends will significantly change your business and your life in the next year or two. The only variable (largely up to you and how you react) will be whether the changes are for the better or worse.

### **Speed**

*Speed kills and today speed is all that matters. Forget accuracy. Forget style or edits.*

Just think about the news of Michael Jackson’s death. Did TMZ wait to break the story? Not a minute. Did they care whether it was correct? Not a bit. We live in a world where mistakes are yesterday’s “news” and where “Oops!” is an appropriate and complete response. Meanwhile, the L.A. Times sat on its sorry rear end for a day or more trying to vet

the story and the details. Honestly, and perhaps sadly, by that time, no one cared what the Times had to say.

## Access

*Ubiquitous access is the new name of the game.*

Anything that impedes the consumer's ready and immediate access to your offerings (products, services, whatever), through whatever device the consumer chooses, will drive higher and higher levels of abandonment and migration to more accessible alternatives.

Consumers essentially disregard any consideration or calculation of the other trade-offs, give-ups, security issues or decreases in actual value or quality of information that such a shift represents.

## Convenience and Ease of Use/ Distribution

*Because a consumer's time is the scarcest resource of all, convenience and ease of use are far more important drivers of behavior than virtually any of the traditional attributes that we have long valued.*

Consumers could care less about the sound quality or fidelity of the digital music they are buying today. All that really matters is how quickly and easily can they get it; how portable it is; how many of their digital devices they can use and store it on; and how easily they can share it with their friends. They just want their MP3s and, it actually appears, they like the way things sound better with a ton of noise and distortion.

Consider Red Box—DVDs for a dollar a night right from a convenient distribution box in your neighborhood—most likely at a place you visit every day anyway.

It's exploding nationwide without regard to the most obvious question: how successful will they be in matching the box's available inventory to the local consumers' new weekly demands for the hottest titles? Blockbuster couldn't do it well with whole huge stores of inventory, so it's hard to imagine that Red Box will do much better.

By and large, however, to today's consumer, it doesn't matter. Consumers will find something to watch or play. They will learn to reserve titles online or they will settle for what is available.

And from Red Box's perspective: Are they driving themselves crazy with inventory algorithms and supply chain concerns? Nope. Because they figured it out—enough is enough.

## Cost

Forget all the discussions about "free" being the new clearing price for just about anything. In some cases, that strategy works great. In others, it's a ticket to the poor house. The market will shake things out over time.

The real problem for so very many companies today is this:

*The consumer is no longer willing to pay for or even acknowledge the value of the serious differences in quality, feature sets, durability or stability, etc. that reflect years of investment and consistent improvements in so many products.*

They just don't care—in large part because they don't know about or use many of these features or benefits—but equally as importantly, because they are more than willing to pay less and get by with less.

As long as the product meets enough of their real needs and requirements to get the job done for them without requiring them to learn a new language, read a manual written in pidgin English, or spend time that they don't have learning things that they will rarely, if ever, use, they will respond positively.

How many of your friends and family can't text or retrieve their voicemail messages on their cell phones?

How many have you called only to find that they haven't even learned how to turn their voicemail service on?



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How many of the 4500 instructions, keys and processes built into Microsoft Word do you use?

The fact is that you're much more likely to mistype something and discover that Word has now turned your document into 4 different fonts and that you haven't the slightest idea of how to get back on track, than you are to ever consciously use most of these features that only the geeky software engineers at Microsoft could love.

Could they make it any easier on Google and Apple to convince people that the systems we rely on every day for our work should work for us and not the other way around?

And the beat goes on. Microsoft Windows 7 is right around the corner. I, for one, just can't wait.

So there you have it. A brief introduction into the new world. The Age of Just OK.

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*Howard A. Tullman serves as President and Chief Executive Officer of Flashpoint - The Academy of Media Arts and Sciences ([www.flashpointacademy.com](http://www.flashpointacademy.com)), and*



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