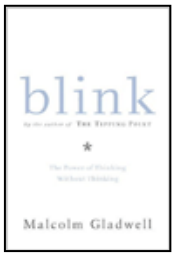
Blink

The Power of Thinking Without Thinking

by Malcolm Gladwell



Have you ever made a snap judgment or assessment about a person or a situation and been right? Have you ever just known that something was about to happen moments before it actually did? Conventional wisdom suggests that our judgments are better when we have all the facts at our disposal, and have time to carefully deliberate before making a decision. But is that always the case?

According to celebrated business author and social commentator Malcolm Gladwell, snap decisions are not necessarily hollow decisions just because they're made quickly. In fact, snap decision-making can make you better at your job, improve your relationships and unlock new worlds of understanding. But only if you understand how it works and learn to recognize, and avoid, its most common pitfalls.

For time-challenged business professionals, Gladwell's latest book, Blink: the Power of Thinking Without Thinking provides a thorough and entertaining primer on this subject. In it, Gladwell creatively explores the concept of rapid cognition — and tells us all we need to know about the kind of thinking that happens in the blink of an eye.

When you first meet someone, or walk into a house you are thinking of buying, or read the first few sentences of a book, your mind takes about two seconds to jump to a series of conclusions. Blink is a book about those first two seconds.

In speaking about what happens during those first two seconds, Gladwell sets out:

- To show us that "Decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately";
- To answer the question "When should we trust our instincts, and when should we be wary of them?"; and,
- To convince us that "Snap judgments and first impressions can be educated and controlled."

While these may seem like novel concepts, the truth is, from a scientific perspective Gladwell doesn't break much new ground with his book. But he is very talented at popularizing others' research and gives credit where credit is due. Gladwell's contribution is more as a storyteller — one who's able to synthesize and translate the complex work of psychologists, market researchers and criminologists into writings anyone can understand and make use of in their everyday lives.

The Theory of “Thin Slicing”

As we mentioned above, Gladwell's first objective in Blink is to convince us of a simple fact: decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately. To accomplish this objective, the author starts us out with an interesting anecdote from the world of art history.

Gladwell tells us how, in 1983, officials at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles thought they had an extraordinary find: a rare marble statue dating from the sixth century BC. The legal ownership of the statue had been meticulously re-traced through the ages by a team of researchers and lawyers. The surface of the artifact had been examined with state-of-the art microscopes. A core sample was extracted and tested using other high-tech gadgets. In short, no stone was left unturned.

At the end of the day, all the available “hard” evidence concluded the statue was, indeed, what it appeared to be. How surprising then, that a lonely art critic, doubting the providence of the statue based solely on her gut feeling, suggested that the statue "just didn't look right." It was even more surprising that this gut feeling turned out to be correct and all the lawyers and scientists were wrong. The statue was a brilliant forgery — one that cost the Getty Museum $10 million and did untold damage to its international reputation.

The cognitive theory behind this kind of strange, but natural, impulse — a theory Gladwell colloquially refers to as "thin slicing" — is at the very heart of Blink.

Put simply, thin slicing is the ability to grasp a situation or problem in the blink of an eye without having to analyze it in detail. When we thin slice, our unconscious mind draws conclusions based on very narrow “slices” of personal experience collected over the course of our life. Another term for this subconscious process might be “instinct.”

So was it instinct then, when Evelyn Harrison — the insightful art critic — needed just one quick look at the statue to know that the Getty had been taken, especially when its high priced scientists and lawyers had spent so much time carefully verifying its authenticity?

Gladwell believes it was, arguing that more information is not necessarily better, even though society is primed to believe careful thought is always preferable.

"We live in a world that assumes that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that went into making it," writes Gladwell. "And what do we tell our children? Haste makes waste. Look before you leap. Stop and *think*. Don't judge a book by its cover." All wishful thinking, argues Gladwell.

Sometimes we have no choice but to judge a book by its cover, he says. And depending on the situation, most of us are better at it than we might think. Gladwell argues forcefully that, in fact, thin slicing is precisely the kind of thinking

that, evolutionarily speaking, has kept the human race alive and thriving.

"When you walk out into the street and suddenly realize that a truck is bearing down on you, do you have time to think through all your options?" asks Gladwell rhetorically. "Of course not. The only way that human beings could ever have survived as a species for as long as we have is that we've developed another kind of decision-making apparatus that's capable of making very quick, and very effective, judgments based on next to no information."

Now, you'd probably agree that Gladwell's theory is true of life or death situations. And, when it comes to an emotionally charged activity like dating, most people would likely acknowledge the importance of what happens during that magical instant when two people meet for the first time — naturally, some form of thin slicing goes on during those first few emotionally-charged moments.

But many thoughtful people would tend to downplay the importance of what happens during the first two seconds of other types of encounters, such as a job interview or business meeting. Surely, well-educated, professional people don't rely on snap decision making in those types of situations too … Or do we?

According to Gladwell, decision-making in personal and business situations isn't all that different. For better or for worse, whether we're on a first date, or in a business setting, we still tend to thin slice. We make dozens of important decisions about the other person, and the situation at hand, all within the blink of an eye.

This should be an important insight for all business people but especially for those professionals in positions such as sales and marketing. Failing to recognize the speed at which others make judgments could be the difference between gaining and losing a customer or the success or failure of a product or business.

Blinking in Business

No writer in recent memory has eased into the role of business opinion leader as gracefully, or influentially, as Malcolm Gladwell. Soon after his first book, The Tipping Point, fell into the hands of business readers everywhere, Gladwell made the leap from obscure staff writer at The New Yorker to international marketing guru.

It seems the business community can't get enough of Malcolm Gladwell, and rightly so. Like The Tipping Point before it, Gladwell's latest book promises to have a substantial impact on business trends, especially in the sales and marketing realm. Blink clearly and persuasively demonstrates the long held belief that brand recognition, product packaging and mainstream advertising all have a powerful impact on our perceptions.

For instance, Gladwell refers to a study that clearly demonstrates how well made liquor can easily be perceived by consumers to be bad, and lousy liquor perceived

as good, simply by swapping the bottles. This, and other research he cities, leads one to the unavoidable conclusion that company logos, colors, Web sites, literature, and packaging — i.e. everything that represents some component of your business — is just (if not more) as important as the product itself. But, at the same time, Gladwell teaches us that marketers who rely too heavily on the power of first impressions do so at their own peril. Conscious mental processes can and do impact our subconscious perceptions. Understanding these thought processes can generate profound benefits for your business. Ignoring them can bring you no end of trouble.

As a marketer, you certainly want your product or service to be desired by the target market. But why then are fabulous products routinely dismissed by focus groups for no apparent reason? If first impressions are all that matters, how can focus groups ever be wrong?

It's because first impressions don't provide the entire picture. Here's an example of first impressions that went awry. “All in the Family” and “The Mary Tyler Moore” show would never have made it past the pilot stage if network executives had listened to their carefully constructed focus groups who didn't much care for these two particular shows. Yet both shows did make it to air, and they turned out to be huge successes.

Hindsight tells us that these focus groups were wrong, in part, because the audience was viewing shows in an environment that was different than their living room at home. So, nowadays, new TV shows are almost always tested in a relaxed and comfortable home environment.

The people participating in the “Mary Tyler Moore” and “All in the Family” focus groups were also explicitly told at the outset that they were judging these shows. As it turns out, just that initial bit of direction from the network executives can be enough to significantly change a focus group's outcome. It would seem that, because these two shows were so different than the norm at the time, the “judge & jury” members of the focus groups felt obligated to decide they must fail.

The point is, sometimes consumers make bad choices because they've been given too little information, and other times because they have too much.

In deciding to trust their instincts and air the Mary Tyler Moore Show, and All in the Family — despite what their consumer focus groups had clearly told them — the network executives luckily managed to avoid making a crucial mistake like the one that would later befall top executives at Coca-Cola when it came time to unveil the “New Coke” during the early 1980s.

In blind taste tests, the sweeter tasting New Coke, which tasted more like Pepsi, always scored well with focus groups. But, as it turns out, the taste tests were based on little sips. Of course, people usually drink the whole can, not just a sip. So despite rigorous testing, New Coke was an unmitigated marketing failure. It turns out that it was designed around consumer first impressions and taken out of context.

In a final and somewhat controversial example from Gladwell's book, two separate groups of African-American students were asked to take IQ tests. The first group took the test without identifying their race on the pretest questionnaire. The second group was asked at the outset to specify their race, and "that simple act," Gladwell writes, "was sufficient to prime them with all the negative stereotypes associated with African-Americans and academic achievement." For whatever reason, the African-Americans who identified their race did worse than the people who didn't.

For sales and marketing professionals, these are very important lessons about how consumers think and make decisions. Sure, says Gladwell, first impressions are extremely important. And things like having a slick Web site or flashy packaging tend to matter a great deal. But decision-making isn't entirely about the first two seconds. There are other factors at play.

In other words, snap decision-making isn't always wise, and first impressions must always be considered in context.

Lessons Learned

Perhaps some of the most important lessons come from the behavior of police officers in New York City. Gladwell provides two contrasting examples in which cops were faced with a series of quick decisions and he explains the good and the bad outcomes.

Gladwell starts with the infamous Amadou Diallo case in 1999, in which four New York police officers open fired on a Bronx man they thought was pulling a gun on them. In fact, Diallo was only reaching for his wallet — and he died because of it.

But these four officers were relatively young, and as Gladwell points out, they didn't have the experience to know how to handle a tense situation in which they may have realistically believed their lives were on the line. So they fired on him.

Conversely, he tells the story of another cop who, at the end of a high-speed chase, came face to face with a teenager who did pull a gun. But this was a veteran cop and he immediately recognized in the kid's face and in his body language that he was surrendering. So the cop in this example didn't fire. His long experience on the job regulated his blink decision-making and, as a result, the second story had a much happier ending.

In the end, this is Gladwell's fundamental point: Like it or not, human beings, by our very nature, are going to make instant decisions. Lots and lots of instant decisions. And snap judgments, in and of themselves, aren't inherently good or bad things. But, when they're backed by experience and knowledge, they are more likely to be good decisions and should be trusted.

That's why the lonely art critic at the Getty Museum knew instantly that the statue was a forgery. She had a deep, personal grounding in such art, whereas the

scientists and lawyers were looking painstakingly for data, which can often be faked.

Conclusion

It's a little known fact that the impetus for Blink started with Malcolm Gladwell's hair. For most of his adult life Gladwell had worn it closely cropped but several years before writing Blink the author decided to let it grow out into a woolly Afro.

"The first thing that started happening was I started getting speeding tickets," said Gladwell in a recent interview with Fast Company magazine. "I wasn't driving any faster than I was before, I was just getting pulled over way more."

Then there was the day Gladwell was walking around New York and cops surrounded him, mistaking him for a rape suspect. "I'm exactly the same person I was before," recalls Gladwell, who's half Jamaican. "But I just altered the way someone makes up very superficial, rapid judgments about me."

Rather than merely complain about his bad luck, Gladwell was inspired to try to understand what happens beneath the surface of rapidly made decisions, and challenge some common misconceptions, about human decision-making.

When all is said and done, what Gladwell is trying to accomplish with Blink is not to teach us how to judge the next blockbuster TV show or how to tell a fake Greek statue from a real one. Instead, what he wants is to make us realize that, with practice, we can all improve our ability to make accurate and rapid judgments on very little information if we learn to trust those instincts that are based on experience and knowledge, and be mindful of our internal biases.

In Blink, Malcolm Gladwell reveals how we can all become better decision makers — in our homes, our offices, and in everyday life. Never again will you think about thinking in quite the same way.

