



SHARE

SHARE

TWEET

RECOMMEND

SHARE

About The Author



Michael Senecal is a contributing writer for DealCrunch with almost 20 years of experience as a business writer and editor. A lifelong history student, he has a passion for investigating trends and transformations in retail and telling the personal stories of the industry's thought leaders.

About IndustryCrunch

DealCrunch.com's IndustryCrunch is the only blog of its kind that highlights all of the retail industry's movers and shakers, up-and-coming startups and more. Stay informed with the latest industry news here.

4.5k

6.3k

656

Trending Topics

The retail industry is always growing and changing. Keep track of the hottest topics and trends on IndustryCrunch below:

- Marketing
- Ecommerce
- Logistics
- Mobile
- Online

2.5.18 • SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The Long Now Foundation: How Thinking About Long-Term Impact Can Help Businesses Make Better Decisions Today

By: Michael Senecal

***The Crunch:** [The Long Now Foundation](#) offers an antidote to what Co-Founder Stewart Brand has called civilization's "pathologically short attention span." It exists to get people thinking about the future not just in days, months, and years but also in terms of millennia. Stewart and his colleagues hope that discussion about the long-term consequences of human activity will foster a sense of collective responsibility toward distant generations. The business community can also benefit from long-term thinking. As consumer buying habits shift and e-commerce surges, traditional retailers often find themselves seeking short-term results at the expense of strategic improvements — and giving way to competitors. While thinking in terms of millennia isn't realistic in business, historical perspective certainly is. The insights of the Long Now Foundation encourage business leaders to take a step back, look at the big picture, and search for sustainability rather than a quick fix.*

Share

In a 2016 talk given at [The Interval](#), the San Francisco headquarters of [The Long Now Foundation](#), economic historian Louis Hyman told a story about Depression-era bankers [who struggled to loan out money](#). Millions of Americans were unemployed, but the bankers couldn't find a home for their capital because they couldn't discern which industries presented opportunities for growth.

Louis argues that the failure of Depression-era financiers to drive consumer demand through capital investment stemmed from their failure to assess shifts in leading business sectors that were taking place. The era of industrial capitalism — based on wheat, steel, and railroads — was giving way to what Louis called the era of "Fordist" capitalism, based on cars, chemistry, aerospace, and electronics.

The benefit of hindsight makes the shift easy to see, Louis said, but during the Depression, more people were employed as candymakers than as aerospace workers. The bankers simply lacked the perspective necessary to understand that similar shifts had been occurring throughout the history of capitalism. They weren't primed to recognize the situation and respond to it appropriately.

The more recent "[retail apocalypse](#)" may not have to do with leading business sectors, but paradigms are shifting in ways that are important to the historical view. Walmart and Kmart provide evidence of that. Both were founded in 1962, but today one is the world's leading retailer, and the other is struggling to remain viable.

The Long Now



Analysts attribute Kmart's demise to its [failure to invest in supply chain logistics and technology](#) to support its low-cost business model. While Walmart prioritized investing in its future, Kmart adhered to a traditional strategy based on marketing and merchandising until it couldn't compete on cost or product selection.

The Long Now Foundation asks decisionmakers to take a broader view of the world around them. For businesses, that means assessing the potential for change by examining the past, analyzing scenarios under which change could occur, and building structures to cope with it.

The foundation accomplishes that objective through hundreds of [seminars](#) and [salon talks](#) featuring, among others, artists, authors, entrepreneurs, scientists, as well as thought-provoking projects like the [10,000-Year Clock](#).

"The past informs the present," as the saying goes. And the Long Now Foundation asserts that the best way to see far into the future is to dig deep into history.

Learning from History: Stewart Brand & the Long Now Mission

By the time [Stewart Brand](#) co-founded the Long Now Foundation in 1996, he had enjoyed a long career as a public intellectual. After training as a biologist at Stanford University and serving as a US Army parachutist, he settled in the San Francisco area in the early 1960s, just as the counterculture era was beginning.

He was moved by the potential of aerospace technology to offer a different perspective on the world. In 1967, a US weather satellite took the first color photograph of Earth. The following year, an Apollo 8

astronaut on the first human orbital journey around the moon took a similar photo — the famous [Earthrise](#).

Stewart used the 1967 satellite picture on the cover of the first issue of his groundbreaking *Whole Earth Catalog*, which he published in 1968. A later issue of the catalog used the Earthrise photo. The [Whole Earth Catalog](#) supplied the counterculture — which Stewart was a part of — with information and product reviews focused on self-sufficiency and other alternative viewpoints. A 1972 issue of the catalog sold more than 1.5 million copies and won a National Book Award.



The famous Earthrise photo was taken by an Apollo 8 astronaut on the first manned journey around the moon.

For Stewart and others, the long view afforded by photos of Earth from space generated a sense of the ephemerality of existence that would give rise to the environmental movement and do-it-yourself culture. He applied that same sensibility to many of his later endeavors, including *Long Now*.

In a 2017 [interview with author and entrepreneur Tim Ferriss](#), Stewart explained that the foundation existed to oppose the modern tendency to “move fast and break things,” borrowing a phrase from Facebook Founder Mark Zuckerberg. “There are some things you don’t want to break,” he said. And business owners, viewing their organizations as an astronaut might view the Earth from space, would be wise to take the steps necessary to preserve them.

Future Planning in Business Extends the Horizon of Expectations

Taking those steps requires extending the framework in which actions are meant to have consequences. In business, that means planning well beyond simply making enough money to survive until the next month.

PR expert Michael Olguin has argued that taking a [longer-term view of goal-setting in business](#) helps managers see the organization “from a competitive, business vertical, or economic perspective” that promotes strategic rather than tactical thinking. When every member of a business team understands the broadest possible context in which decisions are being considered, achieving a consensus on tactics is easier and will “eliminate a lot of the uncertainty that goes with not understanding the goals of the company.”



Stewart Brand co-founded the Long Now Foundation to encourage people to think about their impact on the future.

Olguin also argues that future-planning should always be subject to change. Constant monitoring of business goals with performance, competition, and the economic environment in mind allows for necessary adjustments. Without a plan, the need for change isn't as apparent, and action is delayed.

Small-business loan provider Bond Street similarly recommends establishing [long-term objectives for decision-making](#). A well-crafted

mission statement that answers big-picture questions about the purpose of the company can guide the creation of shorter-term objectives.

A common strategy for setting those shorter-term goals uses the acronym SMART. Goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-based while also respecting big-picture objectives are more likely to achieve buy-in across the team.

Zebra Movement Supports Venture Capitalism with a Social Purpose

While the Long Now Foundation's holistic view of change extends eons beyond the practicalities of business goal-setting, Stewart has long understood the everyday implications of his thinking. In the 1980s he helped start the Global Business Network, a consulting firm that pioneered scenario planning and experiential learning as tools for enterprise management.

After a long run as an independent entity, the company eventually became part of the Deloitte brand, where it operates today as [Monitor Deloitte](#).

Meanwhile, Long Now continues to urge businesspeople to find something worth preserving in what they do. In 2017, it joined the [Zebra Movement](#), a female-led organization calling for ethical and inclusive opposition to existing startup and venture capital culture. Long Now provided resources and participated in presentations and workshops at [DazzleCon 2017](#) — the Zebra Movement's first annual conference.



The Zebra Movement and Long Now hope to create a more just and responsible society in which companies “hear, help, and heal the customers and communities they serve.” And they plan on accomplishing that by advocating for a balance between profit and purpose and the sharing of power and resources in a cooperative business environment.

With the foresight championed by Long Now, the Depression-era bankers might have been able to manage the risk of investing in untried industries. And Kmart might be driving job growth today instead of shedding stores.

As implausible as those alternative realities might seem, the Long Now Foundation works to make them accessible to anyone who can see time — and the world — from the right perspective.

Did You Enjoy This Article?

Let Michael and the entire IndustryCrunch team know by liking and sharing this article! IndustryCrunch is the only blog of its kind that highlights all of the retail industry's movers and shakers.



Tweet



MICHAEL
SENECAL

[Back to IndustryCrunch](#)

OUR SITE

[Industry Blog](#) [About Us](#)
[Stores](#) [Contact Us](#)
[Community](#) [Privacy Policy](#)
[Sitemap](#) [Terms of Use](#)

STORES WE FOLLOW

DealCrunch follows thousands of key retailers to track and publish their top offerings. Browse the stores below:

[A - B](#) [C - D](#) [E - F](#) [G - H](#)
[I - J](#) [K - L](#) [M - N](#) [O - P](#)
[Q - R](#) [S - T](#) [U - V](#) [W - Z](#)



All Things Retail. In Detail.

Being the web's best source for retail news isn't easy. That's why we've assembled the best team of editors, writers, and engineers you'll find anywhere.