Sylvain Labs

OPTIMUS TIME:
AN OFF-WHITE PAPER FROM SYLVAIN LABS

> Time Is As Important As Ingenuity: Applying Deep Context To Innovation

There is an age old saying that goes something like, "there is a time and a place for everything." Typically this is brought up in regards to proper conversation topics at a dinner party or how to conduct yourself in some other formal setting, but the phrase has greater implications for innovation. The world of innovation is a rather unforgiving one, ideas very regularly get euthanized by clients or budgets or both. And it's typically for good reason, people working at innovation companies or in innovation departments are on the cutting edge of what is possible. New technologies? They've heard about it. New services? They're already signed up. But sitting so close to the bleeding edge can sometimes result in the creation of concepts or inventions that the world is just not yet ready for, and you can't drag people into the future. These innovators, as it were, are ahead of their time.

> " At its simplest, *Optimus Time* is the window of time when forces are aligned for the ideal introduction of a new behavior, product, or idea. "

It's an outlook on innovation that forces you to consider people's appetite at a particular moment in time (whether conscious or not) as much as what is technologically or practically possible. In this way it is both a philosophy and a framework for establishing the most effective approach to innovation. A philosophy in that it guides everyday thinking as a constant nagging question, and a framework in that you can build your work to be a demonstration that the time is right for your ideas.

On some level it's an unreachable ideal, something that you constantly strive for, but can never quite achieve. Only in those perfect storm type of situations can you see it with crystalline clarity, so for that reason we chose to use case study examples to demonstrate how *Optimus Time* can work in its best case scenarios—regardless of whether they were happy accidents or strokes of genius.

> Over-Innovating: A Tough Pill To Swallow

In 1999 a company named Webvan was one of many ideas born out of the Dot Com Era's frenetic excitement. In a time when investment capital came easy, it raised over $1 billion dollars. And not without reason, Webvan seemed to hold the promise of completely revolutionizing the way people got their groceries. Webvan allowed customers to order their groceries online and have them delivered in a 30 minute window of their choosing. This model may sound familiar to FreshDirect customers because it is nearly identical in most capacities. Operational and fiscal malfeasance aside—Webvan was widely derided for handling its money poorly—what made a company with seemingly endless money fail in 1999 and a much smaller one find great success in 2002?

One of the biggest factors that held Webvan back was a very slow growth in new customer acquisition. The problem was that Webvan required people to place their orders online at a time when e-commerce was just getting off the ground. The world wide web was a scary place, it was not widely understood, security was still being established, movies about hackers were being created, and people were very reticent to put their financial information online. Even with its rollout in markets like Silicon Valley, a nexus of technological early adoption, Webvan just couldn't convince people to take the leap soon enough. By 2001 they were forced to file for bankruptcy.

It wasn't that FreshDirect held some great secret. It was tht Webvan was ahead of its time and didn't focus on ways of easing people into their technology. People were extremely uncertain about e-commerce and so many of the ideas that were created during the Dot Com Era hinged on it. The recession that would proceed the Dot Com Era can hardly be blamed on Webvan, it was just one of many ideas that didn't convert, but their failures help to illustrate that there is an actual cost associated with being too far ahead of your time.

> Creating The Optimus Time

In the 1990s people began drinking soy juice on a much larger scale. This wasn't a new product, it had been around for a very long time, but the astronomical growth in soy juice had a lot to do with its complete reinvention to fit the times and a clever new name—Soy Milk.
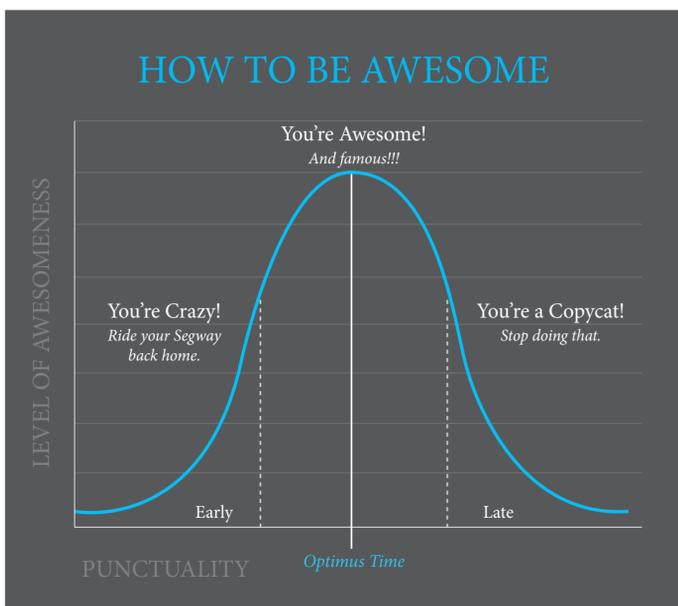

The 90s was a time when health began to take a larger presence in the public stage. It was a time rife with fad diets like Atkins, fad products like the Ab Roller, and it saw the germs of trends in natural and organic that today are quite commonplace. With this new emphasis on health and fitness, people began to drop products that had historically been bulletproof staples. Wheat breads for white is a great example. But one thing that didn't exist in people's minds was a viable milk alternative. Soy juice was used by a few in the know, mostly those with lactose intolerance, but the question arose, how could soy juice take advantage of this new health craze to sell their low-fat dairy alternative?

The solution it seemed was geographic. Move their shelf stable soy juice to the dairy section and call it Soy Milk, not juice—Silk Soy Milk was born. But Silk didn't just stop at the name, it adopted lots of the conventions of dairy such as being placed in a carton. By 2002 it was selling as much as $6MM a week.

> " Silk's success was the result of seeing all of the pieces falling into place while dragging their product to where consumers were and not the other way around. "

People didn't want to pour juice in their coffee or on their cereal, so the people at Silk made "milk" from juice and spawned the entire dairy substitute category as we know it.

HOW TO BE AWESOME

You're Awesome!
And famous!!!

You're Crazy!
Ride your Segway back home.

You're a Copycat!
Stop doing that.

LEVEL OF AWESOMENESS

PUNCTUALITY

Early   Late

Optimus Time

> Conclusion

Optimus Time is and isn't many things. It is an attempt to push forward the concept of timing in the conversation of innovation and invention. So much of the conversation today around these topics has been invested in questions of ingenuity and creativity—"what is the most fantastic thing you can invent?" And to say that finding the *Optimus Time* for an innovation is equally as important as invention is wholly up for debate, but no matter what, timing is more important than it is being given credit for. What it isn't is a silver bullet, nor is it the only way to approach the problem.

Ultimately, *Optimus Time* is a conceptually interesting way for us to wrap our minds around the ripeness of ideas—products, brand experiences, or even pop culture phenomena. A framework for us to build stories against, to test within our gut whether an idea feels like it's right or not. A way to ask if the idea jibes with the world as we see it. It's fully yours to use or dismiss, expand or contradict. But regardless of what you do with *Optimus Time*, in the end you will still be left with the task of creating new innovations for the ripeness you uncover, and for this there is no secret either. Magic Bullets, it would seem, are rarer than we've been led to believe.

Optimus Time In Pop Culture

Optimus Time isn't relegated to the world of product innovations. Ideas and behaviors and culture all have their perfect moments for the introduction of new and wonderful things that might not be received as readily at other times.

A great example is THE TRILOGY. We've always had trilogies throughout the history of literature and even film, but something happened around the turn of the last century that incited a water-shed moment. In Hollywood, there had been a slow boil of difficult blockbusters that began to gain traction in no small part to the likes of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. Star Wars, Indiana Jones, and Jurassic Park were all series that carried immense cultural cachet—however they were series that were released over long periods of time anywhere from 8-10 years. The Trilogy was for the patient and the loyal.

But, in 1999 came the Matrix, a massively impact-ful movie about the internet and the future of mankind that just so happened to neatly coincide with the new millenium, the Dot Com Boom and a general zeitgeist of skepticism about the future of technology. People devoured the Matrix, and with the film's wide-open ending, began to clamor for the sequels. Almost simultaneously, the second, or first depending on your perspective, Star Wars trilogy was also being released. In 2000, the first of the X-Men movies was released to great acclaim, but beyond people's interest in mutants, the series helped create an interesting behavior. You may recall the majority of the audience sitting and waiting, suffering through the entire credits, to see short teasers at the end of X-Men. They had become primed, even demanding of, sequels to movies they enjoy. Then came Peter Jackson's epic tales of Middle Earth and J.K. Rowling with the yarns from Hogwarts. By 2002, we had at least 5 massively successful serial properties that were being released simultaneously.

People had bought into the model of going to the movies every couple years, or even months in some cases, to see the next installment of the story. Hollywood loved the model because it allowed them to reduce production costs while simultaneously nearly guaranteeing a certain level of sales from the next movie in the series. The rest is history. Over the course of the past decade serial stories have ruled. Pirates of the Caribbean, Shrek, Night at the Museum, Meet the Parents, Madagascar, Ice Age, Transformers, Fast and the Furious, Chronicles of Narnia, Spiderman, the Batman reboot, Ironman, Fantastic 4—the list goes on and on. All of these massive series have been made in the last 10-12 years. And people have flocked in droves to be part of them.

And this desire for more complex stories wasn't just a creation of Hollywood. Cable, and occasionally network television, was also very much participating in feeding this newfound cultural hunger for more complex story lines. The Sopranos came out around the same time as the Matrix in early 1999. It broke from what had become the standard, self contained episodic content, and began to create massive story arcs that spanned episodes or even seasons. The same year America met a man from NH on The West Wing and followed him through the course of his tenure as the President of the United States. From there, we began to see other networks take on these layered stories and, as a result, we were given shows like The Wire, Weeds, Dexter and Lost, Mad Men, Breaking Bad, Game of Thrones and Six Feet Under. These complex stories have entranced us and made it difficult to imagine a world where all that was available was a series of self-contained sitcoms between the hours of 8-10pm, after Wheel of Fortune and before the news.