

How to spot the next **big** thing



By Rob Laird

New technology reviewer Rob Laird puts us in,
or out of, the picture.

I thought, by way of introduction, that I would write a philosophical piece to set the scene for my future commentary and reviews.

When first approached by the Lawyers Alliance team to take over the reigns from my learned and talented predecessor, Rob Davis, I jumped at the opportunity. Having spent 25 years in IT, it would almost be a fair enough time to sit back and ponder having seen it all before – having been there,

and done that. I must confess to wallowing in those feelings on more than a few occasions when confronted with something new from the technology industry.

You see, the information technology industry has an amazing capability to re-invent itself. Just when you think you have seen it all, and your mind has extrapolated every potential outcome based on a knowledge of old-school corporate giants, crafty technology

innovators, shifting market dynamics, supersonic technology advancements, and Moore's Law – something new always seems to appear on the horizon.

It is most likely to appear innocuous at first, even to the point of being sublime, but the 'next big thing', the 'killer app', is set to change the way we think, to blow our socks off, to turn us on our heads, as we meander through our comparatively less than prescient daily lives.

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BUT WHAT IS IT?

Well, you and I won't find out what it is until it is well and truly passé, but you can bet it will be the provider of parochial and cultish delight to those fortunate enough to have one.

WHO HAS ONE?

No one that you or I would know, but it seems every second schoolkid does – that goes without saying. So, too, will every musician, every creative director, every advertising account manager and, of course, all computer geeks – including those who have made their own. At some stage, we may become aware of cryptic billboards that we can't possibly understand, which serve only to remind us that we don't have one.

BUT WHAT DOES IT DO?

You and I may never find out. What it does cannot be explained in a language

that we are familiar with. It is so far ahead of its time it requires its own vernacular, bordering somewhere between the arcane and the unintelligible, and it comes with an equally bizarre set of acronyms.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

It will be so expensive that a mere whisper of the price will cause economic shockwaves throughout the developed world. Within months, the price will drop, but only to a point where it is just out of our reach, and if we do decide we must have one, it will be impossible to track down a place to buy it.

If we are lucky enough to finally find the aforementioned place of purchase, the store staff will ignore us because we are not 'cool' enough, and of course they will be totally sold out with no delivery expected for the next 12 months.

DO WE REALLY NEED ONE?

Of course we do, they are absolutely mandatory – everyone must have one. Without one you won't be able to be seen in public, your friends will not speak to you. They will pass you by in the street as if you don't exist; even your formerly loving dog will ignore you.

RUN THAT BY ME AGAIN?

Apart from being a licence to print money for its owners, it is something that can't be anticipated, can't be

quantified, can't be speculated about; it is inscrutable in every way, a marketing force majeure. It shapes culture by surfing the crest of pop culture. It is rude and in-your-face, and it makes no apologies.

OK – SO HOW DO I GET ONE?

It has a strange ability to travel through space and time – and, if you ever do get one, it will probably come to you from a most unlikely source. Perhaps as a birthday present from your grandmother, or as a lucky door prize at a Lawyers Alliance conference. It might come to you via snail mail in a parched envelope postmarked 'Crocker Land' (look it up). You see, you are only a custodian for this type of thing, there can be no genuine transfer of title.

How many of those 'next big things' can you name? How many are you prepared to confess having owned at some stage? How many have you bought and then never used?

Of course, frustration for me has been my lack of ability to be able to pick up on the next big thing and play a part in changing the world.

The closest I came to spawning a next big thing was when I designed a prototype for a credit card machine that connected to a petrol bowser, something that today seems like old-hat – but I am talking about 1982!

We all know that another 10 years passed before this technology arrived in your local petrol station where it lasted

not much more than five minutes. Why? Quite simply, they don't want you to 'pump and go' – they want you to come inside and buy stuff.

I was 10 years ahead of my time in 1982, but rather than the market taking the time to work out what it was missing out on, it coolly decided that what is good for the consumer is not always good for business. The invention became another classic white elephant.

So, the nature of the next big thing is that it is a very elusive beast. But what does this have to do with the practice of law?

I will devote the next few articles to working through some past and present 'big things' in technology that have the capacity, or at least potential, to impact on the practice of law.

We will have some fun tearing them apart to see what makes them tick. We'll also take a look at the paperless law firm: myth or magic? We will ask if the internet really delivers, and look at the basics of law firm office technology to see if we really need it, and to see if there are any crocodiles in the kitchen. Beyond that, who knows?

Until next time ... ■

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