

BLINK: The Power of Thinking without Thinking

*Malcolm Gladwell
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Introduction

Human beings make sense of a situation in two different ways. The first is the conscious approach. They think about what they have learned, and eventually come up with an answer. This strategy is logical and deliberate. The second strategy does not weigh all the evidence. It considers only what can be gathered at a glance. Recall the old proverb, "First impression is the best impression." This book by Malcolm Gladwell, one of the most influential writers of our times is all about when each approach works best. It is about what we can do to ensure that the first impression does not lead to a hasty or wrong conclusion. It is about the kind of expertise and skills we need to develop to ensure that we become good at split second decision making. Gladwell's books are always unique and insightful. This book is no exception.

The Adaptive unconscious

We tend to assume that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that goes into making it. But in many situations, decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately. The part of our brain that leaps to conclusions at a glance is called the adaptive unconscious. It acts as a giant computer that quickly and quietly processes a lot of the data we need in order to keep functioning as human beings. Come to think of it, this ability has played a significant role in the shaping of human civilization. Human beings have survived as a species for so long because they have developed the capability to make very quick judgments based on very little information.

"Thin-slicing" refers to the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience. Thin-slicing can be a very useful competence for managers. At the same time, the unconscious though a powerful force, can be fallible. It can be thrown off, distracted, and disabled. So, when should we trust our instincts, and when should we be wary of them? This book is about how snap judgments and first impressions can be educated and controlled.

Much of the time, we are simply operating on automatic pilot, and the way we think and act - and *how well* we think and act on the spur of the moment - are a lot more susceptible to outside influences than we realize. The dark side of rapid cognition is prejudice and discrimination. We must understand those circumstances when rapid cognition leads us astray. Our first impressions are generated by our experiences and our environment. We must take active steps to manage and control those impressions.

Making sense out of situations

Making sense out of situations is often difficult. People often do not understand why things happen the way they do. What people say about themselves and their actions can often be confusing, for the simple reason that most of us are not very objective.

Consequently what happens may not always have a logical explanation. Take the case of medicine. Doctors do not get sued for the mistakes they make. Analyses of malpractice lawsuits show that some highly skilled doctors get sued a lot while other doctors who make many mistakes are never sued. The overwhelming number of people who suffer an injury due to the negligence of a doctor do not seem to file a malpractice suit at all. In other words, patients don't file lawsuits because they've been harmed by shoddy medical care. They do so because they perceive they've been treated, badly on a personal level, by their doctor. Patients file suits often because they are rushed or ignored or treated poorly.

“Blink” in Market Research

People are often very willing and very good at volunteering information explaining their actions. But those explanations, particularly when it comes to the kinds of spontaneous opinions and decisions that arise out of the unconscious, aren't necessarily correct. Consumer responses during market surveys can often be misleading.

A good example is the phenomenon of sensation transference, a term coined by Louis Cheskin. Cheskin was convinced that when people evaluate a product they might buy in a supermarket, without realizing it, they transfer sensations or impressions that they have about the packaging of the product to the product itself. To put it another way, Cheskin believed that customers don't make a distinction - on an unconscious level - between the package and the product. The product is the package and the product combined.

One of the projects Cheskin worked on was margarine which was not very popular in the 1940s. Cheskin wanted to know why this was so. In that era, margarine was white. Cheskin colored it yellow so that it would look like butter. Then he staged a series of luncheons for housewives. While serving food, there were little pats of butter for some and little pats of margarine for others. The margarine was coloured yellow. Afterwards, everyone was asked to rate the speakers and the food. The people who had come thought the "butter" was just fine. On the other hand, past market research had said there was no future for margarine.

After realizing the color had to be yellow, the next step was to wrap it in foil, because in those days foil was associated with high quality. And sure enough, if they gave someone two identical pieces of bread - one buttered with white margarine and the other buttered with foil-wrapped yellow Imperial Margarine - the second piece of bread won hands-down in taste tests every time.

Another study by the Cheskin company involved two competing brands of inexpensive brandy, Christian Brothers and E & J. The client, Christian Brothers, wanted to know why, after years of being the dominant brand in the category, it was losing market share to E & J. Their brandy wasn't more expensive. It wasn't harder to find in the store. And it was not being out-advertised. So, why was it losing ground?

Cheskin set up a blind taste test with 200 brandy drinkers. The two brandies came out roughly the same. Cheskin then decided to go a few steps further. He told people which glass belonged to Christian Brothers and which to E & J. This time Christian Brothers'

numbers were up. Clearly, people had more positive associations with the name Christian Brothers than with E & J. But if Christian Brothers had a stronger brand, why was it losing market share? Two hundred people were contacted, this time with the actual bottles of each brand being in the background. There was a distinct statistical preference for E & J. The problem was not the product or the branding. *It was the package.* Christian Brothers looked like a bottle of wine: it had a long, slender spout and a simple off-white label. E & J, by contrast, had a far more ornate bottle: more squat, like a decanter, with smoked glass, foil wrapping around the spout, and a dark, richly textured label. To prove their point, Cheskin did one more test. Two hundred people were served Christian Brothers Brandy out of an E & J bottle, and E & J Brandy out of a Christian Brothers bottle. Christian Brothers won hands-down, by the biggest margin of all. Now they had the right taste, the right brand, *and* the right bottle. The company redesigned its bottle to be a lot more like E & J's, and solved the problem.

Clever packaging cannot be a substitute for a bad-tasting product. The taste of the product is important. But the point to note is that when we put something in our mouth and in that blink of an eye decide whether it tastes good or not, we are reacting not only to the evidence from our taste buds and salivary glands but also to the evidence of our eyes and memories and imaginations. Marketers cannot afford to overlook this point and pursue a simplified, uni dimensional approach.

The New Coke fiasco, a celebrated case study in marketing is another good example. In case of New Coke, the entire principle of a blind taste test was wrong in the first place. In the real world, people do not drink Coca-Cola blind. People transfer to their sensation of the Coca-Cola taste all of the unconscious associations they have of the brand, the image, the can, and even the unmistakable red of the logo. But Coca-Cola attributed its loss in market share to Pepsi entirely to the product. Coke decided to change the product itself, making it as sweet as Pepsi. People might like a sweeter product in a sip test, but they don't make their product decisions only on the basis of sip tests.

Another good example is Herman Miller, the furniture manufacturer. The company wanted to make the most ergonomically correct chair imaginable, called the Aeron. An enormous amount of work, went into the mechanism connecting the back of the chair with the seat pan. In a typical chair, there is a simple hinge connecting the two so people can lean back in the chair. But the problem with the hinge is that the chair pivots in a different way from how our hips pivot, so tilting pulls the shirt out of our pants and puts undue stress on the back. On the Aeron, the seat pan and back of the chair moved independently through a complex mechanism. The design team also decided to have fully adjustable arms. That was easier if the arms of the chair were attached to the back of the Aeron, not underneath the seat pan, as was ordinarily the case. They wanted to maximize support for the shoulders, so the back of the chair was wider at the top than at the bottom. This was exactly the opposite of most chairs, which are wide at the bottom and taper at the top. Finally, they wanted the chair to be comfortable for people who were stuck at their desks for long periods of time.

Herman Miller's past experience indicated that when it comes to choosing office chairs,

most people automatically prefer the chair with the most presumed status - something senatorial or thronelike, with thick cushions and a high, imposing back. But the Aeron was the exact opposite: a slender, transparent concoction of black plastic and odd protuberances.

In case of the Aeron, the people reporting their first impressions said they hated it. What they really meant was that the chair was so new and unusual that they weren't used to it. As Gladwell points out, we seem to hate some products though actually we do not, only because they are weird. They make us nervous. They are sufficiently different so that it takes us some time to understand that we actually like, not hate them.

Market research is often ineffective in drawing a distinction between the bad and the merely different. If the Aeron had been just a minor variation of the chair that came before it - the act of measuring consumer reactions would not have been so difficult. But testing truly revolutionary ideas or products is another matter. The most successful companies understand that in those cases, the first impressions of their consumers need interpretation. Market research attempts to provide certainty. But the truth is that for the most important decisions, there can be no certainty.

The importance of expertise

Our unconscious reactions come out of a locked room, and we can't look inside that room. But with experience we become expert at using our behavior and our training to interpret what lies behind our snap judgments and first impressions. Some psychologists have the uncanny ability to predict whether a marriage will work just by listening to a brief conversation between the husband and the wife. Some tennis coaches can correctly predict whether there is going to be a double fault just by watching the way the player throws up the ball.

The first impressions of experts are *different*. Their tastes grow more esoteric and complex. Also experts unlike novices can reliably account for their reactions. It's a lot like what people do when they are in psychoanalysis. They spend years analyzing their unconscious with the help of a trained therapist until they begin to get a sense of how their mind works.

Whenever we have something that we are good at – something we care about – that experience and passion fundamentally change the nature of our first impressions. When we are outside our areas of passion and experience, our reactions tend to be shallow. They are hard to explain and easily disrupted. They aren't grounded in real understanding.

Conclusion

Decision making is the essence of management. In both unconscious and conscious thinking, we can develop rapid decision making skills with training and experience. We can do a lot to shape our conscious thinking. Too often we are resigned to what happens in the blink of an eye. We do not seem to have much control over whatever bubbles to the surface from our unconscious. But we do, and if we can control the environment in which

rapid cognition takes place, then we can control rapid cognition.

Training and expertise can help people to extract an enormous amount of meaningful information from the thinnest slice of experience. Every blink consists of a series of discrete moving parts. Everyone of these parts offers an opportunity for intervention, scope for correction.

This book provides deep insights into the content and origin of instantaneous impressions that arise whenever we meet a new person or confront a complex situation or have to make a decision under stressful conditions. By examining thoroughly how we make decisions, we can improve our ability to take decisions in a split second. That will certainly make the world a better place to live in. But as Gladwell mentions, for that to happen, we must accept that there can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis.