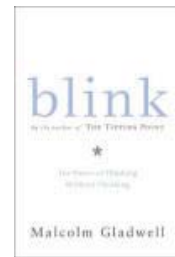


Finison Corner – Blink – The Power of Thinking without Thinking

by E. Bryan Finison, Jr., MBA, AVA



What do policemen shooting people and the Pepsi challenge have in common? What do symphonies and racism have in common? What do chocolate chip cookies and whiskey have in common? Well, Blink is the answer. Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* will shed more light on subjects you just thought you understood.

Gladwell, a former writer for the Washington Post, now with The New Yorker and author of bestseller *The Tipping Point* follows his first book with a spectacular sequel. Gladwell explores the first 3 seconds of thought. You and I call this gut reaction or instinct. Or, maybe some of us label it as your subconscious. Call it what you want, but how does it work. Best yet, if we are applying Gladwell's research to a business setting, what implications does it have on marketing and human resources?

To really get a feel for the book, below are some of the stories that lead you through a variety of thought. See how Gladwell almost makes you believe it is easy until he proves the other side of the argument. He will lead you to believe that you should trust your gut instinct until he shows you all the faults of this false trust. Next you almost believe you cannot trust your initial thoughts ever, until he leads you back around to the initial argument that your gut is usually right. Confused? You should be. I intended it. Gladwell does the same in his book, but by the end of the book, you will see clearly. This is a great book. Check out some of its stories.

In September of 1983 an art dealer approached the J. Paul Getty Museum with the claim of having a 6th century BC statue called a kouros. Was it real? How do you know? The Museum tested it for months with scientists and experts. They almost bought it until a couple of historians looked at it and stated "it just doesn't feel right". How could they know in a couple of seconds what others had studied for months?

Why did America elect Warren Harding as President of the United States? It may have to do with the Tall, Dark, and Handsome theory. It just felt right and he had all the physical characteristics of a leader. However, tall, dark and handsome does not make you a good president as history revealed.

Coke had always been the dominant soft drink until Pepsi started chipping away at its market share. In the early 80's Pepsi began running a television commercial called The Pepsi Challenge. In it, people tasted a small cup of each drink and blindly picked the better one. Pepsi was winning. As a response, the Coca-Cola Company introduced New Coke. It was a failure. You see, Pepsi was a sweeter drink and from only a sip, most

people will choose the sweeter one. However, you don't take one sip of a cola, you drink a whole can. The taste of Coke wins if the entire can is consumed.

If you play a horn in a symphony you need to be a strong man with a big lung capacity, right? Well, don't tell The Munich Philharmonic Orchestra or Abbie Conant. By accident, the judges picked Abbie to fill an empty seat in the trombone section. The auditions were behind a screen because a son of a current Munich Orchestra player was in the audition. The judges did not know what to do after choosing a women. After a court battle, Abbie was made first chair and given equal salary.

Christian Brothers had been the dominant brand of brandy in their product category for years until E & J started eroding market share. Both were the same price but taste tests proved Christian Brothers to be a superior brandy. So why was it losing share? They hired the Cheskin company to study the problem. The findings lie in the bottle and packaging. The 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. Cheskin, the company that made margarine color their product yellow so it would sell better, found that the concept of transference was happening. People transferred their delight and feeling associated with the packaging into the actual product.

The Theory of thin slicing is how Gladwell pulls all of this together. Blink reveals that the great decision makers aren't those who process the most information or spend the most time deliberating, but those who have perfected the art of "thin-slicing"- filtering the very few factors that matter from an overwhelming number of variables.

The mind can fool you if you are not in tune with your thin slicing. Coke was convinced they needed a new product based on the wrong thin slice, a sip of cola drink. The Orchestra made the right decision because they did not allow a thin slice to get in their way, the sight of a women playing a trombone. America saw Warren Hardy and made a bad choice due to thin slicing, a tall, dark, and handsome man must be a good leader. The Museum almost made a bad decision with too much information until several individuals who had perfected their thin slicing ability made the right decision.

There are many environmental factors and internal emotions that cloud our ability to properly thin slice. The media and stereotypes, according to Gladwell, are two ways that program our minds. This is why we think, oh, a woman cannot play the trombone as well as a man. Racism has many of its roots in "programming" according the book. We must overcome our environmental programming if we are to get to the right answer.

Many times, programming is done on purpose. In business this is called marketing. The science of marketing is to create interest. Sometimes marketing creates a perceived advantage whether real or not. Look at the brandy example. Experts demonstrated that the Christian Brothers' brandy was superior but through marketing (ie the packaging) consumers were choosing E & J.

So what does this mean when we are interviewing a candidate for a job? First, we have to do a little introspection and make sure we remove as much programming to the stereotype of the job as possible. There are plenty of men who make great assistants and secretaries; there are great women technology directors, just as there are some of the greatest women trombone players.

I don't suggest erecting a screen between you and the job candidate, just so you focus on the answers and not solely on the appearance. After all, appearance can be a sign of performance. How a job applicant dresses and maintains his/her physical hygiene can say a lot. However, focus first on the qualifications and on past behaviors, they tell you the most. Or if you become an expert at thin slicing like Gladwell suggests, maybe you can have the candidate say a few words and read the resume and you will find all the great employees you can handle.

About the author: E. Bryant Finison, Jr., MBA, AVA, is a partner of the regional firm Tidwell DeWitt, LLC, of Atlanta, Birmingham and Tuscaloosa, AL. He is a strategic planner and specializes in business valuation. Mr. Finison has worked at two of the top 10 consulting firms in the United States. He is the author of *Succession Planning for Your Trucking Company* 1st Ed., co-author of *How to Manage Your Cash Flow* 2nd Ed., author of the Finison/Daily Model as nationally published, author of various business columns, and a frequent guest lecturer on a variety of business strategy topics. He can be reached at 205-345-9898 or at <bfinison@tidwelldewitt.com>