Introduction

Shining a New Light on American History
The President as America's Salesperson

I suppose you've figured out by now that this isn't going to be *that kind* of history book. In fact, it wasn't supposed to be a book at all.

The *Marketer in Chief* project started from pure curiosity and a simple question: Wouldn't it be interesting to imagine the President of the United States as its Chief *Marketing* Officer rather than its Chief *Executive* Officer?

It's a new way to look at history – not as a historian, but instead as an expert in another field. I'm certainly not the first. For example, when forensic accountants reviewed the financial records of plantation owners in the pre-Civil War southern states, they discovered something…*off*. Their numbers simply didn't add up. Those researchers weren't trying to explain away the evils of slavery[1], but what they discovered helped illuminate why Antebellum society was collapsing under its own weight. Financially stressed landowners weren't the only root cause of the Civil War, but their economic situation certainly contributed. Why hadn't historians explored the money trail in more depth? There's no conspiracy. It's simply that historians aren't accountants. They didn't know what to look for; the number crunchers did.

Perhaps I might discover something other historians had overlooked because they didn't know what to look for.

Beginning the first week of January 2020, I researched, wrote, and published the first of 44 weekly essays – one on each president.[2] Instead of focusing on names, dates, and places – or the standard eras and themes we learned in American history class – I chose to look at each president through my own stock in trade: Product development, persuasion, psychology, marketing strategy, storytelling, value signaling, audience segmentation, negotiation, and sales – or as one of my colleagues put it, *how the president makes you feel.*[3] That doesn't mean historians are wrong. Far from it. But they're using one lens. If I had any hope of offering a fresh perspective, I needed to use a different one.

During my research, I purposefully chose *not* to address the presidents in order. There's a narrative baked into the telling of all history, and American history is no exception. We tend to skip over decades of history to focus on the big events – usually wars. Personally, I think there's a little too much emphasis on military conflicts in history. Skipping around (more or less at random) forced me to focus on just one president at just one moment in time.

That approach allowed me to shine a light on stories we may never have learned, told in a way we were unlikely to hear anywhere else. But as I finished my final essay and reflected on the group as a whole, that's when I noticed the pattern.

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The first series of presidents – Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe – all faced an unprecedented challenge. They may have had basic rules for their new Republic as defined in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, but there were no procedures, no customs – not even blank forms. Every decision was the *first* decision, and each was keenly aware of the precedent a good decision (and more pointedly, a poor decision) might make. They may have been very different people, but they had one thing in common: They were all comfortable with extreme risk.

The next group – John Quincy Adams to James Knox Polk – were the second generation of leaders. Each was a child during the Revolutionary War, and although they saw the transition from English subject to American citizen, they didn't see the nation the same way their parents did. Yes, they took risks, but their risks were of a different sort. They could learn from their parents, taking advantage of the basic frameworks and traditions they put in place, and build on them. As a group, they set the stage for rapid territorial expansion. By the time Polk left office, and barely 50 years since the last shot was fired in the war for independence, the land territory of the United States reached the Pacific coast.

The rapid growth that followed Polk exposed all manner of problems. Those decisions the first 11 presidents *failed to make* in the early days of the Republic come back to bite each president from Zachary Taylor to Chester Arthur. *Hard*. They faced a final reckoning on the agreement they could never reach regarding the abomination of slavery. By Abraham Lincoln's election (in the middle of this group), tensions had boiled over into an all out Civil War. Many of us are hard pressed to name a president *other than* the Great Emancipator in this era, but we should get to know them. The conflict came in the middle of a much longer era spanning 10 presidencies – leading up to the Civil War and attempting to recover from it. The war was simply the bloody middle; it was no less contentious on either side.

Beginning with the presidency of Benjamin Harrison, we see the wounds of the Civil War heal enough for the American commercial engine to take off. Immigration spiked during this era as people in droves fled stagnation, famine, and repression in their own countries. This is the time of "big America" – the founding of National Parks, the opening of the Panama Canal, the mobilization for two World Wars, the invention of the Atomic Bomb, the mission to send humans to the Moon (and return them safely!), and the hopeful optimism of the Great Society and Civil Rights legislation. There was nothing America couldn't do…until Lyndon Johnson decided not to run for reelection.

But starting with Richard Nixon's resignation, Gerald Ford's pardons, a retreat from Vietnam, an energy crisis, economic stagflation, and global terrorism, things started to change. Yes, the United States remained dominant, but it wasn't *unbeatable*. Yes, it could win wars and flex its economic muscle, but it was like a repeat champion team…one season past its prime. George W. Bush was the last in a line of presidents attempting to hold onto a past that was slipping away.

So, it has come down to the disruptors – those leaders who saw the challenges of declining dominance and decided to shake up the system to do something about it. Barack Obama and Donald Trump – both in dramatically different ways – were disruptive forces. We can see both of their presidencies as an attempt to reinvigorate a lumbering giant.

That's 240 years in about twice as many words. It was quick, on purpose. We'll go into more detail later, but I stripped away the specifics to show you the pattern. Some of you may recognize it. Here's a hint: You probably didn't learn it in history class. If you recognize it, you probably learned it in Marketing 101: It's the *Diffusion of Innovations*.

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The name Everett "Ev" Rogers may not be familiar to you, but I'll bet you've heard some of the language he invented. He coined the terms "Early Adopter" and "Laggard" to describe people who buy technology as soon as they can get it…or for your friend who resisted getting rid of his typewriter until they quit making them. But you don't need to know the theoretical details to notice the pattern. New products, and the innovations they represent, surround us. Rogers' research simply describes how we choose to adopt those innovations, and more importantly *when* we choose to in relation to other people. It's that simple.[4]

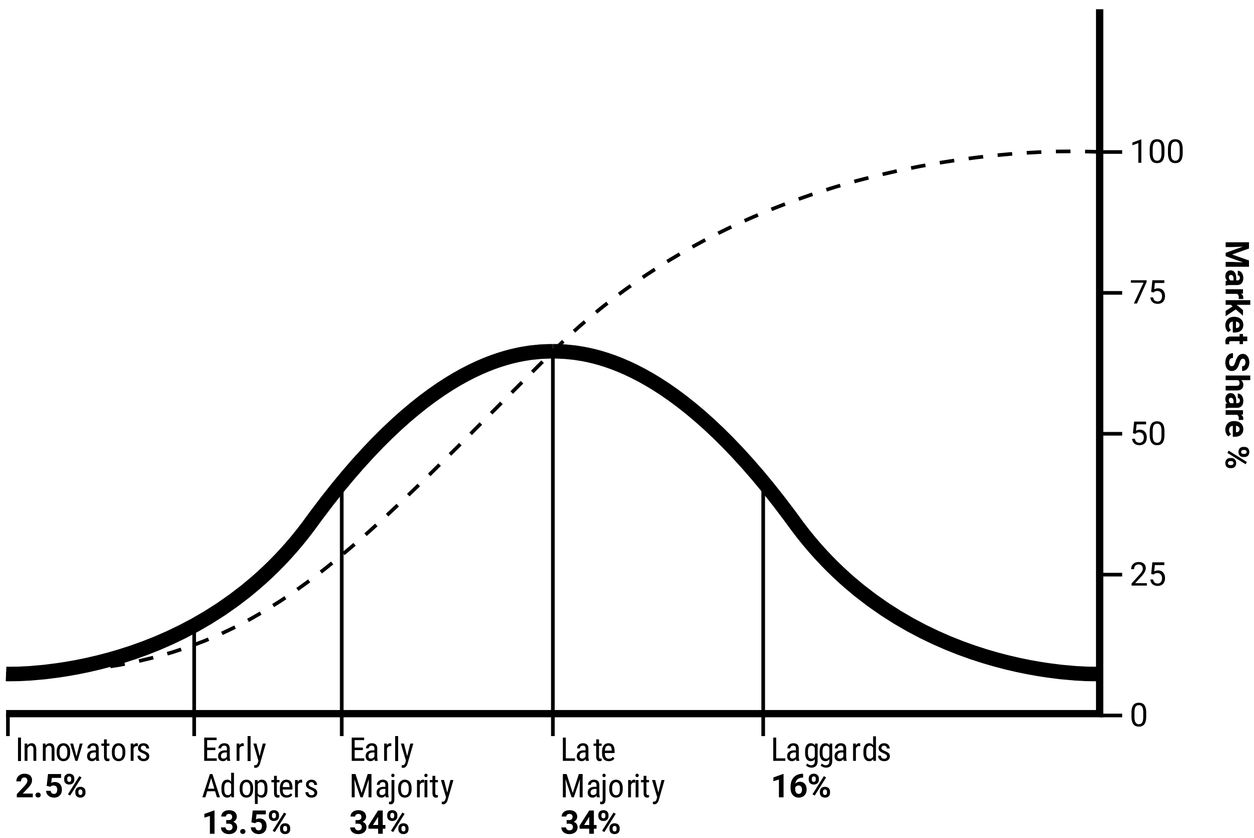

Figure 1: Rogers used the "bell curve" to describe the proportion of a population that chooses to adopt an innovation over time. As you can see, most people adopt an innovation (for example, buy their first smartphone) in the middle of the curve. The divisions between groups roughly correlate to standard deviations from the mean. If the mention of statistics makes you want to claw out your eyes, don't worry. It's not important here and I won't talk about it again.

Rogers used the curve to represent the reality he saw when he tracked first-time sales of a series of new innovations – automobiles, refrigerators, televisions, and many others. Sales of these products started off slowly, grew quickly, and then leveled off. The theory helps marketers like me describe how many new products I can expect to sell – and more importantly, when.

That's good to know, of course, but it's not what's truly important. Here's what most people miss: Diffusion of Innovations' true value lies in what it tells us about the *psychology* of buyers in each group.

Rogers wasn't an economist. He was a sociologist. He didn't study innovations from a *technology* perspective; he studied them from the *buyer's* perspective. Taking the buyer's point of view was revolutionary in 1962. After the end of the second World War, you could fall out of bed and sell millions of substandard products – the demand was so strong and the supply tight with most of the world's production machinery in shambles. But as the 1950s became the 1960s, competition ramped up. We needed a better way to understand why consumers did what they did.

I think it's easiest to describe the genius of Rogers' idea with a simple example: *The microwave oven.*[5]

The initial concept for the microwave oven was developed in the 1930s and patented in 1937 by Bell Laboratories. The device uses microwaves (a form of electromagnetic radiation, just like light, X rays, and radio waves) to heat the water inside food. The first commercially available microwave was the "RadaRange" from Raytheon Corporation (yep, the defense contractor). At 5 feet 11 inches, it was taller than the average full-grown American man, weighed 750 pounds, and cost the equivalent of $57,000 in today's money.

We all know people who would have bought the RadaRange in 1947, right? Of course, we do. These are the people Rogers would call "Innovators." They are the risk takers. They understand that many (if not most) new products and services fail, but they simply *must* be on the cutting edge of everything. Bluntly, they are the ones with the resources to do it – money yes, but also the access to the specialty retailers and manufacturers who also work on the bleeding edge.

Although they improved throughout the 1950s and 1960s, microwaves remained expensive, troublesome, and high maintenance. Along with the Innovators, some restaurants and commercial kitchens purchased them, but sales were limited. (Using Rogers' terms, we would say that *adoption* of the innovation by consumers hadn't yet caught on.) New competitors wanted to use the (now expiring) patent protections to tap into a wider residential market. By the mid 1970s, microwave prices dropped from $57,000 in today's money to $4,000 using the same scale (you would have seen a $495 typical sticker price in 1970). That meant *many more* people could afford them. Microwaves were still risky and cumbersome, but not nearly as much. The people who paid the equivalent of a used car in the 1970s were what Rogers would call "Early Adopters." This group isn't quite as well off as the Innovators, nor are they quite as risk seeking, but they like new stuff, and as soon as it's available at a price range that makes sense, they're on it.

As the age of disco ended, microwave ownership took off.

I remember being a kid in the 1980s when my family bought its first microwave; we were part of the "Early Majority" group. My parents weren't the type of people to buy into the newest thing, but once it became popular (and cheap and reliable enough), they wanted one. In 1971, 1% of households had a microwave oven. By 1986, 25% did (that was us). By 2008, 95% of American households had one –fully capturing both the "Early Majority" and "Late Majority" groups. The big difference between "Early" and "Late" Majorities is resources. If you can afford it, you bought an early model. If you couldn't, you waited. By the time a Late Majority consumer bought their first microwave in the early 1990s, our family was on its second.

You'll notice I said 95%. Not 100%. Here's why.

Don't we all know the person who *just got their first microwave* in the last 10 years? Yep, I know just such a person. Rogers would call him a "Laggard." It's not always that the person doesn't have the money (the Laggard I'm thinking of is quite wealthy), but financial resources certainly are a factor. However, more often they're the type of person who resists new things when they come out *because they're new*, and they resist trendy things *because they're trendy*. They want to be different. They take pride in it. That said, the *microwave Laggard* I'm thinking of isn't also a *smartphone Laggard* – he owns the newest model – but he's funny about food and nutrition. Rogers' key insight is that he recognized consumer behavior and psychology was *domain dependent*. In other words, you could be an Innovator in one area of your life, an Early Majority buyer in another, and a Laggard in a third.

Let's step back and examine the arc of history the microwave represents.

Remember, between 1947 and 1971, the microwave oven was found in only 1% of American households. That's 24 years. In the next 15 years, the number of households with a microwave increased 25 times. In 22 more years, 19 out of 20 homes had one. If we imagine that increase as a graph, we can see the line that represents microwave ownership plodding along until the 1970s, when the curve bends sharply upward, and finally flattening out around 2008, where it climbs much more slowly after that. The resulting shape you see is a curve that looks like a stretched our letter *S*.[6]

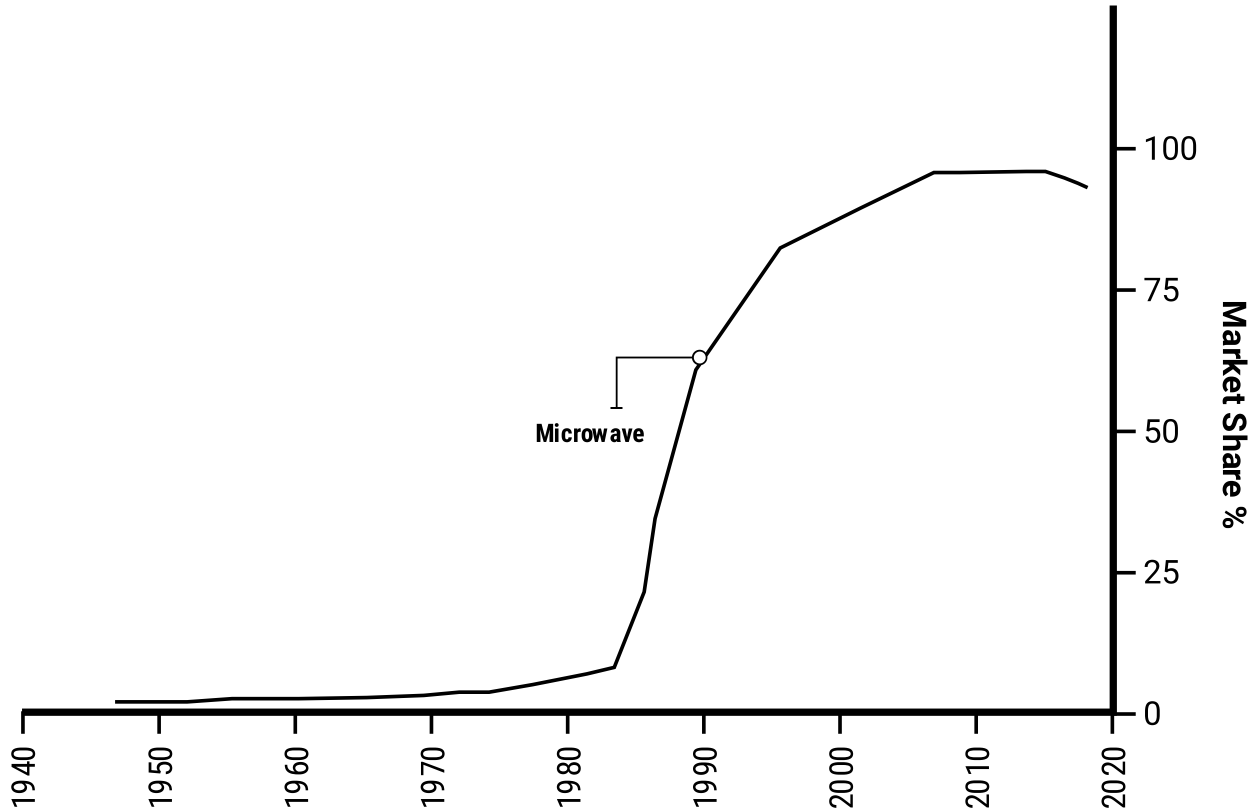

Figure 2: Adoption of the microwave innovation in the United States. Data sourced from Our World in Data. You can chart all kinds of stuff. It's cool. You should try it.

We see the same pattern repeat again and again. The automobile, radio, refrigerator, television, credit card, internet, smartphone, online banking – when you chart just about any product *or service*, you see the same pattern.

Why?

This was Rogers' genius. It was the psychology of different groups of people that defined the shape of that curve. Specifically, how interested in and accepting of new innovations were they? Yes, the technology needed to advance sufficiently for those changes to occur, but Rogers noticed that technology *always* outpaced psychology. In other words, engineers could come up with new things faster than people would be ready to adopt them. *Psychology trumps technology.*

Diffusion of Innovations revolutionized marketing and advertising. It gave birth to the *Mad Men* era in the 1960s, and we never looked back.

For the first time, we could shift from a technology focus in product development to a psychology focus. We understood what it took to succeed at different stages of any innovation's lifecycle. As leaders, we now understood (at least in broad terms) the different sorts of challenges we would face at each stage, and we knew when we needed to start making different types of decisions as the innovation diffused through the population.

For example, Henry Ford faced different challenges introducing the Model T (people compared his product to a horse) than Alan Mullaly faced when he reintroduced the Ford Mustang in 1994 (people compared the 1980s era Mustang to a box). Or more recently, Steve Jobs faced a different task introducing the iPhone than current Apple CEO Tim Cook does in selling the 10th iteration.

Diffusion of Innovations may not be a theory at the level of Quantum Mechanics in physics or Evolution by National Selection in biology, but it's the closest thing to "truth" we have in advertising, marketing, and sales.

We use it as a foundation for pretty much everything we do – for products and services, of course – but also the diffusion of *ideas*.

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Because the diffusion of an innovation has less to do with its technology and everything to do with buyer psychology, there is no meaningful difference between a physical product and an intangible idea.

Let that sink in for a minute.

That insight helps us think about the United States of Benjamin Franklin's era in a completely new way. *The United States of America, itself, is an innovation.*

We don't think of it that way now, but in Franklin's day, a government that derived authority only from the consent of the governed was a very new idea – an *innovation* to be adopted, and not a *given* to be expected. Why do you think the words "self evident" are in the Declaration of Independence*? Those ideas were not self evident.* That's why they needed to say them.

It's easier to wrap your head around this concept when you compare the United States to its "competitors" on the world stage at that time. The prevailing wisdom, especially in Europe, was rule through hereditary monarchy, where power was derived through some mystical combination of birth order or divine right. Other sources of governmental authority included tribal and family bonds, military force and dictatorship, religious adherence, or even the weight of bureaucracy (most evident in China throughout its history).

When we see it through this lens, we can see each stage of our history as a diffusion of the American innovation.

Are there challenges with this way to look at American history? Sure.

People born in the United States didn't necessarily "adopt" the innovation. Additionally, when you plot population growth on a chart in the way we did with our microwave oven example, it doesn't match the traditional "S curve" shape. However, we can see immigration rates as a proxy for people choosing to "buy" the United States as opposed to their competition, where they previously lived. But remember, the specific numbers and precise dates aren't the point: The psychology of people in each stage of the diffusion of any innovation (and the shifting challenges faced by leaders) is what truly matters.

In each era of the diffusion of the American innovation, we can see presidents respond to their situations in different ways based on their unique set of circumstances. For example, you can't ask how Ronald Reagan would have responded to Thomas Jefferson's purchase of Louisiana from France. Reagan's situation as the leader of a global power at the top of its game was fundamentally unlike Jefferson's risky gambit as a fledgling Republic. As most historians would say: We must judge performance in the context of the times. I'm simply providing you a different context in this book – one, I believe, that will seem more familiar. We might take a history course in high school or college, but we see innovations all around us, and we choose to buy (or not buy) them every day.

I want to show you, through each stage of America's lifecycle, how its leaders attempted to "sell" you the innovation of America. You'll realize quickly that "marketing" means much more than "advertising" – think of advertising as the tip of the iceberg that you can see, and marketing as the (larger) part that you can't. That broader perspective helps us shine a light on aspects of the president's role as *Marketer in Chief* that would otherwise be hidden. In other words, expect to be surprised by the stories I choose to tell you.

We'll explore each president in turn – not as a complete biography (I'll point you to good ones if you're interested in learning more), but rather through a series of 45 stories illustrating how each president responded to their market. *Marketer in Chief* is an introduction to a new way of thinking, not an encyclopedia.

Who knows? Once the American people know how they're being sold, they might demand a better product.

Let's get started.

The Franklin prototype is behind us, and we're in full release of "version 1.0" of the new Republic. And like most new products, it's full of hope, excitement, and optimism…and it's flat broke.

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Endnotes, Sources, and Further Reading

1 This is an ugly debate in the historical community, and it shouldn't be. On one side, you have historians who are linking the entire rise of capitalism to the slave trade, carefully ignoring the success of capitalism in economies without it. On the other, you have accountants and economists dismissing the extent of the brutality of slavery and explaining the Civil War primarily in economic terms, carefully ignoring the chilling effect of "a small number" of terroristic tactics. If I've learned anything about the study of history, it's that *multiple* points of view can be true at the same time. In fact, they tend to feed into each other. If you're interested in more on this topic, and the way history and economics bleed together (an intentional choice of words), I would recommend Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* and Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*.

2 Because 2020 was a presidential election year, and 44 weeks would take me right up to the November election, the timing seemed apt.

3 Thanks Tim!

4 Rogers published the first edition of *Diffusion of Innovations* in 1962. It's gone through five editions since then, the latest published in 2003. Like all good theories, it's spawned huge tracts of useful (and less than useful) criticism, as well as additional research, including the Silicon Valley bible *Crossing the Chasm* by Geoffrey Moore. I'm skimming the surface in my introduction on purpose; it gets wonky in a hurry. A couple of important clarifications: *Diffusion* refers to how innovations spread through a society or market. *Adoption* is the process of an individual person making a buying decision. Think of it like macroeconomics and microeconomics if you like. If you want to know more, go right to the source, and read his book. You'll enjoy it.

5 The history of the microwave oven is fascinating. If you're interested, skip the bookstore and read the engineering articles. You can find essays written for the non-engineer in the IEEE's *Spectrum* publication, *Popular Mechanics*, or the *Smithsonian* magazine. If you're *really* geeky, you can find the original patents online at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. If there's a level beyond geeky, there's even a website where you can get the patent art made into a T-shirt. Knock yourself out.