

ENTROPY GRADIENT REVERSALS

All Noise — All the Time

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.

— Karl Marx —

Parable of the Baffled Hosers

We recently told our daughter about lemmings. She's eight years old, pretty hip, and previews all issues of **EGR** before they get sent out. So we figured she could probably handle it. We told her how, when the population density builds up to a certain point, these cute little rodents commit mass suicide by stampeding off cliffs into the ocean. Moreover, we pointed out that this unique animal custom is often invoked as a metaphor for certain human behaviors that would be hard to explain on the basis of self interest alone. Or something like that. She said: "Wow! Weird!"

Soon afterward, in one of those serendipity-meets-synchronicity turns of events, we happened across a news item that said the whole lemming thing was utter bullshit. It seems a bunch of white-frosted researchers went over to Lemmingland and did everything they could to get the buggers to go over the edge. "Here boy! Look! Nice carrot!" Or whatever it is that lemmings like to eat. Eskimo pies for all we know, but that's not important. What is important is they wouldn't take the fabled flying leap.

It was as if their moms had said to them when young: "Suppose little Johnny Lemming flung himself over a cliff. Would you follow suit just to be 'cool'?" And Junior had said what we all have said — for which of us has not been through this drill? — "No Mom, not me!"

Bottom line: lemmings appear not to be jumpers. According to the field reports, the subjects just looked at the guys in the lab coats as if they'd gone completely barking mad.

So the whole lemming death-wish notion is just another myth, and nobody knows for sure where it got started. Big deal. But here's the interesting part. Walt Disney Studios had, like the rest of us, heard this as gospel truth, and in making one of its heart-warming family-oriented True Life Adventures in the 1950s, wanted to show the sort of Mondo-Cane mammalian practices that would enable Dad to remark after the matinee: "How about them lemmings, son? Isn't that just too fucking funny?"

To achieve this laudable goal, it seems that Disney rounded up about ten million of these miniature arctic beavers and — what else? — with multiple cameras rolling to capture all the nifty angles, drove them over a cliff to certain death in a dramatically boiling cauldron of rock-studded surf a mile or so below.

AIIIIIEEEE!

Keep this little vignette in mind as you slog through the rest of this, OK?

For about two years now we've been cranking out this crazy shit. As we write, Entropy Gradient Reversals is within a dozen subs of finally breaking the 2000-reader mark. This has taken slightly less than forever. Also, there have been just over 30,000 "visits" to the web site since January 1 — wait for it — of 1997. This clearly sucks.

We meet people all the time who are like: "Oh yeah, I started an email list last week — about beriberi transmission among tropical fruit bats — but so far it only has 50,000 subscribers." Or: "My new site on Estonian croquet statistics is getting 80,000 hits a day. Is that about average, would you say?"

No, Binky, that's real real good. Now if you don't mind, we'll just go open a vein in a warm bath.

But wait. There's that death-by-one's-own-hand motif again. Substitute paw for hand, and...isn't this a little like the lemming mythos?

What if

Well, it got us thinking. What if we're somehow *supposed* to feel this way? What if there's this free-floating assumption that anything less than a zillion hits a minute or a half-a-jillion subs will precipitate sufficiently terminal depression in those of those of us who haven't made The E-Commerce Cut that we will accommodatingly withdraw from the field? Check ourselves out of the game for good? It's no mystery that the Internet is overpopulated as hell and the food supply for us lowly web-rats is quickly being overgrazed by Fortune-500 sheep. "Say," maybe were supposed to be thinking, looking suddenly at our watches as if having overlooked an important appointment, "isn't it about time to hurl ourselves headlong into the sea?"

But then again, what if this supposed impulse didn't materialize on schedule? Imagine that, when the cameras started rolling and the Schadenfreude-horny expectations of the New Media were mounting nicely for the big Evel Knievel Water Event, we — like the lemmings in the study — just went: "Hunh?"

What if, instead of creating the kind of markets it's always been so famous for, the Invisible Hand simply extended a finger and picked the Invisible Nose? What the ethologists can't possibly have known is that "hunh" is really Lemming for "fuck you!" We know this because we conducted a little study of our own.

Hocus Pocus, Out Of Focus

Here's what we did. Twenty-three months ago, we began putting together a sort of focus group to test some rather contrarian market and marketing assumptions. It was a small collection of folks at first, just a handful of online acquaintances. But it has grown in the meantime to a couple thousand regular participants, and as in any well-balanced focus group, they come from all socioeconomic sectors, all walks of life. Some are thoughtful individuals who tend to look beyond appearances; some are so stoned they wouldn't know the difference. Some are diligent workers in the larger corporations; others while away their days wiring incendiary devices at the kitchen table. Young and old, black and white, male and female, gay and straight: it's a pretty decent mix all round. One thing we've found they seem to have in common is a degree of intelligence just a hair this side of spooky.

If you're reading this, you're one of them. The "focus group" of course is **EGR**.

So what were some of the questions we set out to answer? Simple things really: like whether or not people like eating shit (we've found that, generally speaking, they do not); like whether they would rather be verbally abused by a human being than sucked up to by corporate zeros (the surprising answer here is a resounding "yes"); like whether they would rather hear from a talking horse or dinosaur than read another product brochure (apparently so); like whether they are entirely satisfied with the kind of die-cut fodder that passes for "content" on the World Wide Web (take a wild-assed guess).

Humpin' and-a Pumpin'

Here at **EGR**, we tend to think about "e-commerce" in the following way. A bunch of companies that have had a gargantuan mass-marketing jones since approximately The Flood looked at the Internet and held a great counsel amongst themselves, saying: "Verily you betcha! It sure don't look like television, but we know how to fix that!" Then they looked again, and lo, they saw the Web was like unto a big ol' weather balloon that needed inflating. Except instead of blowing it up with hot air, of which they were blessed with an endless bounty, they decided to pump it up with money, of which they had some measure less. But in their pride and World-Class-Can-Do-Know-How, they figured that once this monumental blowjob was completed, they could just sort of tie it off and — if you'll forgive us mixing in another metaphor or two — the mother would be up and buckin' like a cash cow crazy on crystal meth.

But a funny thing happened. They found out that they had to keep pumping money into the balloon or it would go all droopy, not unlike their own dicks when they thought too long about this unexpectedly difficult problem. Whatever the problem *was* — nerves maybe? work-related stress? — they just couldn't seem to keep it up.

And by now the Great and Terrible Race of Bean Counters was getting seriously bent. “What the fuck is going on here?” some were heard to inquire. “And *where* the fuck is that Return on Investment you promised us, you sorry sacks of shit?” And the Sorry Sacks in Marketing replied: “But the focus group thought it was A Very Cool Thing and only therefore did we do it!”

Now let's back up and think this through a minute. Most focus groups are what? A dozen people? Maybe two? They get together for an afternoon, sometimes a whole week's worth of afternoons. Across an entire industry, billion-dollar bets on market trends and product categories are often placed on the knee-jerk hunches of these stellar ad-hoc collectives. But focus groups have the great advantage of being simple, usually calling for nothing more intellectually taxing than multiple choice. For example:

Do you think our Very Cool Thing is:

- a. Very Cool?
- b. Astoundingly Cool?
- c. A Paradigm Shift?
- d. Have No Opinion

Oh yeah, and The-Thus-Focused get a little cash and a free lunch for their trouble.

Now, *you*, on the other hand: you don't get no money, you don't get no lunch. In many cases, you *are* lunch. Yes, we know it: we've been very mean to you. In fact, we've tried everything we could think of to run you off. And in many cases it's worked; hundreds have unsubscribed. Still, there are a couple thousand of you left. Waiting for more.

If that sounds supremely arrogant, for once, it's not meant to be. We love it that you hang around at all, but that's not the point. We strongly suspect that, in the larger scheme of things, you're waiting for a whole lot more than **EGR**. Hell, we are.

We'll leave you with what we think *might* be the point, framed in the ever popular story-problem format:

Assume that a company (X) makes a \$100-million marketing decision on the basis of 10 x -random individuals' offhand opinions over the period of a week. Also assume that, every once in a blue moon under near-ideal conditions, such input *may* be sufficiently informed to carry non-zero predictive value. What is the size of the market (Y) that could potentially be predicted with 200 times as many *knowledgeable and passionate* participants interacting over 100 times as many weeks? Solve

for Y to the nearest billion dollars. Also, estimate the probable half-life of X to the nearest web-minute.

For Extra Credit: From your own experience, given the attitudes you have seen reflected in and by this larger group, describe what Market Y might look like. How could its products and services be expected to differ from the shit sandwich you once mistook for Wonder Bread?

“HUNH?”

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“reality leaves a lot to the imagination...” John Lennon