

"The Visual Slide Revolution" named as one of the Top 10 Business Books of 2008 by The Globe and Mail

IDEAS » TOP 10 BUSINESS BOOKS OF 2008

Best of the best: intelligent, clear, filled with advice

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Of the many books I sampled this year, the one that most impressed me was *The Snowball: Warren Buffett and The Business of Life*. It was compelling – mesmerizing actually – despite its hefty 838 pages of text. It was intelligent, clearly written and easy to read. I admired the author, analyst-turned-writer Alice Schroeder, for her diligence, deft flair with words and storytelling ability.

But I'm not picking it as the best book of the year.

In these columns, I try to share ideas and tips that can be put to good use in your career. And while there were certainly useful ideas on investing and business in *The Snowball*, I felt it was outclassed by two other books that were also intelligent, clearly written, easy-to-read, and compelling – as well as loaded with management advice.

These were *Billion Dollar Lessons* by consultants Paul Carroll and Chunka Mai, and *Stall Points* by Matthew Olsen and Derek Van Bever of Corporate Executive Board.

Both books also share another attribute: They are about what can go wrong in your business, and how to avoid the potential problem or fix it should it occur.

In the end, I leaned to *Billion Dollar Lessons* as the top business book of the year, because some of the pitfalls it illuminated stem from strategy that is widely accepted and can prove dangerously flawed.

Here is the top 10:

1 BILLION DOLLAR LESSONS
by Paul Carroll
and Chunka Mai (Portfolio)

The authors' study of colossal business failure found that strategy was invariably the cause. They pinpoint seven popular strategies that can lead a company off the rails: Foolhardy pursuit of synergy; financial engineering, rollups of mom and pop operations, steadfastly refusing to switch from a misguided course, moving into an adjacent market, riding the wrong new technology, and consolidation. The list is a catalogue of strategies that companies are routinely urged to follow and that can work – but also can lead to disaster. The authors provide sobering examples of failed companies as well as tough questions to ask when considering any of these strategies.



2 STALL POINTS
by Matthew Olsen
and Derek Van Bever
(Yale University Press)

This book looks at the near inevitability of fast-growing companies hitting a period where they unexpectedly stall and, if they aren't careful, crash. "It is common to stall, it is hard to see a stall coming, and it is extremely hard to recover from a stall," the authors state. "In fact, companies that did not recover quickly face long odds at returning to a sustainable growth track. Ever." Their research identified 42 root causes of stalls, but found that four categories accounted for more than half the swoons: Premium price position captivity, breakdown in innovation management, premature core abandonment, and talent bench shortfalls. The book offers advice on how to avoid, or minimize, these perilous plunges.

3 CHANGE THE WAY YOU LEAD
by David Herold
and Donald Fedor
(Stanford Business Books)

The writing in this book was stilted but I'm still placing it above *The Snowball* because change is so difficult for organizations to get right and the perspective in this book might help you. While many "change" books – notably the work of John Kotter – focus on how to lead change, these authors argue that you also need to think through carefully

what needs to be changed and in what way, who is involved in the effort as leaders and followers, and the context in which it is happening. That seems obvious, but the book deserves attention because it integrates those issues with the matter of leading change. Mr. Kotter has a good book out this year, too, *A Sense of Urgency* (Harvard Business Press), that expands on his thinking and fans will relish, but *Change the Way You Lead* is the better buy.

4 THE SNOWBALL
by Alice Schroeder (Bantam)

Warren Buffett is an amazing man in more ways than we knew and this book, written with his co-operation and with him sharing his innermost thoughts, shows not just his grand business achievements but his struggles, both in business and in life.

5 THE ILLUSIONS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP
by Scott Shane
(Yale University Press)

The Case Western University professor of entrepreneurial studies takes virtually all of the shibboleths we believe about entrepreneurship and demolishes them: whether the United States is the summit of entrepreneurship; who the entrepreneurs are among us; how businesses are financed; how well entrepreneurs fare financially; why women are less likely to start companies.

6 THINK BETTER
by Tim Hurson (McGraw-Hill)

The Toronto-based consultant guides us through productive thinking, which involves both creative and critical thinking skills. He provides a six-step process that you can use in brainstorming sessions or in tackling problems solo, designed to push beyond the predictable, mundane ideas that usually come to you initially and even the better ideas that follow, stretching boundaries but still essentially constrained by what you know. He helps you to reach the next level, the "third third," as he calls it, where unexpected connections occur, as you keep asking yourself what else might be possible.

7 STOPWATCH MARKETING
by John Rosen
and AnnaMaria Turano (Portfolio)

The two consultants remind us that consumers have an internal stopwatch ticking as they consider your products and services. They outline how to align your marketing with the four common stopwatches you will encounter: impatient shopping, recreational shopping, reluctant shopping, and painstaking shopping.

8 EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES
by Cynthia Cooper (John Wiley)

This chronicle of what went wrong at WorldCom Inc. by the woman who shared honours as Time magazine's person of the year in 2002 for blowing the whistle about financial misdeeds at the company shows us step by step how individuals can fall into gross ethical breaches. It's a heroic story, but also a sobering, sad story as she tells with admirable empathy how things came apart and good friends became adversaries as well as jailbirds. Above all, it's gripping reading, ideal for the holiday season in place of an escapist novel.

9 THE VISUAL SLIDE REVOLUTION
by Dave Paradi

This self-published book, available at thinkoutsideslides.com, is a detailed guide to improving presentations so that they revolve around powerful, persuasive graphics rather than unfocused bullet points.

10 FIVE FUTURE STRATEGIES YOU NEED RIGHT NOW
by George Stalk
(Harvard Business Press)

The Toronto-based Boston Consulting Group senior partner and Globe and Mail columnist outlines five strategies that companies will have to

consider in our fast-changing world: supply chain gymnastics, as ports become jammed with goods from China; smaller production runs in disposable factories, to sidestep economies of scale; dynamic pricing, to match the second-by-second wishes of customers, embracing complexity around us; and infinite bandwidth. It's written in pithy consultant-speak, packing a lot of hard-edged advice into a short read.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

» *Stampede: The Rise of the West and Canada's New Power Elite* (Key Porter) by Globe and Mail senior business writer Gordon Pitts is an eye-opening look at the changing economic geography of Canada that I'll review in a forthcoming column.

» *Sell Yourself in Any Interview* (McGraw-Hill) by consultant Oscar Adler takes the idea of distinguishing between features and benefits in the sales process into the interviewing process to help you land a job.

» *Forces For Good* (Jossey-Bass) by non-profit advisers Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant sets out six crucial practices for non-profits to become more effective.

» *Chain of Blame* (John Wiley) by journalists Paul Muolo and Matthew Padilla dissects what happened in the U.S. subprime mortgage scandal.

» *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Little Brown) is best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell's engaging and eclectic look at success.

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