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Breaking away from the 'copycat economy'

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By **LINDA BLASER** lblaser@pioneerlocal.com

Becoming the gold fish in a copycat sea of white, where everyone looks the same, is the goal to break out of the pack, Oren Harari, noted author and strategic and global management expert told the full house at the Lake Forest Graduate School of Management continuing education presentation on March 31.

Harari led a group of some 200 professionals and students through an inspired 90-minute discussion of his new book, *Break From the Pack: How to Compete in a Copycat Economy*.

"It's not products and services that count any more. It's the value you present to the marketplace," Harari said.

Companies that are circling the wagons to protect their existing businesses is copycat thinking.

"We're becoming commoditized, becoming imitated," he said. He pointed out telecommunications companies, where there was double-digit growth 30 years ago, as an example.

"Long-distance voice was a big deal. It was hard to do," he said. Then, it cost \$10 for a one-minute call to India. Today, that same call costs 2 cents.

"Long distance is no longer a value-adding concept where it definitely used to be. Every facet of business is like that," he said.

Providing a quality product with good turn around time and strong customer service used to guarantee success. "They're all taken for granted. Now you just survive with that," he said.



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Before the recession hit, Starbucks opened three new stores a day and people were willing to stand in line for a \$4 cup of coffee.

"Now there's a million (copycats) out there," he said, noting that McDonald's now employs baristas. While the coffee might not be the same, "it's good enough and it's only a dollar."

Starbucks ran into trouble because it became static and didn't change with the times, he said. "Business is a motion picture."

"We are in situation now where companies are going to have more limited resources coupled with more discerning customers who will be even more demanding in terms of price value," he said.

The business world has changed from an era where "big" dominated. "Size is no longer the predictor of success," he said. "Top companies, the biggest companies no longer exist."

Harari suggests finding an edgy niche, an uncharted territory and being the best at that for when the economy turns around.

"There are two sets of factors we can look at. Both require constant innovation," he said. Above ground, the products and services customers see, and under ground, what the market doesn't see.

"The real issue is not to ask how do we cut our budgets by 5 percent. Don't ask people to work harder and skip lunch. You need to identify what you can do that radically redefines the way we do our business, otherwise we slip into copycat mode," he said.

"Either you innovate or you're in commodity hell. If you do what everybody else does, you have a low margin business. That's not where we want to be."

Companies that define and lead the agenda for their industries include Whole Foods, Amazon and Apple, he said.

"To thrive, you want to continually be throwing out new curves. Don't wait until someone else does it then claw onto it. No such thing as a 'fast follower' in our economy," he said.

"You need to be concerned less with responding and more with leading. If you can't respond, you're dead."

He said companies need to lead their customers to an impossible place. "If you wait for a focus group, it isn't uncharted."

Innovation "under ground," in how a company is structured, is just as important as innovation on the front end.

Harari talked about radical revisions in how businesses are run with cross-disciplinary teams and focus on new talent.

"Keep lean so you can respond quickly and de-layer. The more layers you've got, you're blocking the flow of information."

That concept is difficult for a lot of executives, he said.

"In today's economy, you've got to be lean, simplified, incredibly focused," he said. "You can't do it all. You've got to focus. You can be in as many markets as you want, but you have to set the agenda in those markets. It's not about building for size, it's building for domination. Domination is about leading the agenda."

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For companies that really get it, Harari said, "it's not just strategic, it's almost spiritual."

More information about Harari and his books is available at www.harari.com. For a list of upcoming programs School of Management, visit www.lakeforestmba.edu.

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