



Mass Forces

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I love meeting successful businesspeople and entrepreneurs who have managed to consistently flourish in whatever they do. They all seem to share the same gift:

They understand where the forces of the market are headed before others do, and they tap into this.

In fact, of all the skills someone in business can possess, this alone is the most significant and valuable.

In the recent collapse of the mortgage industry, a few people were able to analyze the market beforehand and profit from it. Consider John Paulson: He was a relatively unknown investor on Wall Street who in 2005 started getting a little nervous about the housing industry. He decided to bet against it, with spectacular results: In 2007 alone his small hedge fund earned \$15 billion. Similarly, others such as Dr. Michael Burry of Scion Capital emerged from obscurity by betting against subprime mortgages, to make over \$825 million dollars from his small fund.

Mutual funds, financial advisors, and others in the financial industry are all paid to tap into these mass trends and understand where things are headed. But very few truly understand trends, markets, and mass forces and can see where public sentiment is going. The few who can are extraordinary—and quite rare. They are the investment names you know -- Warren Buffet, John Paulson, Peter Lynch.

The world of religion has its equivalents -- figures like Muhammad, Jesus, Buddha, and Joseph Smith, who tapped into public sentiment and carried a message that resonated at a particular point in time. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, for example, came along when hordes of Protestant sects were competing with each other. His message was that his was the “true” Protestant sect. This resonated with an audience confused by the numbers of options to choose from.

In politics, such visionaries were embodied by the likes of Napoleon, Hitler, and others who could command mass followings by tapping into public angst at a certain time and place. Germany, for example, had been comprised of a collection of nation states that had never known any real unity, but the country had just experienced a massive blow to its ego after being defeated in World War II. Hitler was able to create a sense of unity by tapping into Aryan master-race theories and creating a scapegoat, Jews, to justify the nation’s problems.

Spotting mass trends and movements and tapping into them is an extraordinary skill few people possess. One person invests in gold and another in silver; gold goes up and silver goes down. Some are “lucky” in seeing trends, but their luck usually runs out.

The greatest job seekers are no different from the greatest businesses and the greatest investors: They understand the mass desires of people—and, most important, are able to see where these desires are going before others can. They place themselves in the right industries. They shape their experience on their resume so that it appears consistent with certain trends. They are savvy about what’s going on in the world, so they understand where things are headed.

Certain mass forces and desires are enduring, no matter what:

- The desire to eat
- The desire of businesses to earn money
- The desire of women to be attractive
- The desire of men to be virile
- The desire to be understood
- The desire to make a living
- The desire to reproduce
- The desire to survive
- The desire to communicate
- The desire to be entertained

What the most successful businesses—and job seekers—do is channel these desires *towards them*. They analyze the landscape around them and determine the best response to it.

Domino’s Pizza at one time decided that fast pizza delivery was a good idea. Prior to Domino’s Pizza, the only pizza parlors that delivered were those that absolutely had to. When I was young I can remember sitting with my mother in a car outside the local pizza place—sometimes for quite some time -- waiting for pizza to be made. Domino’s came along and channeled people’s desire for good pizza delivered quickly, and the company made billions of dollars.

Pizza had been around for a long time. As had hunger. But Domino’s took the desire for pizza and channeled it differently. They analyzed the landscape and interpreted the desire, then added speed and delivery to satisfy it in a way that had never been done on that kind of scale.

I remember when Domino’s came to my neighborhood. The small local pizza parlors all went out of business. Customers doubtless thought to themselves: *Why would I go to the local pizza parlor and stand around waiting for some teenager to make me pizza and then take the pizza and drive home, when I could sit in front of my television or talk on the phone and have it come to me?*

When Apple came out with the iPod they took something that already existed (the mass desire for entertainment) and made it portable in a new way. Then they took the desire for entertainment and combined it with the desire to communicate and came out with the iPhone.

Prior to the iPod, brick-and-mortar businesses like Tower Records and Borders gave people the entertainment. With the onset of the new digital music, these businesses failed, because digital music was cheaper and more convenient. People likely thought to themselves: *Why would I want to go to a record store and spend time searching for a CD that may or may not be in stock? And why would I spend \$15.99 buying an entire album when I can buy the one song I really want for 99 cents? And finally, why would I drive to the store, maybe pay for parking, and waste all that time when I can download the song in just a minute?*

Every business and product out there was developed and created in response to some mass desire that people already had. It all starts with a mass desire. And all any business is doing is tapping into one of these mass desires and channeling these forces to them. The more effectively a business channels these desires, the better that business will do.

The key is understanding how to focus these desires.

What, then, makes one business—or individual—more effective than another in tapping into these mass forces? It is the ability to see *where things are trending and where they are going*. The goal is to take mass forces out there and harness them to your advantage. The smartest people are able to catch rising tides when those tides are nearly imperceptible. The average person cannot see rising tides—only a gifted few can.

A good portion of my career has been spent helping attorneys find jobs. While I hate to say this, on the most fundamental level an attorney is a product. Because an attorney is a product, the attorney is part of the “mass desire” that exists in the marketplace for legal services.

- If the attorney went to a good law school and did well, the market (law firms, clients) is more likely to want to hire her than if she did not.
- If the attorney has good experience, the market (law firms, clients) is more likely to want to hire him than if he did not.
- If the attorney is in the right practice area at the right time, the market (law firms, clients) is more likely to want to hire him than if he is not.

It's fascinating how fickle the market can be. Sometimes the real estate market is hot – lots of jobs; then it dries up – no jobs. And then the market moves on to something else. It's the same with litigation, corporate law, and so on. It happens geographically too; the market for corporate attorneys could dry up completely in New York City and simultaneously be very healthy in Dallas.

Part of your job in marketing yourself, then, is being acutely aware of these trends vis-a-vis what's marketable at different times—and even *where* it's marketable. What are the mass desires of the market? Where are those mass desires headed? How can you package yourself most effectively?

An attorney whose market has turned against her needs to understand how to recast herself and her services, to accommodate to new trends that clients may need her services for. She needs to appeal to employers in a way that is different and fresh. She needs to be exquisitely tuned in to what people want.

I work in an office park in Malibu that's populated by legions of skin-care salons. When I walk out of the office I frequently see 75-year-old women who resemble creatures from another world—perfectly sculpted bodies, with faces stretched and smoothed over from numerous nips and tucks. Recently I spied one of these characters wearing snakeskin boots and a big cowboy belt and sporting breasts that bore no relation to nature. It was frightening.

In most areas of the world, women at that age would be relaxing and enjoying being old. Here they're literally trying to recapture a life and look they had 50 years before. Are they tapping into a mass desire—to be attractive and desirable? I don't think so—I don't think a 75-year-old woman can alter herself and tap into a mass desire the same way a 25-year-old girl can. She's barking up the wrong tree. The mass desire of “the market” is more likely for her to be a wise grandmother at this point in her life.

The rules of the market are constantly changing, so you must be alert to those shifts at all times. Those 75-year-olds with plastic surgery are trying to tap into a mass force that that long ago abandoned them and that they have fallen away from. The trend they ought to be poised to catch is one they may not want, but it's the one they'll be most successful at – in their case, using their experience and years to, well, act their age.

When you're looking for a job, what worked in the past may no longer work now. Many people think they can do what they did in the past, packaging themselves the same way. But that won't work. You need to stay current on what works now and tap into these forces.

Several years ago I was advising an attorney who'd graduated from law school in the middle 1970s. At the law school he went to, Career Services had told students to attach a photo of themselves to the cover letter and resumes they sent out. For a few years this was apparently what people did. The attorney thought he should do the same when he mailed out his applications this time as well.

“Are you kidding?” I asked him. “People will think you're nuts!”

I could not believe I was looking at a resume with a black-and-white photo of a 60-year-old man stapled to it. It was surreal. It certainly got my attention.

What worked in the past does not work now.

Because the rules are always changing and the forces that determine the outcome are constantly shifting, formulas will not work—they are too tightly bound to the past, and they must be replaced by new analysis. You need to understand the market around you and the people around you, and you must be able to position yourself so that you'll succeed in today's world, so that you can make the forces out there work for you. Again, you need to understand where things are headed.

How do you understand the market? There are always going to be numerous signs of where things are going that indicate how you can get there first. You need to develop the ability to cut through the market and see what makes it tick. The correct solution lies buried in every problem you face. Your goal is to take the mass desires that are out there and harness them for your own benefit.

The most skilled job seekers and interviewers know how to harness mass forces.

First, the most skilled job seekers will understand how they fit into the mass forces that currently exist in the market. The attorney, for example, may understand that there's a desire for competent experience in securities law. He will understand that in order to package himself effectively he'll have to lead with this experience and emphasize it over other sorts of

experience. He'll understand that the employer is unlikely to be interested in a resume littered with other skills. He'll spend his time in the interview talking about his most important skills as they apply to securities law. He'll understand why securities law is important to this employer. He'll understand the forces that motivate his interviewer.

My career has involved studying what makes people successful. I've noticed that if people continue doing something long enough, they generally become successful at it. You can be successful doing tons of things—politics, running Laundromats, exterminating bugs. You don't need to be a neurosurgeon, attorney, or CEO to be successful. In fact, the most successful people I know do really random things that are completely off the radar for most people. One guy sells shampoo.

The reason people become so successful doing random things is that they're able to tap into mass desires; they understand them. That's because they've done the same thing over and over for a long time. When you do something long enough and really get into it, you start to see patterns and get a sense of where things are headed. You get in tune with mass desires.

People who try to do lots of different things are typically out of tune with these mass desires, because they don't stay with anything long enough to catch the patterns.

In your career, nothing is more important than being in tune with mass desires. You do this by learning everything you can about whatever it is you do for a living. You go to seminars, you network, you meet new people and speak with them – all this helps you understand where things are going.

Steve Jobs, Warren Buffet, and every American hero of any substance generally has had the ability to see where things were headed and channel the trends toward them.

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