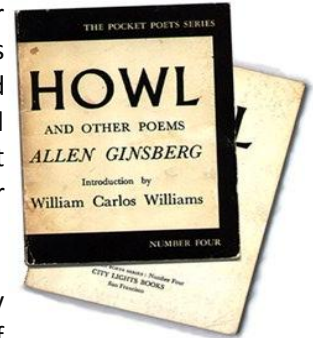


# The Rise of Post-Modernism

While it is difficult to pinpoint the precise moment this trend first appeared in our country, it is likely to trace to the so-called “beat generation.” While perhaps inexact, it was definitely not subtle. Take “The Howl,” a single sentence, 2,145 word rant composed by Allen Ginsburg. Not exactly a poem, this piece has been described as unstructured, jazz-like and hallucinogenic. Aptly named, it is a seething lament against the social and political structures operating in the mid-fifties... in other words, modern society.

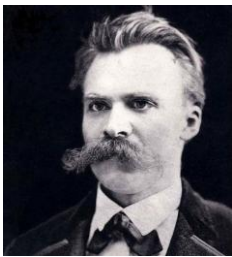


But Ginsburg did not act alone. His accomplices included Jack Kerouac, Neil Cassidy and William Burroughs. They were all contributors to a new consciousness or way of viewing the world that began to divide people. Appealing to some, alarming to others, the post-modern movement had begun in the perhaps sleepy but proud U. S. culture. But the “beat poets” weren’t necessarily the inventors; they might more accurately be described as conveyors, at least in the United States.

Even earlier, an existential movement was popularized in France by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. And even before them philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche emphasized the importance of the individual, individualization and denial of authority.

Kierkegaard believed in self-reflection, that “subjectivity is truth and truth is subjectivity” and the necessity of a “leap of faith” in the absence of objective experience.

Nietzsche of course gets perhaps the ultimate bad rap for his unremitted claim that “God is dead.” While certainly open to interpretation (as the post-modernist would no doubt insist), this statement was perhaps intended less emphatically than most infer. Nietzsche warned that technological and social advances in Western Europe were eclipsing more traditional views of God. He questioned the presence of morality and truth in a Godless world and by doing so, he set the stage, if not discovered, nihilism. This is where it gets jiggy.



The point here is that: 1) post-modernism is not something that happened overnight, 2) it isn’t owned by a single source; in other words it is not nationalistic or tied to a specific demographic or generational cohort, 3) it is not tied expressly to a single era and finally, 4) it is not linked to a single medium or cultural currency. Somewhat paradoxically, post-modern thought can predate modern thought. Conversely, modern thought can pre-date post-modern thought (and admittedly usually does).

That said, we find post-modernism gaining momentum in the past three decades. These are the decades in which Generation X and Generation Y have come of age. So, we would expect these cohort groups to be more oriented towards a post-modern world view. And they are.

One reason is that they have had a front row seat during their formative years of the collapse of a wide array of modern institutions. But, again, it is not attributable to a particular group. This is a trend that has gained momentum. There are a number of cultural milestones you could use as a starting point. Let’s take the 1970 evacuation of Viet Nam. This event is



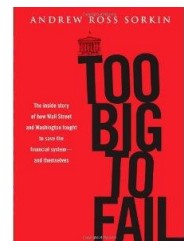
emblematic of the failure by the U.S. military with respect to achieving our goals in the region. Therefore, incidentally, it was something we were not used to. Not actually a “war,” a “military conflict. By the way, war is a modern term; military conflict, on the other hand, sounds post-modern. Soon after we had “Watergate,” a failure of one of the most important institutions in our country, certainly in government.

In the 1980’s we had the “Hostage Crisis,” “Black Monday” and the “Savings & Loan Crisis.” These were all broad based cultural milestones and they were all troublesome to say the least. They were *shocks to our system* as Americans, each providing more evidence that our modern values and the institutions that supported them were under duress.

In the 1990s, we had the “Clinton Sex Scandal,” the “Simpson Trial” and “Enron.” In the new millennium, we’ve had 9/11, “Pedophile Priests,” the collapse of the banking industry and, perhaps most spectacular of all, Bernie Madoff. Of course there are a myriad of smaller mishaps along the way. I apologize if I have omitted your issue in my post-modern text.

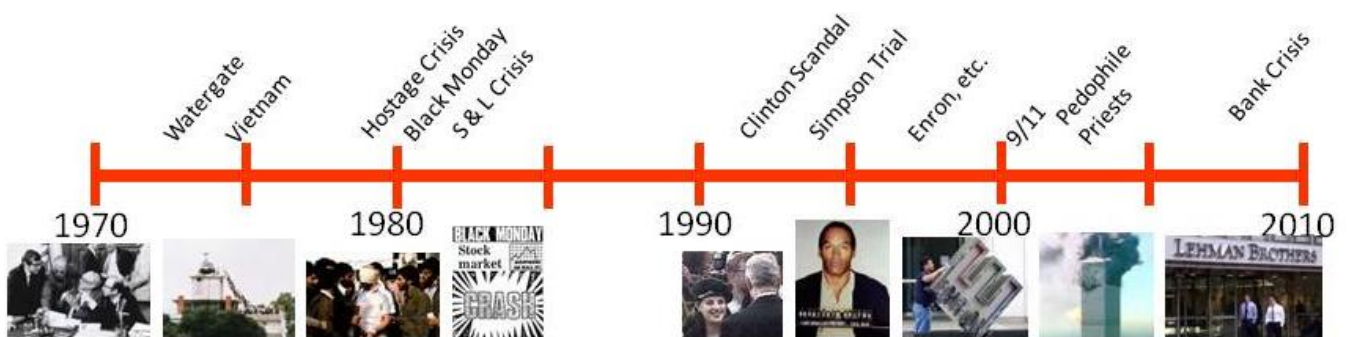
It is getting worse? Is that the point? How is a sex scandal modern? Good questions.

It’s getting worse if the frequency and/or magnitude are increasing. This calculus is beyond me. What I am more certain of is that each of these failures is emblematic of modern institutions. With each failure, the paradigm is pushed a little further. Trust drops like a dot-com stock. Fear increases.



Perhaps the most interesting observation is that some of our institutions, most notably the larger banks and insurance companies have been dubbed “too big to fail.” I find that to be something less than comforting. We are drawn unremittingly into the moral debate between: “they deserve to fail because they should have made an electric car twenty years ago” and “if they fail, they take a lot down with them including my neighbor’s job.”

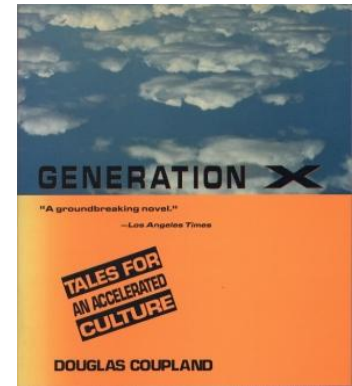
Other institutional failures are not milestone oriented. The institution of marriage has become, sadly more often than not, a failure. Most Generation X and Generation Y individuals are less confident about their chances in marriage. They question the necessity and certainly the practicality. Who can blame them?



The obvious lesson here is that when the paradigm does shift, it isn’t necessarily pretty. Ask anyone who served in Viet Nam or who was planning to retire on their General Motors stock or who is the product of divorced parents. While it is difficult for all of us, it is particularly poignant for younger members of our society. The more mature cope but younger people question the value of getting on board at all. As Winston Churchill reputedly stated: "one who is under 25 and is not an idealist is a fool, and one who is over 25 and is still an idealist is a bloody fool."

Thomas Kuhn first coined the term “paradigm shift” in his seminal book: The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. The upward trend of post-modernism and the world view associated with it is, to a great extent but not entirely, replacing modernism. One of implications of Dr. Kuhn’s work is that when paradigm’s shift, there are two kinds of participants: 1) those who are directly associated with the old paradigm who have everything to lose and nothing to gain and 2) those who are directly associated with the new paradigm who have everything to gain and nothing to lose. In other words, paradigms are attached to people. So, there are politics. This helps explain some of the tension between different groups—generations for instance—and why, in the case of social or aesthetic paradigms, the shift is gradual, fitful, unevenly manifested and often contested.

Douglas Coupland famously dubbed those born after the Baby Boom: “Generation X.” His book by that title is not so much a study of the times or the demographic as it is a narrative. The cultural diffusion of the term—as many “Gen-Xers” have pointed out—was driven by disgruntled members of the Baby Boom generation who either don’t get it, don’t like it or simply feel displaced by post-modern values. That said, post-modernism is the meta-premise that tends to differentiate Baby Boomers from the two generations that follow them.



A rallying cry of the Generation-X cohort is: “we are not a target market.” Another favorite of mine is: “I am not my haircut.” To unpack these statements, you have to wade through the angst. Being part of a target market to this group is dehumanizing and undermines individualism. It is too structured and subservient. Finally, it implies submission to a life of consumerism and the too easily deciphered marketing campaigns that rely on segmentation, targeted advertising and measured return on investment, all of which have little if any value to the post-modernist. To put it in post-modern terms, *it sucks*. Try to find a Generation X woman who is worried about “ring around the collar.” I don’t think so.

Why am I “not my hair cut?” Because none of us are. It is the separation of style and substance. It is disdain for presumption and pre-judgment, especially through the eyes of the larger and presumably more established baby boom generation.

From a modernist point-of-view, as we get further into a post-modernism era we feel a little like all hell is breaking loose. It can appear to be a celebration of chaos or sometimes just chaos unleashed. In its extreme, purest form, it opposes just about anything that is organized, thematic, centrist, modeled or documented.

If you’ve been paying attention, you might note that writing a paper on post-modernism is essentially an un-post-modern thing to do. The dyed in the wool post-modernist rejects authority and so too rejects the author along with his text. The author is *demoted* in post-modern thought; the reader, viewer, listener or observer is *promoted*.

Post-modernism is about the subject, not the object; the receiver, not the sender; the reaction, not the action. Before post-modernism, we read the book, looked at the painting or listened to the song and said “what was he trying to say or what does it mean? The authors, editors, publishers, curators and architects were holding the cards.

In D. A. Pennebaker’s documentary Bob Dylan is swarmed by British reporters and journalists. He is on his second tour of England in 1965. It’s all about to happen for him. Both the media and the fans are fascinated by Dylan who is entirely post-modern in his musings. Pennebaker brilliantly lets the viewer in on the secret: they and their magazines are quintessential examples of a modern media trying to decipher their encounter with a prodigious and prolific post-modern artist. Dylan says: “I just go out there and sing ‘em [the songs]. I

don't try to get people to like 'em" and "I don't have a message." He is unapologetically condescending to his questioners but he is onto something. He is inventing post-modernism in his own time and medium.

Pennebaker does his part too; he takes a post-modern subject and uses a post-modern technique to tell the story. There is no script, voice-over, titles—you draw your own conclusions.

Of course Dylan is precocious but he is also a little stunned and eventually just plain exhausted by what appear to be ridiculous questions. One interviewer pleaded "that his magazine wanted to print the truth"; Dylan retorts "these magazines have too much to lose by printing the truth." Another interviewer asks him if he is the Messiah. They're all a little confused. By the end of the movie, Dylan's manager, Albert Grossman, informs Bob that he has been labeled an anarchist. Through the lens of history, that might be an expected reaction. The post-modern artist is iconoclastic and appears to be "for" nothing but "against" plenty... "a hard rain's gonna fall."



In post-modern life, we look at art and say: how does it make me feel? In post-modern world, we have permission to explore our own feelings, thoughts and impulses. Whether you like him or not, Bob Dylan broke through the imperceptible barrier that divided modern thought from post-modern. He created a cultural counterpart to what Chuck Yeager and a legion of aeronautic scientists did years earlier with the X-1. You might say the film by Pennebaker documents the *other* sonic boom.

For better or worse in a post-modern culture we are the judge. It's freedom. Let's look at some examples of how post-modern expression emerged in popular culture.

Music. In the 1950's we listened to Patti Paige, Pat Boone and other "pop stars" who sang songs with definite structures that typically oohed and coohed along for less than two minutes so they could be and would be played on the radio. Nothing to risky. In the 1960's "album oriented rock" was the major movement. We didn't even necessarily call them songs anymore. They were cuts, sides, albums or just music. That music broke some rules and was typically not going to fit into a two minute slot. If you're my age, your parents probably said: "that's not music." Admittedly, it was difficult to explain why you needed to listen to Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog" at fifty decibals. You just had to.

FM radio, the preferred medium for Album Oriented Rock, was the antithesis of AM radio. The early voices on the FM band didn't sound like the "voice talent" on the AM dial. They sounded like the guy down the hall in the dorm who hadn't left his room in days and wanted to turn you on.



In 1969, Jimmi Hendrix closed Woodstock with his performance of the Star Spangled Banner featuring his mastery of electronic feedback. Jimmi-- his choice of the national anthem (a text), the use of feedback and the Woodstock venue--created an enduring emblem of post-modern culture. It wasn't just risky; it was shattering. For emphasis, on other occasions, he would dowse his guitar in lighter fluid and build his own personal campfire in an early example of deconstructivism and, one might suppose, "performance art."

In addition to changes in radio broadcasting, the music business changed as well. Control has slowly slipped from the label to the artist—particularly as in the "singer-song writer era"—to the distribution network. In 1999 a guy named Sean Fanning and a couple of his buddies applied file sharing technology to the music business. They wrote the code in their dorm room and named the company using Sean's nickname. "Napster"

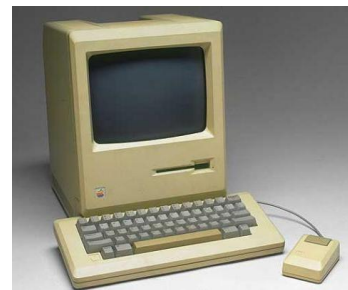
was a post-modern tidal wave that allowed virtually anyone in the world to download copyrighted material for free. Now we've gone too far. Within months, even "authors" (oops a modern value judgment) like Metallica and Dr. Dre were suing. Eventually Napster was shut down but it begat other, legitimate, downloading services, most notably Apple's "iTunes."

Computing. In the 1950s, Univac invented what became the mainframe computer. IBM commercialized it to great success in its 700 series computers that dominated the corporate landscape for two decades. Then came the mini, a smaller version of the same thing but still a modern machine. Then, the tide began to shift.



Apple didn't invent the personal computer but they were the first to position it as a mainstream device. The headline in their first ad simply read: "Hello." It had charm. It brought emotion to a modern industry that heretofore was cloaked in lab coats and wore the pocket protector as a badge. The subhead read:

"The computer for the rest of us." Steve Jobs said, about Apple: "this isn't about computing or computers, it is about democratizing information." A big, post-modern idea. Eventually, the industry became more about the software than the computer. Then Michael Dell took it a step further with his infamous catch phrase: "it's the network, stupid." In other words, it isn't any longer about the computer or the software, it is the network. Two words for you if you doubt this: Face Book. And, have you seen the Verizon campaign?



Architecture. If the greatest architect of the last century was Frank Lloyd Wright, then the greatest modernist is Mies Van de Roe. He stripped away all the ornamentation. He worked in steel and glass and pioneered not just the look of modern architecture but the use of modern materials and modern construction techniques. Like his colleague Walter Gropius, he was trained at Germany's Bauhaus. His work is quintessential minimalism, an important modern concept.

If Mies, is a minimalist, then Gropius is soaring and breath-taking. And then there is Le Corbusier, a Swiss-born architect, who's work reads more like sculpture than architecture. Together they broke the rules and created a distinct counter-point to the traditional forms of Classical, Gothic and Neo-Classical architecture that preceded them.

So what happened? Structuralism happened. The idea that buildings should be built to accommodate the social patterns of the people who inhabit them. One little kernel of structuralism asserts that "users should participate in the design of the space." Oh-oh. That is a post-modern thought. A mighty one...especially if you consider the skyscraper sized egos of the architects in the modern era. Down with the author; up with the user.

Show me an architect and I'll show you a practitioner who thinks his clients are a pain in the neck...to put it mildly. Architects are still getting used to it. In a post-modern world, they aren't in control. We are. And don't even get them started with regulatory compliance issues.

Automobiles. As David Halberstam made clear in his nostalgic look at The Fifties, the automobile business took wing in this decade...or should we say, "took fin." Cars



were getting bigger and bigger. And so were the tail fins designed into most cars in an attempt to mimic their NASA counterparts that actually flew around the earth or maybe to the moon. We were so caught up in space stuff that we made believe our cars could fly. Automobile industry advertising was among the most sophisticated and avante garde of any industry. Automobiles were a modern artifact. Style, horsepower, color. Remember the baby-blue thunderbird?



Then a few things happened, most of them went unnoticed at first or were maybe even laughed at by the guys in Detroit. The modernists had hubris, if nothing else. In 1964, the first Volkswagens “Beatles” crawled onto our shores. They were first introduced in 1953 to the UK market, so one would think we had some warning.



The early Beatles or Bugs weren’t very good cars. They were everything General Motors and Ford wasn’t. Ugly, under-powered and noisy. They didn’t have amenities or “modern” conveniences but they had something. Advertising man Bill Bernbach got hold of that something and produced a series of print ads, the most notable using headlines such as: “Think Small” and “Lemon.” This campaign dared to take on the conventional wisdom and in so doing, created one of the early manifestations of the American counter-culture. When the industry was going *big*, he advertised *small*.



The next thing that happened was that just about every country that could make a car, began exporting to the United States. England, Germany, Sweden, France, Italy, and especially Japan. They weren’t very good cars at first but they were cute. They were stylish. Were they post-modern? I don’t know. But I do know that they challenged modern conventions. This all coincided with the first “Energy Crisis.” The one where we waited in line for gas and paid over \$1.00 per gallon. Oh my.

Why is this post-modern? Because it was one of the first examples of a national movement that challenged a national institution. In fact, it challenged two of them: Detroit and the Oil Industry. This was the beginning of the end for at least one of our greatest modern institutions. Until the early 1970s, we took what they had to offer. The combination of “Think Small” and waiting in line put a dent in that.

Warfare. Another telling way to understand the progression from modern to post-modern is to look at the way we battle each other. Before WWII, there was a lot of hand-combat using hand weapons. It was mano-a-mano. We’ve seen it all on film. Civil War soldiers eating their shoe leather, rotting in hospitals, etc. The advent of the Modern War taught us how to kill from a distance. The “A-bomb” was arguably the greatest manifestation of modern science applied to armaments. We dropped a couple of them and then realized we really shouldn’t do this anymore. What if someone did it to us?



As morally confusing as the modern war was, the post-modern war was no walk in the park either. In Viet Nam, we met the Guerilla war. Unlike WWII, we didn’t get there first. We were accustomed to, and trained for, command and control, military order and an easily recognized enemy. Those were the days. Now we fight terrorists that often operate in cells. A cell is one of many “organisms” that operate independently with ties that are so loose, if even existent, to a central authority that finding the center is practically impossible. This is a post-modern structure.



We are more likely to fight “rouge states” or maybe tribes than we are to fight other nations that we can identify and clearly understand. Warfare has moved past modern into Post-Modern. And, since our status as a super-power is partially dependent on our ability to defend ourselves and other countries of national interest, we are not what we once were. For better or worse, the post-modernists are winning this battle.

News. This is a good one. The CBS evening news was a bastion of modernism. Walter Cronkite used to say: “and that’s the way it is on [insert date].” For a while, a long while, he was the most trusted man in America. When President Kennedy was assassinated, Walter Cronkite told us. But he wasn’t the only one; each of the three (yes, just three) networks had their rock star anchor and a host of other journalistic reporters (remember them?...they weren’t all good looking but they had gravitas), who reported the news. It was “on the air” at 5:00 and 10:00 if you lived in the Mid-west and 6:00 and 11:00 if you live on one of the coasts. The paradox was that the networks and the newspapers had their own news bureaus, foreign correspondents and field operations. The network wasn’t just a broadcast network, it was a news gathering network. And all of that content was edited into a News-Hour or Newspaper. In other words, they created a daily text.



Somewhere along the line “the news” became a business. Then it became part of the entertainment business or was it the entertainment business that became part of the news business? The Viet Nam war happened and the news bureaus and their cameras went into combat. A modern medium shoved into a post-modern war. Then CNN happened. Then the internet, then the blog. The CBS Evening News = modern; the blog = post-modern.

One of the best ways to understand Post-Modernism is to look at the contrast between modern and post-modern institutions...

Every once in a while, I’ll pop a bag of microwave popcorn. This has to be one of the great modern inventions. A product cooked with microwaves. Before we ever used the phrase: “power-app.” That’s what this was. An application that sold hardware.

What I’ve noticed about my brand of microwave popcorn is that it takes a few seconds to get going. It just lays there for about twenty-five seconds...then it begins to build. It pops furiously for about two minutes, then starts to fade. In the last ten seconds, there is a pop here and there and then it is over...or almost over...there is always one pop left after you open the bag.

Modern	Post-modern
Television	The Internet
The CBS Evening News	Personal Web Page
Bauhaus	Gehry House
Buckminster Fuller	Computer Hacker
IBM	Apple
The Jetson’s	The Simpson’s
“Command & Control”	Skunk Groups/Work Circles
World War II	Vietnam
Dwight Eisenhower	Barack Obama
The :30 TV Commercial	The Infomercial/Viral Marketing

The same thing happened to me in the summer of 2008. Over a two month period, I received dozens of invitations to Linked In. There was a trickle for several months before and there have been a few since, but the popping was really concentrated for about two months.

It turns out, this is a predictable pattern recognized by the social scientists that study the diffusion of innovation. Many technologies are developed and often take years to be commercialized in a way that leads to diffusion throughout the culture. We might think the “Eureka Moment” is immediately followed by prototyping and then commercialization. In reality, it doesn’t always work that way. It happened with the pull down menu, digital cameras and will happen with renewable energy sources. Whenever it happens, there are winners and losers. Ask Kodak. Ask General Motors. Usually there are social or political barriers; always there are economic drivers. Malcom Gladwell popularized diffusion theory in his wildly popular book: The Tipping Point. It documents the tipping point, or inflection point, of innovations and social trends.



In a modern world, corporations conduct quantitative research to identify trends, unmet needs and preferences. Then they commercialize products that meet those needs. They measure market size, return on investment, product life cycle and expected future value of the investment. It is formulaic. In a post-modern environment, it isn’t that simple. It is more serendipitous. You have to have lots of lines in the water if you want to catch something. There is no meta-narrative like there was after World War II. For instance, the baby boom was created because everyone did the same thing. They met their sweetheart at the USO dance, got married and had babies. They bought a starter home and filled it with appliances. Women got tired of appliances and TV dinners and other “modern conveniences” and decided to go to work. The tipping points are so predictable in hindsight...especially when the meta-narrative was singular.

Now it’s plural. Everyone isn’t going to buy a washing machine or a color TV or a Buick. Been there, done that. In a post-modern environment, the product isn’t the product, the person is the product. Face Book, Linked In, Twitter, the personal webpage. The thing I like best about my phone is that it has my music and my photos on it. I haven’t downloaded a personal ringtone yet, but millions have.



Post modern products somehow combine with ME. They morph to my lifestyle, personality and desires. They help me tell the world who I am and what I’m about. Is this new? Not entirely. Many product categories have played this role before...colognes, distilled spirits, automobiles. What is new is the degree of personalization going on. The product is a means to an end and that end is a more individualized you. Carl Jung said it best: “the role of every individual is to individualize himself.” Dr. Jung would be pleased if he were still around assuming he wouldn’t regret the impact he has made on product development and marketing practices. Maybe we aren’t as patriotic or religious or “Man in the Grey Flannel Suit” as we once were but dang, can we use those personal devices? Do you own a “crackberry?”

So what about this Linked-In thing? It is part of what we are now calling “Social Network Marketing.” And that is part of what we were calling Internet Marketing. And that is part of what we were calling “Emerging Media.” Why do we need it? Because we aren’t all sitting on our front porches anymore. Communities are no longer defined by geography. They are defined by like interest and what we can do with our facebook and Flickr accounts. As we become more mobile, transient and generally wireless, we need to compensate for the lack of contact afforded by our geographically determined communities. You can play in fantasy sports



leagues, do war games on the internet, blog or “hook up” in what is becoming a virtually limitless number of ways.

Social media gives us a way to hang our shingle electronically. It says: “here’s who I am—what about you?” It’s quintessentially post-modern. The only author is you. There is little in the way of supervision. It is an “open system” that allows you to control the content, exposure and frequency of involvement.

Speaking of controlling the exposure, what about pay-per-click? This is another internet enabled device that is essentially post-modern. It uses the principle of a real-time and on-line auction for certain words that have something to do with who you are or what you are selling. You build your campaign and you control the on and off switch. If you want clicks on a particular day, you turn it on; if you don’t, you turn it off. “It” doesn’t care. There isn’t an account executive from the advertising agency warning you about the perils of discontinuing your campaign during a recession. You self-navigate.



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