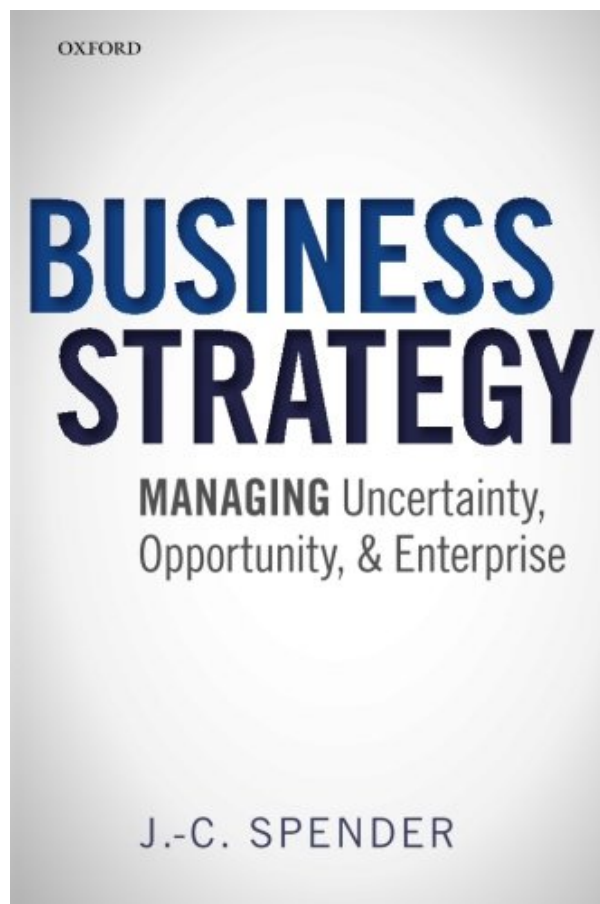


**BUSINESS STRATEGY: MANAGING
UNCERTAINTY, OPPORTUNITY, AND
ENTERPRISE BY J.-C. SPENDER**



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BUSINESS STRATEGY

MANAGING Uncertainty,
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J.-C. SPENDER

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Review

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BUSINESS STRATEGY: MANAGING UNCERTAINTY, OPPORTUNITY, AND ENTERPRISE BY J.-C. SPENDER PDF

What is strategy? For many it is the application of a theory, model or framework. In this book Spender develops a different creative approach. Emphasizing that firms face uncertainties and unknowns (knowledge gaps) he argues that the core of strategic thinking and processes rests on the organization's leaders developing newly imagined solutions to the opportunities that these uncertainties open up.

Drawing on a wide range of ideas from strategy, economics, entrepreneurship and philosophy he stresses the importance of judgment in strategy, and argues that a key element of the entrepreneur and executive's task is to engage chosen uncertainties, develop a language to express and explain the firm's particular business model for dealing with these, and thus create innovation and value. At the same time he shows how the language the strategist creates to do this gives the firm identity and purpose, and communicates this to its members, stakeholders, and customers.

In an accessible and engaging style Spender introduces these ideas, and reviews the strategy tools currently available from consultants and academics. Throughout he stresses the uncertainties or knowledge absences that pervade business and make effective strategizing both necessary and valuable. He outlines a structured practice that managers and consultants might chose to follow, not a theory.

With appendices on casework, teaching strategy, current strategy texts, and further reading this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the field and practice of strategy, opening up new approaches for managers, consultants, strategy teachers and students.

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Most helpful customer reviews

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Masterpiece but long and repetitive

By Matti Makelin

I bought and read this book because it was picked out as a top book in strategy by *Business & Strategy*.

First, I try to summarize what is said here. The book emphasizes forward-looking subjectivity, constructivism and human heterogeneity.

The shift from operations to planning and further to strategy is discussed. The era of managerial capitalism aimed at efficiency, Taylor in production, Chandler in administration. During this era of managerial capitalism, "pre-WW2 writings about management ... presumed managers were completely in charge for the

enterprise and knew it holistically from top to bottom". Operations research and other WW2 lessons learnt had a large impact to the use of rational planning methods. The author writes that the shift away from managerial capitalism to strategy meant a shift from seeking efficiency to seeking rent by differentiation and focusing on competition to the detriment of only internal operations. Was this really so simple - or was it so that value chain and other process methods since the 1980s and enterprise architecture platforms since the 1990s integrated positioning/differentiation with efficiency and transparency.

The author is critical especially towards consultants - "the absence of progression in (their) strategic thinking in spite of the great changes to economy at large and to how business is done..." - and uses expressions such as fifty-year old concepts and retro-ware. I agree but isn't the apparent lack of progress true only in the sense that "new" strategy is still a fragmented patchwork, no holistic treatment has yet been written. But this book is an attempt.

The central role of knowledge absence and epistemology to strategy is highlighted so that the author's definition of strategizing includes what some people may call insighting which I think is historically underestimated but the essence of any "new" strategy. Many strategy books such as Rumelt and Kaplan & Norton move towards planning where the most of the consultancy money lies, this moves backwards.

The author defines the field of strategy as "finding a knowledge absence to plunge into", and strategizing as "the judgment of or imaginative response to what is NOT known, to the surprising, unexpected, incomplete, or illogical nature of what arises through our practice...the interplay of identity, intent and content ... analyzed to uncover and identify knowledge absences in Nature (ignorance), in each other (indeterminacy) and in ourselves (incommensurability)".

And further, "strategic work addresses the knowledge absences at the interfaces between identity, intention, and context ... respond(s) to knowledge absences with relevant judgments...make(s) this all in to structured practice, a methodological view of dealing with uncertainties ...as a collaborative multi-person activity".

This emphasis on imagination and surprises to the detriment of "rational man" brings entrepreneurship and dynamics to strategy.

The author sees strategizing largely as knowledge management - I'd rather like to call it knowledge networking - and classifies unknowns aka knowledge absence into three categories. Ignorance is the lack of objective knowledge which is somewhere there, static, waiting for discovery. I interpreted this mostly as business intelligence. Indeterminacy means the lack of knowledge about others and their responses to our actions. I interpreted this as customer, market and competitor intelligence. This category of unknowns can be effected by, e.g., negotiating. Incommensurability means fragmentation, misfit and inability to put together different perspectives and types of knowledge into a coherent picture, because of talking past each other. The author associates data with ignorance, meaning with indeterminacy, and practice with incommensurability. These are the three types of knowing where practice is always specific, situated and unique, never general.

The author emphasizes natural language and "strategic talk" as the only means to communicate and evolve the idiosyncratic and unique character of the business model, as recently enabled by social media. He (at least indirectly) seems to criticize consultants and tools on putting the ease of use over analytic power. But many consultants like me are big fans of good visualizations, worth thousands of words, and dislike prose. Paradoxically the book follows its own line of reasoning by curly natural language and should have more structure and less text in it.

Near the end of the book the author characterizes it as a "supermarket of ideas". Instead of wanting to tell everything the book would be more useful in practice if edited. The author seems to know (because he writes) that the book is partly repetitive, to the extent that it is in some places even (subjectively) boring, but not at all difficult to read for non-English like me.

To conclude, the book points towards new strategy which is about people, dynamics and entrepreneurship, and it is an ambitious summary of the history and tools of strategy. To my mind the long and repetitive style does not decrease the value of the book but requires that you really want to read it. I wonder how many business managers have the required time and patience, maybe some of them need a middleman or an interpreter for the purpose.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

One of our best business books for 2014

By strategy+business

In *Business Strategy: Managing Uncertainty, Opportunity, and Enterprise*, J.-C. Spender takes what he calls the "entrepreneurial" path to corporate growth and market response. To the peripatetic business professor and retired dean of the School of Business & Technology at SUNY/Fashion Institute of Technology, strategy is the product of executive imagination and judgment, not just logic; the strategy process involves balancing the known, the unknown, and the unknowable. The purpose of strategic analyses, frameworks, and methods is to inspire inventiveness and inform judgment.

Spender arrives at this position by comparing the quantitative planning techniques popular in organizations after World War II--which were mostly developed by the military during the war--with the more subjective, less rigid strategic methodologies that appeared in the 1980s and that are now widespread in the business world. In the earlier era, the dominant idea was to match a firm's resources to the market's demands. The company's business model was tailored to customer needs, suppliers' offerings, labor availability, logistics, and the like. If a mismatch occurred, the resulting inefficiencies would reduce profit and threaten the firm's survival.

By contrast, explains Spender, the modern strategy process must be a much more forward-looking activity, because efficiency is no longer enough to deliver a decisive strategic advantage in many industries; instead, a so-called monopoly-based strategic advantage is needed. He cites Apple's dominance of the tablet business to illustrate the overwhelming necessity of innovation as a means of securing sustainable, above-normal profits, "especially where the 'windows of competitive advantage' seem to be opening and closing with increasing speed."

Business Strategy does an extremely thorough job of surveying the consulting tools and academic economic models and theories available to corporate strategists. The book describes in some detail the salient facets of the most essential methodologies and concepts, including SWOT, Porter's five forces, the experience curve, the balanced scorecard, the value chain, horizontal and vertical integration, and more. But again and again, Spender returns to the notion that companies must avoid letting these tools stymie their flexibility by over-objectifying decision making. Ultimately, he argues, added value stems from the strategist's choices--the entrepreneur's imagination and judgment--not from reams of analysis or data-based conclusions.

By way of example, Spender compares two strategic milestones: IBM's decision in the 1940s to turn down the patents and processes for electrophotography developed by Chester Carlson, which became the basis of the Xerox machine, and Intel's ceding of the DRAM market to low-cost Japanese competitors in the 1980s in order to focus on microprocessors. Based on market conditions at the time, IBM believed the customer base for electrophotography was too small and chose to sit on the sidelines; Intel, meanwhile, decided it could build a monopolistic position in microprocessors when neither the market potential nor the manufacturing challenges were well understood. In Spender's view, IBM hewed to the safety of the known to its detriment, whereas Intel rode the wave of strategic risk by using data analyses as the basis of a calculated leap into the unknown and unknowable.

Spender devotes a chapter in the book to the role of executives in communicating the organization's strategy to employees so that it is effectively executed. And although he delves deeply into a variety of techniques for disseminating a company's strategic program (rhetorical, formal and informal, group and individual), he concedes that if successful strategies--and, indeed, successful companies--are built on imagination, motivating people to collaborate requires equally inspired approaches. As Spender advises: "The rhetorical practice that shapes the creative actions of others is precisely what makes the modern firm possible."

Executives will ignore at their peril the fundamental message of **Business Strategy**: Once-popular mechanistic planning methodologies no longer work; they have been replaced by innovation-based models that demand flexibility and creativity. A choice to use anything less, Spender argues, is the precursor of corporate atrophy.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

but not easily implemented due to their highly abstract nature

By Cheiron

This is an unconventional book by an unconventional scholar. Spender has a wide ranging mind that is not encumbered by what most academics (or practitioners) think. Many of the ideas are provocative and fresh, but not easily implemented due to their highly abstract nature. I like how this book makes you think.

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