

The Big Lessons of a Little “Like” Button

It’s hard to imagine the digital world without that thumbs-up “like” button. Despite its ubiquity in our lives, few of us have paused to consider where it came from or just how far-reaching its impact has been.

A new book, [*Like: The Button That Changed the World*](#), written by my colleague Martin Reeves (chair of the BCG Henderson Institute) and Bob Goodson (a Silicon Valley veteran and cofounder of Quid), takes us behind the scenes of this deceptively simple innovation. On the surface, it’s a tech origin story—but at its heart, it’s a powerful reflection on how technological innovation occurs and what it means for leaders navigating today’s disruptions.

We now tap a like button more than 7 billion times a day. Inspired in part by an idea sketched out in 2005 by coauthor Goodson when he was employee number one at Yelp, this small UX solution was designed initially to encourage user content creation. It has since evolved into a critical component of the \$700 billion digital advertising industry. It has transformed how we communicate, share, promote, create, and engage—sometimes even how we derive self-worth. But none of its early creators saw that impact coming.

A Disorderly Path to a Clean Idea

The like button’s origin was strikingly fragmented. Multiple engineers in Silicon Valley were solving small, tactical design problems: how to rank content, how to reduce friction in feedback,

how to encourage user-generated content. Facebook only adopted the feature in 2009, years after prototypes had surfaced at places like Yelp and Everything2. The breakthrough wasn't a flash of genius; it was the accumulation of unremarkable moments of routine problem solving.

The story of the like button is a lesson in just how messy and unguided innovation can be. It's not typically about lone geniuses or carefully plotted strategies, despite the allure of the hero's journey narrative. It's about collaboration, timing, recombination, and serendipity—an evolutionary, collective effort. Silicon Valley's culture of open sharing created the fertile ground for the like button to grow.

That unplanned path led to a simple and powerful idea: a thumbs-up gesture recognized across time and cultures, activated through a single click. People took to it because it was familiar, frictionless, and intuitive—not because it was novel.

The like button is also powerful because it connects with an essential part of being human. Neuroscience tells us that liking—and being liked—releases dopamine, tapping into ancient evolutionary wiring that underpins our need for social belonging, affirmation, and learning from those we identify with.

The Power—and Risk—of Scale

There's a darker side to the story, too. That little thumbs-up not only powered digital connection—it also contributed to addictive behavior, self-esteem issues in teens, and social polarization. The very frictionless quality that made it ubiquitous also made it difficult to contain.

This remains a significant challenge: how to govern technologies whose consequences no one anticipates. As the book points out, regulation necessarily lags behind innovation. That's likely to be especially true with AI, where the scale, impact, and speed of change may far exceed what we've seen before.

Making Room for Serendipity

Whether we're developing new products or deploying AI tools, *Like* urges us to rethink our assumptions about innovation:

- Are we too focused on the blueprint and not enough on emergence?
- Are we building systems that allow us to identify and capitalize on parallel efforts and accidents?
- Are we anticipating and adapting to unintended side effects?

Like is an entertaining story that also brings insights into how we structure innovation inside organizations. Rather than tightly managing ideas, we need to make more room for serendipity, cross-pollination, curiosity, and bottom-up experimentation. So whether it will soon be summer at the beach or winter by the fire in your part of the world, this a great read. Thanks, Martin and Bob. My button clicking will never be quite the same.

Until next time,



Rich Lesser
Global Chair

Further Insights



Like: The Button That Changed the World

This book offers an insider's look at the creation and evolution of the like button and what it reveals about business, technology, innovation—and us.

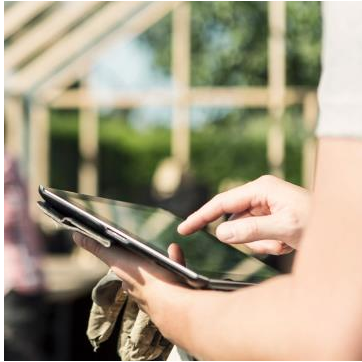
TURN LIKES INTO LEGACY



What the Like Button Can Teach Us About Innovation

We need to be open to surprises, encourage diverse contributions, and balance structured processes with flexibility and curiosity.

INNOVATE THROUGH OPENNESS



Radical Optionality

It's no longer enough to develop specific options for a given future scenario. We need to be able to adapt quickly to—and thrive in—any new reality.

FUTURE-PROOF YOUR DECISIONS