***Pardon the Disruption …***

Business school MBA programs throughout the country teach the notion of innovation through disruption in an effort to spark business leaders and would be entrepreneurs enrolled in their program. While such programs endeavor to nudge entrepreneurs out of the nest with success stories about Silicon Valley innovators (that famous guy from Apple© comes to mind), the speed of innovation and disruption today is like a spring tornado blowing through the Midwest leaving a wake of realization that ideas of would be innovators may have already been disrupted.

What is disruptive innovation? When I started my Executive MBA at the University of Denver in the spring of 2011, this concept was foreign to me. However, during my 18 months in the program, we devoted a lot of time in our marketing classes and business plan development efforts towards finding innovation. One framework used for this phrase is that an innovation will retire the incumbent. I grew up in the era of 8-tracks and cassettes and I am not exactly sure which disrupted the other. However, one thing is for sure - the compact disk and digital music disrupted both of them along with their cousin, the “LP” record. MP3 devices later disrupted the CD. Flip cameras and smart phones have disrupted the camcorder. Back in the day, I think we felt like we had to fill up the whole VHS tape and recorded life events endlessly. Now we are content with a couple of minutes of a video shot from a smart phone and then uploaded to the internet facilitating our sharing with others. The disruption occurred in the way we knew how to do things, the way we did things, and with the devices that we had familiarity.

In their Harvard Business Review article, *Big Bang Disruption* (HBR, March 2013), Downes and Nunes suggest that the life cycle of an innovation is much shorter than in the past thereby causing the approach to market saturation to be much different. Historically, innovators would seek new customers who have a low cost mentality as an entry point and then gradually pick off those high end customers by “chipping away” at the incumbent provider (Downes and Nunes, P. 46). Now innovators are leveraging the information age and the memes of social media to create “infection” (hence the phrase “viral”) through the innovation. Rather than a growing process to introduce innovation, innovators must now muster the biggest splash possible to create the viral impact. As a result, innovators are capturing early adopters and the early majority much sooner in the product cycle in order to capture market share before the next big disruption comes along. In this fast moving environment, It’s not just competitors that are innovating; companies are self-cannibalizing their own products as evidenced by the many versions of the iPhone™ and iPad™. Rather than earning their way in the market, these “Big Band Disrupters” are entering with a full out assault and looking to be significant in the market from the beginning.

To be relevant in today’s market, players have to be nimble in order to respond to the rapidly changing market environment and customer demand. Understanding the customer through today’s market intelligence protocol (i.e. the internet and its capabilities) will position a company ahead of a competitor that is relying on outdated market data gathering systems. To phrase it another way, old market research methods have been disrupted.