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Learning From Nature: The Innovative Invader

Invasive species bring major natural change. Studying such disruption can yield useful lessons for would-be innovators in business

By [Henry King](#)

From the Asian carp to the zebra mussel, invasive species are a major force of change in nature. They radically alter the ecosystems they invade, seize control of important resources from established native species, and create new opportunities for themselves and those that can adapt quickly enough to help exploit the way they affect things. They are the very model of disruptive innovation, sharing certain characteristics that can be used by executives to think afresh about their approach to [innovation](#) across all areas of business.

1. Start small. Most non-native species arrive on foreign shores in small numbers. Few survive. Those that go on to become invasive tend to exploit their smallness, which allows them to survive longer, with fewer resources, in uncertain circumstances—and to keep out of sight of competitors, predators, and parasites until they've learned how to thrive.

Acting small provides the same benefits to business innovators. In addition, thinking small can illuminate market opportunities that large companies typically overlook. Curves, the world's largest health and fitness franchise, can operate in spaces as small as 1,000 square feet. In some markets the company reportedly needs as few as 250 members to be profitable. That means that Curves can serve small, previously overlooked communities.

2. Speed up your cycles to get to resources earlier. Invasive species develop earlier and shorter reproductive cycles, allowing them to exploit precious energy sources before their native competitors. In business, there are significant opportunities for companies that can sync their cycles to their customers' needs, rather than to those of internal planning and reporting departments.

In the retail fashion industry, [Zara](#) has reduced design-to-store time from an industry norm of six-to-nine months to two-to-four weeks. Once in the store, the clothing lines stay there for no longer than four weeks, which means Zara's customers in its native Spain visit the stores up to 17 times a year (the industry average is three times a year). In 2008, Zara's parent company Inditex overtook [Gap](#) to become the world's largest clothing retailer.

3. Embrace disturbed environments and tumultuous times. Invasive species tend to find significant opportunities for success in environments that are prone to being flooded, burned, built-upon, or in some other way altered. Many invasive weeds flourish along the sides of roads or railway lines, in regularly churned agricultural land, or at the edges of forests.

The current recession and its accompanying crises in health care, real estate, the financial markets, and other industries have wreaked a similar upheaval. This provides huge opportunities for would-be innovators. The same conditions that cause most organizations to hunker down will be exploited by the next generation of leaders.

4. Think hybrid. There is growing evidence that hybridization between non-natives and native species among animals, plants, and microbes actually helps both parties. The combination of the characteristics of the native

species, which helped them flourish in the original environment, with those of the non-native species, which predisposed them to succeed in unfamiliar places, creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In 2002, [Best Buy \(BBY\)](#) demonstrated the virtue of thinking small when it bought then-tiny Geeksquad. Becoming a hybrid entity benefited both companies. In just five years, Geeksquad grew from 50 employees and \$3 million in revenues to 12,000 employees and \$1 billion in revenues. Best Buy acquired a customer-service innovation tool and a way of gaining access to people's homes, driving a further nail into the coffin of its major competitor, Circuit City.

5. Exploit under-utilized resources. Established species in any given ecosystem usually compete for the most accessible and most abundant resources. Would-be invaders are often forced to take advantage of resources that the incumbents have ignored or rejected. If they are successful in doing so, they find that they have no competitors—at least for a while—and can succeed in their new surroundings.

Some innovators have focused on undervalued customer segments and other sources of revenues. [Enterprise](#) chose to target the occasional renter, rather than the business traveler; the home, rather than the airport; and the insurance company, rather than the corporate expense account. In doing so, Enterprise left [Avis](#), [Hertz \(HTZ\)](#), and others to fight over the same customers while it outgrew them all.

6. Be a serial invader. Invasive species aren't invasive forever. Sooner or later they attract predators, competitors, parasites, diseases, and imitators. Eventually they become an established part of the ecosystem.

When this happens, it's time to search for new challenges. Over 40 years ago a young British entrepreneur named his company Virgin to denote his inexperience and "outsiderness." Since then [Sir Richard Branson](#) has continued to enter and transform industry after industry, most recently positioning Virgin Galactic as the first commercial space line. If all goes well, Branson will become the first true space invader.

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