

## F | R Interview: Futurist Paul Saffo on How to Do Well in a Recession

Carleen Hawn | Sunday, June 22, 2008 | 9:00 AM PT | [7 comments](#)



We recently spoke with [Paul Saffo](#), the technology forecaster best known for his associations with the [The Institute for the Future](#) (which he left earlier this year) and [The Long Now Foundation](#), whose mission is to replace society's "faster/cheaper mindset" with "slower/better thinking." Saffo also teaches a course on the future of engineering at Stanford, where he requires students to envision their projects — 30 years from now.

Saffo says a startup must take a long view of its place in the world — even imagine its legacy — if it is to succeed, especially in a recession. And what, in his view, is the best way to achieve this? "Focus on doing good, in addition to doing well."

**F | R:** *It's hard to stop and consider "the forest" when you're just trying to get a beta launched, meet payroll and stay afloat to the next funding opportunity. Can founders pressed by such demands make time for the "long view"?*

**Saffo:** It is hard being an innovator, so most entrepreneurs think, "I just don't have time to think about the rest of the world. I've got other things to do." But such a micro focus is actually bad for business. At Long Now, we often invoke the phrase: "The whole point of life is to learn how to become good ancestors." If you brood on that at a business level, it says that it is no longer sufficient to do well. You must also do good.

**F | R:** *An infamous litmus suggests there are only two kinds of founders: those who want to be rich, and those who want to be king. Where does the do-gooder-founder fit in?*

**Saffo:** Every entrepreneur has a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. The angel is saying "Change the world!" The devil is saying "Get rich! Get rich!" If you're only trying to get rich, you're not going to innovate. You'll be like late arrivals in the dot-com bubble — the managerial equivalent of cholesterol in our veins. Only listening to the angel isn't right, either. That just creates a children's crusade — sounds wonderful, doesn't get anywhere. Those who are most successful, like Steve Jobs, say, "Of course I will change the world. I will do something nobody else has done, and my just reward is that I will get rich." But the Andrew Carnegie model of selling your soul for profit, then buying it back with good works won't fly anymore. We all have to find our way to make a contribution, and waiting until you're a big company isn't enough. Quite simply, the world cannot wait for you.

**F | R:** *Starved for time and resources, what sorts of good works can startups realistically do?*

**Saffo:** In the dot-com era they bought billboards, so buy a roadside clean-up sign instead. Or in lieu of the Christmas party, donate the party money to charity. Let your employees vote on which one. These things are becoming quite standard in Silicon Valley, and they have tax benefits that help your cash flow. But this shouldn't just be do-gooder activity. If you apply the same entrepreneurial spirit to it that you applied to creating your company in the first place, you will find ways to do good that benefit your company in very tangible ways.

It's an old example, but look at [Interface](#), the residential and industrial carpet company. It bugged founder [Ray Anderson](#) that his product was getting thrown out whenever anyone remodeled. So he wrote his 1-800 number on the back of his carpets. "Call us, we'll pick it up." Installers loved it because it eliminated dump fees. Customers loved, it was environmental, etc. So Ray takes it a step further: He stops selling carpets and starts leasing them. Now he says, "We'll charge you if you don't return it." So people start replacing only the damaged parts, like corners that were stained. Guess what this inspires? [FLOR](#) tiles. Suddenly Ray isn't in the carpet business anymore; he has innovated a whole new consumer line of "beautiful flooring."

It all comes down to share of mind: If you do good, you stand out. And if you stand out, that makes your customers feel good, and you get more attention. So doing good is strategically valuable, especially in a recession, when you have to fight so much harder to win business.

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The businesses seriously need to revise their concept of 'premium' to stay relevant in the minds of consumers. Any economic crisis brings a threat to the economic sustainability of the firm while a tremendous opportunity to boost the brand image.

playcircuit — 11:29 AM on June 22, 2008

Reply



I love such clear-minded, innovative & practical out-of-the-box thinking that benefits everyone.

Heal the woorld.. make it a better plaaace.. for you and for me and the entire human race! :)

Luv Sayal — 5:13 PM on June 22, 2008

Reply



Thank you for providing the necessary thought leadership for the long-term.

Parrish — 6:58 PM on June 22, 2008

Reply



Great advice from somebody who successfully founded , umm, what did Paul S. found?

andrew carnegie — 8:21 PM on June 22, 2008

Reply



"what did Paul S. found?"..It's not about what he founded! It's that you can help your business by doing things that are good for the world and benefit your bottom line. After all, if your business doesn't help anyone, how successful can it be?

Roman — 9:57 AM on June 23, 2008

Reply



More preaching from self-proclaimed gugus = yada yada yada about nothing so what exactly has Saint paul given up in the last 1 year for the sake of Mrs Earth??

gimme a break.

yea yea yea — 11:04 AM on June 23, 2008

Reply



Great article. Our culture as a whole could really benefit from long-range thinking. I pod this on Kirtsy.com

Barchbo — 4:04 PM on June 24, 2008

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