

Openings: As the line for the musical standard goes, "It's the most wonderful time of the year." For whatever reasons this rings true to you, make an effort to bottle a little of this feeling so that it is available to sprinkle over any part of the coming year that does not feel quite so wonderful.

Just For Fun: In 1974, staff at Canada Post's Montreal office were noticing a considerable amount of letters addressed to Santa Claus coming into the postal system, and those letters were being treated as undeliverable. Since those employees did not want to fathom those writing the letters, mostly young children, being disappointed at the lack of responses, they started answering the letters themselves. The amount of mail sent to Santa Claus increased every Christmas, up to the point that Canada Post decided to start an official Santa Claus letter-response program in 1983. Approximately one million letters come in to Santa Claus each Christmas from many people, even those living outside of Canada, and all of them are answered, in the same languages they are written in.

Canada Post commissioned a special address for mail to Santa Claus, complete with its own dedicated postal code:

SANTA CLAUS
NORTH POLE HOH OHO
CANADA

Spotlight: For any business that is seasonal, a special set of business skills is required. Rather than maintaining a constant flow within the business, these businesses must effectively expand and contract over a very short period. What other businesses consider growing pains or downsizing, these businesses consider business as usual. For this reason, the seasonal business have much to teach us all about the reality of business.

All life, including business, is cyclical. There are always peaks and valleys with the only variable being the period over which this cycle plays out. Accepting this fact is easier once we have experienced a few valleys and our faith that we will come through the other end grows. Seasonal businesses have the shortest cycle and therefore come to terms with this fact much quicker than other businesses. They also are more honest with customers and employees regarding the commitments made. Customers know that the business will close as soon as there are insufficient customers to make staying open profitable. Employees know that their jobs are temporary no matter how well they perform their tasks. The impermanence that seasonal businesses accept is the reality of all businesses.

Lifetime commitments are something that all business should make. At the same time, it is important to be clear about how long a lifetime is. For a seasonal business, a lifetime may be as short as several weeks, for other businesses, months or years. What we often confuse with a business lifetime are relationships that appear constant over years and decades. The vacationer, returning year-after-year to the same resort, sees the illusion of one business lifetime. Facilities may change, employees come and go, and even new owners take over. Still, the vacationer has a sense of permanence where in reality, the business has lived through several lifetimes.

That people are at the heart of every business makes it easy to anthropomorphise any aspect of an enterprise. This can be beneficial or, as it is in the case of life span, this can be detrimental. When making commitments to stakeholders, be explicit regarding the period over which that commitment is valid. A lifetime can be a moment or a millennium.

Musings: For a person who has never owned and barely even touched one of their products, I find myself very interested in the company Apple Computers. What interests me most is that the company still exists.

On more than one occasion, Apple's star has fallen far enough to seal its fate in either being absorbed by another company or filing for bankruptcy. Yet at this time, Apple is the darling of Wall Street, praised for its technical and aesthetic achievements, and the trendiest brand on the market.

What this tells me about Apple is that there is more to the company than standard qualitative and quantitative measures can show. There is an intrinsic life force within the enterprise that continues to fight for its existence. This energy is very attractive to the enterprise's stakeholders and it causes them to become advocates for Apple: customers pay more, employees work harder, investors are more lenient. Even when management makes foolhardy mistakes, these people stay with Apple because they are deeply invested in its success.

I continue to watch Apple as a lesson in what is possible in building an enterprise. In between that which is visible, I am looking for the DNA of the enterprise that explains its unusual robustness. It is that essence that I am looking to understand. I can safely say that an iPod is not something in my future; a Sony Walkman was the similar device of my day. Still, as entrenched as I am in the PC world, I do hold out for the possibility of owning a Mac because for Apple, there are no disinterested consumers—just non-believers to convert.