

### What Really Matters

“Grease” was the word when Procter & Gamble first introduced Dawn dishwashing liquid in 1972, and it remained so for nearly 30 years, as noted by Ellen Byron in a *Wall Street Journal* review of *What Really Matters*, by John Pepper, the former P&G chief.

That singular focus on one idea — even one word — seemed pretty risky at the time. Conventional wisdom was that so much emphasis on just one brand benefit could be limiting.

Well, it wasn’t — at least until Colgate-Palmolive came along with “new fragrances and packaging.” As Mr. Pepper recalls, Dawn’s singular focus “on the benefit of superior grease removal” then became a liability.

“We had committed the cardinal sin of giving consumers a reason to switch from Dawn.” Of course the company “fought back with new Dawn fragrances, spruced up bottles and even an improved grease-fighting formula.”

In addition to “suspenseful and substantial” case studies, “Pepper extols the virtues of P&G’s “promote-from-within” culture, saying he can’t “imagine P&G being able to navigate so well... if it hadn’t developed a community of colleagues who had grown up together in pursuit of common goals.”

*What Really Matters* provides “a rare glimpse into a notoriously insular corporate culture... a well-rounded portrait of the challenges of managing mega-brands for a consumer-products titan and one of the world’s biggest advertisers.”

### A Culture of Improvement

Contrary to popular belief, James Watt did not invent the steam engine, Eli Whitney didn’t invent the cotton gin and Robert Fulton did not invent the steamboat, writes Adam Keiper in a *Wall Street Journal* review of *A Culture of Improvement* by Robert Friedel.

All three of those inventions actually were “incremental and derivative” improvements on existing or extant technologies. As Robert notes, these and other key inventions typically were “preceded by similar machines that incorporated most, if not all, of the principles of the famous devices.”

His main point is this: “Too often the existence of a key patent or the success of a manufacturing enterprise has diverted attention from the long and

gradual history of creativity.” That history, he argues, is not about “advancing human reason or a great, impersonal force directing the course of history.”

“Rather, it proceeds by fits and starts — held back, pushed forward or diverted by social and biographical contingencies.” For example, Robert Fulton’s name is forever associated with the steamboat not because he “invented” it but because he had the “capitalist vision and fortitude” to figure out how to make money from it.

The reason Robert Friedel’s book is worth reading, says Adam Keiper, is that he’s not a *futurist* who tries to predict where technologies might lead us, but rather a *historian* who understands that “everyday technologies were born of creative genius, hopeful investment, clever marketing, shifting social arrangements and, often enough, sheer serendipity.”

### The Cigarette Century

“It seems striking that a product of such little utility, ephemeral in its very nature, could be such an encompassing vehicle for understanding the past,” writes Allan M. Brandt in his new book, *The Cigarette Century*, reviewed by Jonathan Miles in *The New York Times*.

“But the cigarette,” he continues, “permeates 20th century America as smoke fills an enclosed room.” Indeed, cigarettes claimed “only five percent of the domestic tobacco market” in 1904. But by the 1950s, “nearly half of all adults smoked. Cigarettes were ubiquitous, with ashtrays freckling every room: nurseries, doctor’s offices, TV news studios.”

When “the causal relationship between smoking and lung cancer was finally ‘proven’ in scientific terms ... the industry devised a cagey defense; rather than denying the harms of smoking, it insisted there were ‘two sides to the story,’” and framed “consensus as controversy.”

However, Jonathan Miles thinks that Allen Brandt failed “to examine the central, vexing paradox of smoking: that in return for death, cigarettes give pleasure.”

Or, as Jean Cocteau once wrote: “One must not forget that the pack of cigarettes, the ceremony that extracts them, lights the lighter, and that strange cloud which penetrates us and which our nostrils puff, have with powerful charms seduced and conquered the world.”

