

Technology & Society

Title: *Platform Leadership*

Authors: Annabelle Gawer and Michael A. Cusumano

Publisher: [Harvard Business School Press](#)

Copyright: 2002

ISBN: 1-57851-514-9

Pages: 304

Price: \$29.95

Rating: 88%

There's an old gambler's adage that says you'll never lose if you get to define the rules of the game. The equivalent situation in business is when a company's products become accepted as the standard for a given function. The three companies discussed in *Platform Leadership* all, to one extent or another, define the rules of electronic commerce.

Gawer's research, as directed by her faculty advisor Cusumano, focused on the strategies and tactics technology firms use to ensure internal innovation is matched by innovations from firms with complementary products. To promulgate the Universal Serial Bus (USB) standard, which is a socket on a computer into which you can plug a wide variety of devices (printers, external hard disks, scanners, and such), Intel had to convince its competitors that signing on to a standard developed by Intel wouldn't lock everyone else in to a development path where the entrenched, well-financed firm would have a decisive advantage.

Intel overcame their competitors' hesitance by sharing much of what they developed, both in terms of standards and in terms of hardware developments. By making the playing field relatively level, while also working around the fact that there is a benefit to having developed the technology from scratch, Intel managed to convince the industry to adopt its USB standard. Manufacturers benefited from the consensus to adopt USB in that they were able to begin designing their peripherals with USB connections in mind, and consumers benefited because they could shop for products differentiated by features, not based on features and the type of plug by which the peripheral connected to a computer.

There is a lot of great information in *Platform Leadership*, but I hesitate from giving it a 90% rating because of the writing style, which I found to be a bit stilted. In the book's preface, there is a note that the book is based on Gawer's dissertation research, which she completed in January 2000. In fact, the standard dissertation formula of "a thesis and three examples" works well here: Intel, Microsoft, and Cisco fought for the same goals, but used sufficiently different methods of cooperating with (and, in some cases, co-opting) complementary organizations to add some welcome diversity to her work.

That Gawer and Cusumano were able to turn her dissertation into a viable business book is a testament both to her work and to the insight on the part of the acquisitions editors at Harvard Business School Press. The submission guidelines you'll find for any press invariably state that unedited dissertations are, as a rule, not suitable for professional publication. Not only is a dissertation usually the author's first book-length project, it is usually written in the maddening academic writing style where passive voice is relied upon to avoid direct statements, causing the author to appear to be distanced from the subject they're describing. I'm happy to report that *Platform Leadership* is a mature work product, though it's also true that the writing isn't up to the level of more

experienced Harvard Business School Press authors.

I am, of course, comparing a newcomer to the masters of the game, so I hope I don't come across as being too harsh. *Platform Leadership* cuts to the heart of how companies establish themselves as industry leaders, and even if the book stopped its discussion after showing how Intel pursues its strategies it would still be well worth your time.

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