BIG FISH, SMALL POND:

THE POWER OF BRAND POSITIONING

WITHIN EMERGING TECHNOLOGY MARKETS

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Advertising
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

May 2026

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Maya Sykes for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Advertising to be taken June 2026

Title: Big Fish, Small Pond: The Power of Brand Positioning
Within Emerging Technology Markets

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Primary Thesis Advisor

In an oversaturated media environment, creating advertising that impacts the consumer is increasingly difficult. For a company to succeed in our society, they must position themselves in the consumer's mind. Inspired by the framework and definition of positioning in Al Ries and Jack Trout's *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, this thesis examines the factors and strategies that drive success in emerging technology markets. Specifically, it explores the big fish, small pond concept, asking what it takes for a brand to claim and defend a dominant position in a nascent market. This thesis covers four case studies comparing the leader and challenger of recent technological advances: 1. early computing, 2. internet browsers, 3. social media, and 4. artificial intelligence. Through literary review and analysis, this thesis discovered the vitality of positioning in determining the success of a new technology. A brand must focus on the people, not the product, to last more than a few years in this ever-changing industry.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my support system. To my family, friends, and everyone in between who extended kindness and support throughout this process. Thank you for listening and more importantly, caring. To David Ewald, the GOAT, thank you for your guidance, humility, and always meeting me where I am. To Slavka Eberhart-Garah, thank you for changing my approach to advertising and to life. You both are the reason I fell in love with strategy. To Autumn Shafer and Brian McWhorter, thank you for helping make this project a little less looming. Finally, thank you to the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication for introducing me to the world of advertising and showing me what I could be.

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Authors Note

As I wrote this thesis, my goal was seemingly simple: learn how positioning impacts success in technology markets. However, throughout the process, I learned that my goal was anything but that. One thing advertising and technology have in common is that they are ever-shifting, subjective, and complex. To combat this, I attempted to stick to facts and examples. Yet, opinion and emotion always tint advertising, that's what makes it what it is. I came to terms that I cannot be completely objective, but I can present the facts and allow the reader to come to their own conclusions alongside me.

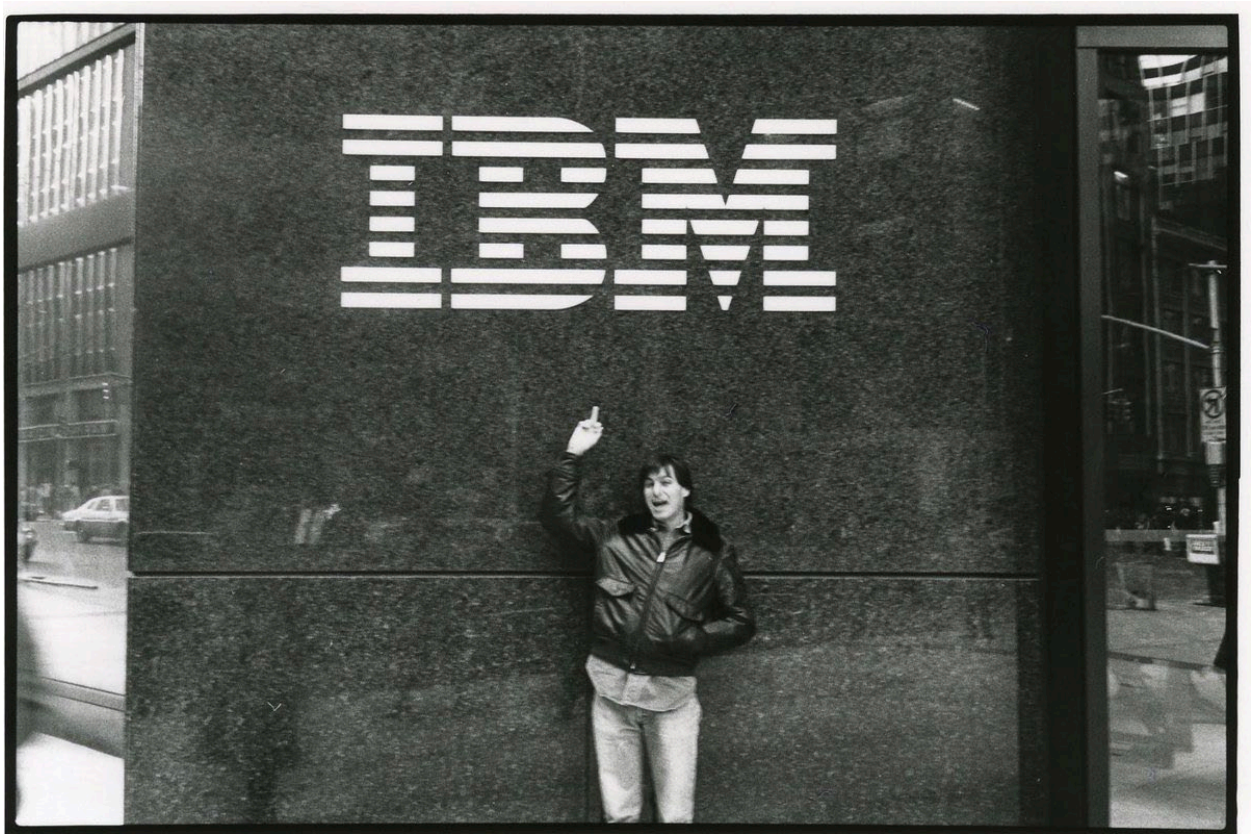
The world of technology is vast, and humanity is characterized by innovation. To make it bite-sized, I sectioned this thesis in four case studies. Each case study contains a recent technological invention that led to a competition between the first and second on the market. There are usually more players in the game; I chose the ones that I thought characterized my topic and the era best. Technology is ever evolving. You can nail down an informative era, but in a few years the market leaders can completely shift.

In this process I came to know a few truths:

1. There are a lot of variables in technology and advertising.
2. One thesis cannot cover the entirety of technology, nor can it cover all four technological advancements in full. It can cover the necessary information to the topic.
3. Technology markets are cutthroat. Everyone is pushing to the top at any cost. Every company mentioned utilized sound strategy but also questionable ethics. I had to come to term with separating the morality of the brand with the lessons they teach about advertising to combat this divide.

Finally, I learned that in advertising and life, knowledge is everything. To look forward, we must look back.

“People hate advertising until they lose their cat.” - David Droga



Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, at IBM in New York City, 1993 (Pigozzi)

Introduction

When a new technology emerges, they benefit from the big fish, small pond effect. They might only have one to two direct competitors. It is better to be a big fish in a small pond, and increase the size of your pond, then vice versa. This concept and the basis of this thesis stems from Al Ries and Jack Trout's *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind.* The concept of positioning was first introduced by Al Ries in Advertising Age article titled "The Positioning Era Cometh" in 1972. The concept was based in the idea that advertising, which had previously worked, would no longer be viable. Creativity was no longer the sole key to success; the market was beginning to become too oversaturated. Ries and Trout emphasized in order "To succeed in our over-communicated society; a company must create a "position" in the prospect's mind. A position that takes into consideration not only its own strength and weaknesses, but those of its competitors as well" (Ries, Trout 1972). All of these ideas were encapsulated into the holy book of strategy: *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind.* Despite being published in the 1980s, the book continues to serve as a lighthouse in a populated market.

This thesis is framed around the following concepts outlined in *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*:

1. The ultimate goal of advertising is to continuously claim space in the consumer's mind. It is not about the product, but how a brand is perceived relative to its competitors.
2. People mentally rank brands within a category in hierarchy, like the rungs of a ladder. Only a few brands can occupy each category, and their strategy must account for their position on ladder.

3. The leader is the inventor or first to market, and in doing so automatically wins the top rung of the ladder, the challenger must work to fill out the rung below. It is difficult, if not impossible, to replace the top rung in the minds of people. People do not like change.
4. Focus on the people, not the product. A state-of-the-art product can lose easily to a better positioned one.
5. Complexity is the enemy of positioning. A strong strategy can be watered down to three pillars: simple, memorable, and credible.
6. Leaders and challengers must have different positioning tactics. The leader's goal is to reinforce and defend their position. The challenger's job is to fill a gap through differentiation and repositioning.
7. Repositioning can be a gamechanger for the challenger. A brand can reposition the competitor or the entire category in their favor.
8. Repositioning the leader means reframing how consumers see the leading brand, making their strengths into a reason to choose something different. Repositioning a category is changing how consumers think about a product category and shifting it in their favor.

This thesis aims to discover what factors and actions create success in the increasingly populated market. Each case study shows a different strategy technique in the battle between leader and challenger for positioning in a customer's mind. They all have comparable products but one succeeded over the other. The goal is to explore why this is. In the case of early computing, the one that succeeded repositioned the other company. When the browser wars followed, the successor repositioned the category. In the expansion of social media, the winner did both.

Positioning dictates the difference between playing to not lose and playing to win. To truly understand positioning, one must understand what came before it.

An Abridged History of Brand Positioning in Advertising

Before positioning, there was branding, and before that: a brand. Advertising, in its modern definition, was spurred by the Industrial Revolution. The invention of mass production allowed for efficiency and technological advances never seen before. Increased production means more products, creating more choices. Choice resulted in the emergence of packaging, brand name, and labeling (Landa 2006). Between 1870-1920, inventions were being created in every aspect of human life (Vista Print 2025). Literacy was on the rise, and the invention of photography, typewriters, and mass media was transforming the way people consume. When the United States implemented trademarks in 1870, this process was expedited and by 1906, there were over 10,000 registered trademarks (Lurito 1985). Companies began to realize they needed to stand out to succeed.

By the beginning of the 20th century, industrial growth was at an all-time high. For the first time, people had extra income to spend on the non-essential goods. The rise of mass media attributed to the desire for brands (Landa 2006). Print advertising consisted of mainly informative graphics, usually explaining the product. Brands differentiated themselves through design choices (Vista Print 2025). However, the emergence of radio sponsorships and advertisements in the 1920's tied value with brand. As said by Robin Landa, "Not only would a brand name soap clean your clothes better than the others, but it also paid for a broadcast radio program that was entertaining" (Landa 2006). When television became mainstream in the 1940s, this idea expanded to an even broader audience. Mass media allowed people to form relationships to brands, now that they were memorable and relatable through advertising.

Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind separates advertising from the 1950's till now into three distinct eras: product era, image era, and the positioning era. The product era started in the

1950s when advertising consisted of having the better product and the funds to promote it. Most advertising at the time focused the features and benefits of a product (Ries, Trout 1980). However, the consumer culture was transforming. Industry in the United States continued to develop with the expansion of the middle class and suburbanization (Vista Print 2025). Competition brands were emerging tenfold and brands a way to needed to stand out. Thus, in the 1940s, came the image era. Companies found increased success when they valued their reputation over simply product features (Ries, Trout 1980). David Ogilvy, often recognized as the "the father of advertising," was considered the architect of this era. His famous quote characterized the era well "Every advertisement is a long-term investment in the image of a brand." As advertising and branding became more prevalent, formal marketing research started being performed. The expansion of qualitative research allowed for greater understanding of consumer decision making (Keller 2025). As said by Ries and Trout said, "Successful companies found that reputation, or image, was more important in selling a product than any specific product feature." Branding was now about understanding your consumer. Brands began focusing on the emotional side of advertising, going from purely informative to intimate (Vista Print 2025). However, as with any era, it came to an end. With the emergence of many "me-too" brands, every company was trying to establish a reputation for themselves in an increasingly saturated market (Ries, Trout 1980).

Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind introduces the idea that companies must position themselves in the mind of the consumer to succeed in an overcommunicated society. With the overwhelming stimuli of the newly expanded media environment, the consumers brain rejects information that does not draw on previous knowledge or experiences (Ries, Trout 1980). Starting in the 1980s, creativity was no longer the sole key to success. Advertising was not about

inventing the best item, it was about being the first in the consumer's mind. Ries and Trout focus on Michelob as an example of this concept. Michelob justified premium priced American-made beer with the simple yet effective slogan "First class is Michelob." In a short few years, they became one of the largest-selling beers in the United States, despite the higher price. Michelob was neither the first expensive domestic beer nor new to the scene, yet they were the first to position as such in the beer consumers mind (Ries, Trout 1980).

The foundation of *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* is built on a few core principles. Most importantly, the leading brand has the advantage. They can be the first in the consumer's mind. When a company creates a truly new product, it is more impactful to the consumer to demonstrate what it is not, versus what it is. Being second is more challenging but does not mean it is impossible to succeed. It is, however, very hard, if not impossible, to dislodge an idea from the consumer's brain. This creates the opportunity for the company to utilize their position to their advantage. A company can reposition competitors or reposition as a different market. They can use the positioning already in the consumers mind to their advantage. Ries and Trout warn about never competing directing with a category leader and instead focus on creative ways to differentiate themselves. Finally, companies should focus on the simplification of their messaging. This way is easier to find a window into someone's mind.

In today's media landscape, internet has led to an extreme oversaturation of information and an increase in instant gratification. Companies must position themselves to break through the overcrowded mind of the consumer. Being successful in today's market is no longer about having the best product or bring the most creativity, it is about finding what makes your product stick in the consumers mind. The leader is the first on the market and has the advantage of taking up most of the consumer's mind. However, the second on the scene, the challenger, has the

opportunity to learn from the inventor and reposition based on what has distanced the consumer from the product. In the following case studies, this paper will explore how being the inventor does not always equate success and how brand positioning is vital to entering the mind of the consumer.

Case Study #1: The Battle for Personal Computing

The battle for personal computing was a cutthroat competition between the Goliath, International Business Solutions (IBM) and the David, Apple Inc. Their fight for the personal computer market is a saga of innovation, strategic decisions, and knowing your audience at its core. Nowadays, everyone has heard of Apple but only have a general idea of IBM's offerings. In the early days of personal computing, IBM had the reputation and market share. Apple was the new kid on the block. Despite impossible odds, Apple was able to reposition IBM in the mind of the consumer and surpass them to greater heights. How they did this? Unlike IBM, Apple succeeded by focusing on the people instead of the product.

International Business Machines (IBM)

International Business Machines (IBM) is one oldest and most well-known computer companies in the world. They have spent their hundred-year existence pushing the boundaries of human capability. For decades, IBM was known for their consistent revolutionary inventions. IBM is responsible for the inventions that form the backbone of modern computing including the first completely electronic computing machine, hard drives, and FORTRAN, the precursor to most modern computer coding languages (Reed 2020).

The company began in June of 1911, when three dominant data-processing technology companies merged to create the Computing-Tabulating-Recording company, later known as IBM. Led and financed by businessman Charles Ranlett Flint, the company became the leader of industrial products such as punch-card tabulators, time clocks, and scales (Reed 2020). The first president, Thomas J. Watson, is credited with the vast expansion of IBM.

The early 1900s were a time of great technological advancement, with the implementation of telephones, electricity, and the Model T car. IBM took advantage of that by

focusing on the data emphasis in their various technologies (IBM). Watson was a salesman, he invested in the company's sales force and acquired further technologies, such as electric typewriters, to diversify offerings. When Watson's son, Watson Jr., assumed his father's position, IBM finally joined the mainframe computer market with their first machine in 1952 (Anderson 2023). In 1964, they disrupted the industry by releasing the first comprehensive family of computers, the System/360 (Computer History Museum). This invention forced main competitors of IBM to merge or go bankrupt, allowing IBM to lead the market. In the 1960s, IBM made 70% of the computers used worldwide and 80% of the ones used within the United States (Anderson 2023). IBM became synonymous with the nickname "Big Blue," supposedly because of the company's widespread influence and iconic logo color. With their influence in the market and exponential success, when IBM released their first personal computers, "Big Blue" made a big splash.

IBM's first Personal Computer (PC) was released in 1981, with the goal of widespread use for the public. Each was equipped with Microsoft's Disk Operating System (MS DOS). While other companies had released personal computers before, but they were characterized for hobbyists and nerds. IBM legitimized the market through their unique advances and standing reputation in computing (Computer History Museum). It was one of the first-time computers were targeted at the public. The IBM PC could connect to a television, process text, and play games (IBM). The capabilities of the IBM streamlined business operations, fundamentally changing corporate America (IBM). Companies all over the United States incorporated computers into the office for the first time (Computer History Museum). When IBM's Personal System/2 released in 1987, their computers took the world by storm. The PC/2 reimagined layout, display quality, speed, and memory (IBM). The PC/2 implemented legacy computer

components such as keyboard and mouse ports (Carleton University). The computer also found strong support in corporate and academic settings. However, within a year, hundreds of similar copycats were filling the market. IBM struggled to keep up with their high costs and lack of compatibility with other technology (Carleton University). With invention comes competition, and a small start-up named Apple was about to give IBM a run for their money.

Apple Inc.

"His name is Steve. He likes to do pranks like you do, and he's also into building electronics like you are" (Isaacson 25). In history, there are moments we look back to and understand the significance of that moment. When Bill Fernandez connected his two friends, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak in 1971, little did he know he was taking part in the creation the revolutionary technology brand Apple.

In the beginning, Jobs and Wozniak connected over their love of electronics and shared goal to change the public perception of computing. Compared to the refrigerator sized computers of the time, they wanted to make ones that were small enough for homes and offices. Jobs and Wozniak built their first machines in Jobs' family garage in 1976. The two presented their prototype to their employers, two prominent electronics companies: Hewitt and Packard (HP) and Atari. Both turned down the now almost four trillion-dollar company (CNN Money). To raise the necessary $1,300 to build their computer, Jobs sold his Volkswagen minibus and Wozniak his programmable HP calculator (Lemelson-MIT).

The risk paid off. With Wozniak's computing proficiency and Job's marketing prowess, their start up quickly found success. In 1976, the Apple Computer Company was officially founded and released their first computer, "Apple I." The unit sold for $666 and was the first single-board computers with onboard Read Only Memory (ROM). The following year, former

Intel executive Mike Markkula, contributed $600,000 of venture funding and expanded the company to Apple Computer Inc. (Lemelson-MIT, Computer History Museum). In April of 1977, Apple II was introduced, including color graphics and a plastic case. This computer took the company to another level. Jobs encouraged programmers to create applications for Apple II, leading to over 15,000 available within the machine (Lemelson-MIT). Apple's revenue increased 15x from $7.8 million in 1978 to $177 million in 1980, the year they went public. With the creation of their revolutionary Lisa computer and the following renowned Macintosh, Apple took their first steps in becoming the iconic brand we all know.

Apple's Lisa released in 1983 with a transformative mouse-driven graphic user interface (GUI). Inspired by their visit to Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), Apple implemented windows, icons, menus, and pointers, all controlled by a mouse (Hsu 2023). They were the first to introduce the "desktop" concept. Lisa was targeted at the business market with a larger processer and hard drive (Hsu 2023). Despite all these advances still utilized today, Lisa was unsuccessful. The computer was slow and incredibly expensive at $9,995 (The Computer Museum). Former Lisa team member, Jeff Raskin, and Jobs had a vision for the next generation. Raskin wanted "a small, portable 'computer for the people,' envisioned as a versatile 'Swiss army knife,' an easy-to-use appliance" (EBSCO, 2021). Both Raskin and Jobs pushed the team to create a more cost effective but limited computer (The Computer Museum). The Macintosh was announced in a commercial at the 1984 Super Bowl. The Macintosh was revolutionary but not because of its computing capabilities. The Macintosh was a compact, all-in-one computer with an included screen, floppy disk, keyboard, mouse, and power supply (Tashev 2023). However, the true impact was through aesthetics. The computer opened to a cursive "hello" and included multiple sized fonts, a distinctive shape, and rounded buttons (EBSCO 2021). Before

Macintosh, computers were focused on capabilities with little attention to aesthetics. However, the line between innovation and imitating is fine, Apple needed to make bold moves to pull ahead of the pioneering IBM.

PC/2 v. Macintosh: Hammering Down Big Blue

> "Innovation has nothing to do with how many [research and development] dollars you have. When Apple came up with the Mac, IBM was spending at least 100 times more on [research and development]. It's not about money. It's about the people you have, how you're led, and how much you get it."
>
> – Steve Jobs, Co-founder of Apple

A singular 60 second commercial changed the course of the early personal computing. IBM was winning. They had everything in their corner: first in the market, innovative technology, and most importantly: reputation. In 1983, Apple was selling two for every three IBM computers sold, and it was only getting worse (Rai 2026). IBM was on the rise and Apple was flailing. Their previous computers, Apple II and Lisa were not gaining the traction they have hoped. Apple was younger, less established and struggling to make their mark compared to IBM. Then came the Macintosh, Job's "pet project." Jobs described the Macintosh as "the people's computer," it incorporated the vital parts Lisa while including a GUI (Oldham 1996). The Macintosh was more than a computer, it was "a democratizing tool for creatives, thinkers, and dreamers" (Thackray). Apple needed to make a big move and in turn, reposition IBM. Hence, the idea for the iconic "1984" commercial was born.

Apple hired advertising firm Chiat/Day who created the concept, inspired by George Orwell's dystopian novel, 1984 (Hintz 2014). The commercial was filmed by Ridley Scott, the director behind *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982), and a master of dystopian aesthetics and storytelling (Hintz 2014). The advertisement was a metaphor for Apple's role in the computing

industry. The ad, titled “1984,” began with the marching of similar uniform drab clones. Occasional flashes show a woman in bright clothing running from guards, holding a sledgehammer. A voiceover recites lyrics from “The Times They Are A-Changing” by Bob Dylan. They all file into a room entranced by a Big Brother figure on the screen. Big Brother admires the society’s successful “Unification of Thoughts.” The woman enters the room, throwing the sledgehammer at the screen. The Big Brother image explodes into a flash of light. As the camera pans the rows of shocked faces, the screen reads “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like ‘1984.’” The screen fades to black, showing a simple rainbow Apple logo. The advertisement did not show a single computer.

The commercial was shown in the 3rd quarter of Superbowl XVIII on January 22, 1984. It was viewed by 43 million Americans (Hintz 2014). When the football game returned, CBS announcers Pat Summerall and John Madden asked each other, “Wow, what was that?” Apple’s Macintosh sold 50,000 computers in the first three months of availability (Macro 2014). The product marketing manager at the time, Barabara Koalkin, exclaimed “We could have sold 200,000 Macintoshes if we could have built them.” There was a noticeable effect after the release of “1984” in the advertising industry. It was one of the first times that advertisers experienced earned media. Despite only being aired once, the commercial gained massive recognition from being reshown by news networks (Hintz 2014). John O'Toole, president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, emphasized “What ‘1984’ as a commercial for Apple really signified was the first time somebody could put a great deal of production money into a single commercial and run it only once and get tremendous benefit from running it only once” (Johnson 1994). The Super Bowl transitioned to advertisement event as well, with viewers

tuning in to see the high budget statements. The ad anticipated the blend of commercial advertising and entertainment that was seen almost 20 years later (Barton 2025). Television advertising grew exponentially and shifted from the previous personality-based, transactional nature (Hintz 2014).

Apple's "1984" showed that emotional advertising can sell and create cultural impact with little to no product focus. The Macintosh was focused on the people, not the product. IBM was doing the opposite. The commercial positioned Apple as the underdog, selling a feeling of freedom and individuality rather than technical details (Rai 2026). It also showed the value in repositioning your competitor. Apple painted IBM as Big Brother, dominating with "dull conformity" and alienating man from the computer (Hintz 2014). Apple portrayed themselves as defeating this regime, liberating the world from IBM's corporate dominance. The ad tied into political sentiments of the time, with the distrust and fear from George Orwell's book and the Cold War. Apple were not just selling computers; they were leading a revolution.

The Macintosh, as a technology, was not groundbreaking but their strategy was. Apple positioned themselves in the consumers mind as the liberator. In 60 seconds, Apple took IBM from the reliable classic to the oppressive dominator. This was a vital move in pushing Apple further as a brand. Through emotional yet simple storytelling and differentiation, Apple was able to shift the way consumers saw IBM in their favor. IBM's reputation became a reason to choose something different. They turned IBM's strength into an ailment. And the cure? An Apple.

Case Study #2: The Browser Wars

The Browser Wars between Netscape and Microsoft was a fight for the future. The World Wide Web (the web) was brand-new, much to the credit of Netscape. Society had never had this level of connectivity. The competition between Netscape and Microsoft was on a Real Housewives level of drama and intrigue. From disruptive technology to antitrust lawsuits to braggadocios founders, the Browser Wars had it all. Despite being late to the game, Microsoft prevailed. They succeeded through not just repositing themselves, but the entire category. Browsers were no longer separate entities; they were intertwined pieces of software.

Netscape

The internet would not be what it is today without Netscape Navigator. They paved the way for all web-based technology. Founded in 1994 by Marc Andreessen and Jim Clark, Netscape started the revolution that led to global connectivity. When the first renditions of Netscape were being developed in January 1993, there were 50 known Web servers. By October, there was more than 500. In 1994, following the release of their first edition, there were 1,500 (Wolfe 1994). Netscape's story began with Marc Andreessen, a 21-year-old technology savant studying at University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. In 1993, with a team of fellow students, Andreessen created the first graphical web browser, Mosaic. Mosaic was the first browser with a graphic interface (Barksdale 1999).

While Mosaic was not the most optimal browser available, its user-friendly design made it so popular. As it stood, the web had platform-specific pages with tightly packed text (Blitz 2019). Mosaic made the web fun. Using it longer required technological knowledge or specific keyboard commands. The user did not need to be experienced to use the software. It was appearance focused and allowed uploading of documents such as color photos, sound bites,

video clips, and most notably hypertext links to other documents (Wolfe 1994). The hypertext allowed for traveling through the web and exploring information in ways like never before. As *Wired* described it in 1994, "Mosaic is not the most direct way to find online information. Nor is it the most powerful. It is merely the most pleasurable way" (Wolfe 1994). Mosaic created the web with the components needed to gain popularity, allowing for self-publishing and interconnectedness in the vast pool of information. Andreessen's goal was to democratize and globalize the web (Barksdale 1999). His approach was to allow maximum flexibility and openness. All items on the web looked similar, but could be accessed on any reader or browser, a crucial addition in making the web attainable.

Jim Clark, a successful businessman with a Fortune-500 start-up making computer graphic workstations, was enamored by the prospect of the internet. He heard about Andersseen's work and emailed him. The two met up and eventually incorporated on April 4, 1994. Since the software was made on University of Illinois campus, they held the intellectual property rights to the original Mosaic. They needed to start from scratch. Andersseen recommended hiring the Mosaic team to rebuild, given they were all freshly graduated and looking for work (Blitz 2019). Clark emphasized, "I didn't want a single line of code from [the original Mosaic], because that's how we were going to stay out of court." Unfortunately, University of Illinois raised infringement claims, settling with millions of dollars and a name change to Netscape (Blitz 2019). However, with Clark and Andersseen's combined forces and talented team of freshly graduated engineers, Netscape released Netscape Navigator 1.0 by the end of 1994 (Barksdale 1999). They were the first commercial company to distribute software over the Internet. Merely four years later, that became and continues to be the standard still utilized today (Barksdale 1999).

With the release of Navigator 1.0, Netscape saw incredible success. They offered unheard-of security and higher performance than other browsers of the time. Navigator was a computer add-on, costing $39 for personal use, with bulk discounts available (Barksdale 1999). Netscape had unprecedent growth, being named the fastest-growing software company in history at the time (Barksdale 1999). Within four months of release, 75% of people on the Internet were using Netscape Navigator (Heiney 2023). Quickly after the launch, Jim Barksdale joined as CEO and brought large investors with him. Netscape went public in August 1995. It was the largest opening day for a company to that point, with Netscape's net worth jumping to $4.4 billion (Heiney 2023). The Wall Street Journal pointed out that "It had taken General Dynamics 43 years to be worth $2.7 billion in the stock market. It took Netscape about a minute." The craze of Netscape's Wall Street bonanza showed the public, and the Wall Street, that the internet was a business not to be ignored. During this time, Netscape was often called "the Microsoft of the Internet" but that nickname would not last (Campbell 2015).

Microsoft

A defunct magazine named *Popular Electronics* is what led to the behemoth everyone knows as Microsoft. In December 1974, Paul Allen saw the latest issue of *Popular Electronics* at a kiosk in Harvard Square featuring the "World's First Microcomputer Kit." Allen ran to his friend, Bill Gates, exclaiming "It's happening without us!" (Gates). They went on the create computer and internet technology that revolutionized the industry. Bill Gates and Paul Allen were long time friends, initially meeting at Lakeside School, a renowned preparatory school in Seattle, Washington. Gates and Allen bonded over their shared infatuation with computers (Rodini 2026). The two spent hours in University of Washington's computer science lab, home to the Sigma, a million-dollar rare mainframe computer. When they weren't at the lab, they were

hacking into the computer system, leading to their ejection in 1971 (Rodini 2026). By 1973, Gates has started at Harvard University and Allen had recently dropped out of University of Washington to work as a computer programmer in Boston (Rodini 2026). When Allen walked past the newsstand, he predicted the computer revolution had begun. He was right.

Paul wrote a letter fibbing to Micro Instrumentation and Telemetry Systems (MITS) claiming they had written their system in the computer language BASIC. MITS said the first group to complete the software wins. Gates dropped out of Harvard and the two got to work making their claim a reality. For two months, the two tirelessly coded before their meeting at MITS headquarters in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Even as the plane touched down, Allen finished a forgotten piece of code (Gates). The software worked and they got MITS licensing deal. Thus, Micro-soft, a mix of "microprocessor" and "software," was born in 1975 (Gates).

In early 1979, Allen and Gates relocated to Bellevue, Washington in hopes of acquiring more software engineers (Rodini 2026). A year later, Gates secured a deal with IBM to create an operating system for their new personal computer. IBM released their first PC in 1981 with MS-DOS, a Microsoft's first operating system. Their software became the standard, later being installed in 90% of all personal computers (Rodini 2026). MS-DOS became a building block in creating Windows. Released in 1985, it included a graphical user interface along with word processing, spreadsheet abilities, and increased storage (Dewey 2024). Allen had to leave his position at Microsoft due to illness, although he remained vice chairman until 2000 (Gates). Quickly after the initial release of Windows, Microsoft went public in 1986, selling for $21 a share (Stoddard, 2022). By the end of the day, 2.5 million shared were sold, leaving Gate's 45% stake worth $350 million. Microsoft stock increased hundredfold between 1986 and 1996. Within a year of the company going public, Bill Gates became the world's youngest billionaire.

Windows 95 brought the world Microsoft's first web browser, Internet Explorer (IE). The first two renditions were released in 1995. They were add-ons to Windows 95 and later Apple's Macintosh (Schnoll 1998). They did not cause much stir in the internet community because there was nothing differentiating them. IE 3.0 changed that. Released in 1996, IE 3.0 was fully integrated into all Windows 95 computers. It had a wide variety of features, including image support and audio playback without another application needed (Fried 2010). IE 3.0 matched all the capabilities of competitors and was an all-in-one package. Microsoft was essentially giving the browser out "for free." However, a lot of people did not enjoy having their decisions made for them, especially with the security vulnerabilities IE was experiencing (Schnoll 1998). In 1997, Microsoft claimed that IE 3.0 could not be uninstalled from Windows 95 (Schnoll 1998). Due to this, Microsoft was embroiled in antitrust litigation for preventing from uninstalling IE and using other browsers (Steele 2021). The case was eventually settled, ruling that Microsoft was a monopoly. Although, Microsoft won an important appeal. They did not have to split into two companies separating operating systems and software (Beattie 2026). By IE 4.0, Microsoft had caught up if not surpassed the technology of other browsers. The rendition introduced the foundations of the internet known today like Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) for design (Firefox). The best part, the browser was all wrapped up in a beautiful Microsoft package. Everything was deeply intertwined into the Microsoft ecosystem. By the time IE5 came out, Internet Explorer and Netscape were neck and neck.

Navigator v. Internet Explorer: Escaping Netscape

> "Netscape will soon reduce Windows to a poorly debugged set of device drivers."
> – Marc Andreessen, Co-founder of Netscape

In 1995, Netscape Navigator had 90% of the market share. Five years later, Microsoft's Internet Explorer had 95% of the market share (Naughton, 2015). How did Microsoft steal almost the entire market share in half a decade? Microsoft did not just position themselves; they repositioned the category. Netscape was the first on the scene to make the World Wide Web available to the masses (Long 2011). While Microsoft was leading in the computer world, they did not have an internet server, or even a way to connect to internet until 1993 (Naughton 2015). When Netscape's founders began boasting that their browser could become the only real piece of software needed for computer, Bill Gates took that as a declaration of war (Long 2011). Microsoft threw everything into internet. From software giveaways to massive developing conferences, they seduced high level programmers into creating a browser that would take away users from Netscape (Jackson 1996). Microsoft's efforts came to fruition with the release of Internet Explorer (IE) 3.0, it matched every Netscape feature and was free. Netscape focused on the product. They implemented dozens of features that added convenience but bloated the software. Microsoft was homed in on making external browsers obsolete (The History of the Web 2017). In 1995, Gates delivered his now-famous Pearl Harbor Day address pledging to "embrace and extend" the internet. He emphasized "When we say the browser is free, we're saying something different from what other people are saying. We're not saying you can use it for 90 days, or you can use it unless you're a corporation, or you can use it and then maybe next year we'll charge you a bunch of money" (Andrews Flores 1997). Microsoft was going for the kill, and nothing could stand in their way.

Netscape was not sitting idly by. Netscape founders, Marc Andreesen and Jim Clark enlisted corporate manager, Jim Barksdale to help in the fight. Barksdale was best known for his previous influential work with AT&T and FedEx (Jackson 1996). He implemented a few key

company initiatives. Barksdale knew the only way to truly compete was make sure they were on equal footing. His first move was making sure the programmers were well supported and moral was high, as they were a vital factor in keeping up with technology of Microsoft (Jackson 1996). Barksdale and Netscape partnered with Sun Microsystems in late 1995 (Barksdale 1999). Sun Microsystems had created a net-based programming language named Java. Java made it possible for websites to have fully functional applications, like word processors (Jackson 1996). It was a direct threat to Microsoft Office products. Microsoft centralized their "embrace and extend" strategy. Microsoft would "embrace," take everything Netscape was doing, and "extend," add extra to give them a leg up (Jackson 1996). The true choice that took Microsoft to the finish line was because bundling the software and making it accessible. Internet Explorer was everywhere and anywhere. Users could download from the internet or Microsoft for no cost. It was installed in every Microsoft computer after Windows 95 as the default browser. It expanded their computers capabilities and encouraged user to stay with Internet Explorer (Bodily, Vakharia 1998). Microsoft completely repositioned the category. They made internet internal and add-on browsers seem redundant.

An important aspect to acknowledge, and a frequent truth in technology markets: it was not an equal match. In some cases, these grassroots companies rise above, like Apple. However, in the case of Netscape, Microsoft had the establishment and resources to overtake them (Beattie 2026). They did not play by the rules made by World Wide Web Consortium, whose goal was to establish standards for internet technologies (Finley 2016). A court fully ruled Microsoft a monopoly (Beattie 2026). So no, it was not fair. In the end, neither technically won. Netscape did not survive. The antiquated browser was acquired by AOL in late 1998, in their own hopes to combat Microsoft. Before being acquired, Andreessen released the source code, allowing

programmers globally to work on it. This choice led to later browsers, Mozilla and Firefox. Navigator was finally shut down in 2007 (Blintz 2019). While Microsoft remains prevalent, Internet Explorer was slowly phased out to Microsoft Edge in 2015 (Stoddard 2022).

The Browser Wars was not only a fight between two companies but a fight against the fast-moving plow of technological advancements. All the same, Microsoft showed the power of repositioning a category. Before Internet Explorer, internet browsers were an add-on. Microsoft made internet a neat all-in-one included package. They positioned Netscape to seem frivolous in the mind of the consumer. Microsoft consistently focused on the consumer ease while Netscape became bogged down with added features. Microsoft did not compete with Netscape; they made their own competition. Netscape was playing not to lose, and Microsoft was playing to win.

Case Study #3: The Virtual Connection Combat

Social media completely revolutionized how people interact with technology. Myspace was one of the first to enter the social media scene, but Facebook was who lasted. Myspace was a place of self-expression and customization. Facebook was the home of authentic connection and user-centered design. Unlike today, early social media consisted of raw authenticity and social connection at a forefront. Myspace sold a canvas while Facebook sold a mirror. In the end, people love a mirror.

Myspace

Early social media, especially Myspace, fundamentally shifted society's relationship to the internet and technology. Before its arrival, the internet lacked a true sense of community, Myspace transformed it into a shared social space. Myspace was founded in August 2003 by marketing professional Chris DeWolfe and former computer hacker Tom Anderson (Leahul 2009). The two were inspired by Friendster, a social networking website published the year before. DeWolfe and Anderson wanted to create a broader, customizable, and interaction-based website. DeWolfe originally bought the domain MySpace.com to use for data storage (Leahul 2009). Despite DeWolfe's initial suggestion, they opted to make it free for users, a vital move in their success.

It was the first social media akin to what is seen modernly. The goal was to create widespread connection and the ability to express oneself, no matter where they were located. Myspace differentiated themselves through detailed customization. Users could fully tailor their profiles with HTML and CSS, allowing for custom backgrounds, music, and images. There was a sense of independence for users, being able to edit most aspects of their page from font to the music playing when their page was opened. Myspace encouraged community through action-

based features. The website created groups based on interests and geographic location, giving users autonomy through opinion-based "Polls" and newsletter-like updates called "Bulletins." (Schneider 2019). The "Friends" component was a large part of their success and differentiated them their previous competitors. A "Top 8" feature was added, allowing users to rank their closest friends (Capital Commerce 2024). Sharing unique URLs became a new trend for individuals, musicians, and companies alike (Allgaier 2018). Anderson once said, "We didn't expect it to be cool, with people trading URLs instead of phone numbers."

To promote Myspace, the founders utilized grassroots marketing tactics. They convinced local minor celebrities from the Los Angeles club scene to shift from Friendster to their platform (Allgaier 2018). Myspace quickly became a social shepherd. In June 2004, Myspace was experiencing one million unique visitors per month (Jackson, Madrigal 2011). Just five months later, they were at 5 million users (Allgaier 2018). Due to the increasing attention and exponential growth, News Corp's CEO Rupert Murdoch acquired Myspace for $580 million in July 2005. At this point, Myspace was the 5th most viewed internet domain in the United States with 20 million members (Leahul 2009). By September of that year, the site had grown to 27 million members.

Myspace became a voice in the music scene. Since music was so intertwined with the platform, the sharing and searching for songs became a central aspect. A former Myspace employee during the development of music pages, Nate Auerbach, said "We knew that it was the music that lived in between or outside of genres that would ignite global communities of niche kids who depended on Myspace to find others like them." Artists were able to engage with fans directly, uploading music and sending personalized notes. Many popular bands credit Myspace for their success, including Arctic Monkeys, Fall Out Boy, and My Chemical Romance

(Kornhaber 2023). Myspace launched Myspace Records with Interscope Records in October 2005. They created a home for the existing "emo" culture which brought them success, but also limitation.

In June 2006, Myspace surpassed Google as the most visited website in the United States (Allgaier 2018). They reached a peak as the largest social networking platform in the world (Capital Commerce 2024). However, deep-rooted issues threatened their platform and competition was encroaching. News Corp had an institutionalized presence that stood against everything Myspace represented. Myspace also had serious regulation deficits. In fear of censorship, the website had very little moderation, allowing for an excess of illicit content (Allgaier 2018). The platform became more advertising centered, cluttering the website. Myspace was on top but with the issues they were facing, competition to the platform became increasingly looming. A similar social networking site was gaining traction quickly. Their name was Facebook.

Facebook

The social media empire, Facebook, started as a simple game of "hot or not." In late 2003 and Mark Zuckerberg's sophomore year of Harvard, he made "Facemash" from the comfort of his dorm room. At the time, Harvard used online directories called "face books" with information and photos of students (Barr 2018). Zuckerberg hacked the database and used the data to create a website for users to compare two photos and vote on who was most attractive. He quickly sent the link to his fellow students. Within a weekend, there was 450 visitors and 22,000 votes (Schwartz 2003). The website faced backlash and was eventually taken down. Zuckerberg underwent scrutiny from fellow students and punishment from Harvard administration, almost

being expelled. Despite the lessons learned, he had the framework for what would become Facebook.

Harvard did not have an all-encompassing “face book” for students, prompting Zuckerberg to make one (Barr 2018). “TheFacebook” was launched February 4, 2004, with the help of co-founders Dustin Moskovitz, Chris Hughes and Eduardo Saverin. In one day, 1,200 Harvard students signed up. A month later, over half the undergraduate study body had a profile (Phillips 2007). The app was originally solely for the Harvard population, but quickly expanded to other Ivy League schools, then college campuses all over America. Later in 2004, Napster’s founder and CEO, Sean Parker became the president. Napster was one of the original social media formats for music file sharing. Parker was experienced in the industry and what the consumers wanted. At this point, Zuckerberg dropped out of Harvard and moved “headquarters” to Palo Alto. With the added help of Peter Thiel, PayPal’s cofounder, and his $500,000 investment, Facebook took off (Greiner, et al. 2019).

In 2005, Facebook dropped “The” when they purchased the domain facebook.com for $200,000 (Phillips 2007). They also began to allow high school students, a big move for increasing reach. By the end of 2006, Facebook expanded to anyone over 13 years old with a valid email address (Barr 2018). This was made possible by the $12.7 million investment from venture capital firm Accel Partners (Bellis 2025). Facebook was consistently growing with over 12 million users (Ghanghro 2024). Zuckerberg turned down multiple billion-dollar deals from companies like Yahoo and Google, expressing they undervalued the potential of Facebook. Microsoft purchased a 1.6% share of Facebook for $240 million, valuing the company at 15 billion (Greiner et al. 2019). By this time, Facebook had become the largest social media with an educational focus, reaching 30 million registered users (Phillips 2007). Throughout the vast

expansion, conflict followed the company with multiple parties waging lawsuits for stolen ideas. Regardless, by 2009, Facebook became the world's most used social networking service, revolutionizing how humans connect and interact.

Facebook implemented many features that had not been seen before. They created an environment encouraging seamless communication and connection, through a screen. The website launched with eight main features: user accounts, friends, invitations, profiles, metadata lists, metadata search, privacy restrictions, and a friend graph visualizer (D'Angelo 2012). The first big step was the implementation of "The Wall" in 2004, an area where users could post messages publicly. Later, Facebook created "News Feed," shifting from status to a curated stream highlighting friend activity (Bunz 2009). The move had immense backlash but created the first centralized stream of friend content. Features expanded in 2007, allowing users to gift friends, post advertisements, and develop their own applications (Phillips 2007). User made applications named Graffiti and Scrabble were some of the most popular. One of their biggest moves was in 2009 with the invention of the Like button. A singular thumbs up button changed the way social media interactions worked.

Quantified popularity now existed and encouraged a social metric. A few months later, Facebook acquired FriendFeed, a social sharing website that gave news updates and originally created the like button. While Facebook had been previously taking many of their creations, the acquisition streamlined the two (Greiner et al. 2019). In 2011, "The Wall" becomes obsolete with the introduction of Facebook's "Timeline." For the first time, user's posts are organized in chronological order. Facebook consistent expansion of features and strategic acquisitions propelled them to be the world's most popular social media, connecting people all over the world (Greiner et al. 2019). Facebook was a pioneer for creating community and interconnecting the

world. The website contributed to the complete shift in human communication and how we present ourselves. Information sharing became globalized. In underdeveloped countries, Facebook allowed for greater connection to real-world events (Olorunlana 2025). Facebook offered everything wanted in social media but the deep sense of identity that Myspace was built on.

Myspace v. Facebook: Window or Mirror

> "Myspace is like a bar, Facebook is like the BBQ you have in your back yard with friends and family."
>
> – Reid Hoffman, Co-founder of LinkedIn

Myspace was set up for success. They were first on the scene with a strong following and even stronger software. The fall of Myspace and success of Facebook was a result of one's missteps and the others succinct strategy. In June 2006, Myspace surpassed Google as the most visited website in the United States (Allgaier 2018). By May 2008, they had 115 million users. That same year, Facebook surpassed them in unique visitors (Statista 2021). Both companies were on even footing as small start-ups, Myspace even had a head start. Social media remains a uniquely difficult industry to this day. Companies not only have to master interactive software but implement social features to easily encourage digital connection. For Myspace, they had nothing to reference. There had been nothing like it before, this closely intertwining technology and sociability. It was a fine line, and Myspace was the first to traverse it on this scale. Facebook got to learn from their mistakes. There were many issues that led to Myspace's demise, but the beginning of the end was started with their acquisition by News Corp.

News Corp sucked the soul out of the identity-based foundation of Myspace. Myspace was built on freedom, identity, and customization. News Corp understood social media in the

terms of classic media and disregarded the humanized aspect of it (Conant 2025). News Corp was everything a corporation stood for; they prioritized profit in an inherently personal section of technology. Myspace shifted towards monetization, focusing on advertising instead of staying ahead (Conant 2025). As corporate policies slowly seeped into Myspace, Mark Zuckerberg let Facebook become what it was. He allowed the success of Facebook additions to guide their business decisions. Facebook let the user dictate the path of the website but not the actual features. An important distinction as Myspace became more bogged down by increased advertising on the website. Myspace's ads were intrusive and made basic use difficult. Facebook opted for a sidebar layout, instead of pop-ups or banners (Elwood 2025). Myspace's platform was becoming increasingly hard to traverse. They were overrun with advertising in an already chaotic interface.

Myspace's reputation for extreme user customization betrayed them. In the beginning, Myspace was as new to social media as the user, so they let them curate it. While a draw in the beginning, this quickly faded with the evolution of social media. Myspace pages were no longer mural of your identity. They were cluttered and overwhelming (Kelleher 2010). Facebook was no exemplar, but they opted for a cleaner interface and stuck to their blue and white color scheme (Kelleher 2010). Myspace remained loyal to their HTML wonderland. They played it safe and used to what they knew, refusing to change or innovate. As The New York Times summarized "Myspace, though clearly the dominant player, got complacent and never innovated" (Arango 2011). When all of this was happening, Zuckerberg was learning from Myspace's mistakes and strategically positioning Facebook apart. Facebook benefitted from being second, especially since it was only by a few months. Mike Jones, former CEO of Myspace, explained "The real problem was that the world had been trained by Myspace that

social networking was interesting, but the actual product had been perfected by Facebook" (Jacobs 2015).

Facebook repositioned themselves based on the misgivings of Myspace. Facebook utilized a mix of the positioning techniques seen in the past examples. They simplified Myspace's idea and centered it on the people. That reframed both the category and the competition in consumers' minds. Despite being second with a similar concept at a similar time, Facebook never compared themselves to Myspace. Facebook was their own entity. Myspace was Apples and Facebook was Oranges. Myspace did the opposite; they pushed everything to the extreme to compete with Facebook. Facebook positioned themselves as a clean and real "social utility" (Thomas 2019). Myspace, on the other hand, was a one way to express yourself that was messy, immature, and exhausting (Boyd 2007). Myspace was a hobby. Facebook was a tool. Facebook won the mind of the consumer and market share rushed to follow.

Case Study #4: Computers Making the Decisions

For the first time, we are tasked with questioning the ethics of both the technology itself and those behind it. Many ethical concerns can be raised by Artificial Intelligence and the companies creating it. In this case study, one company was born from the other. Those who made Anthropic started at OpenAI. This is not a story of the past, the AI industry is at the precipice of the journey seen in this past case studies. Assumptions may be too soon to be made. What is known as of now, OpenAI was first but the challenger, Anthropic, is pulling ahead.

OpenAI

OpenAI was incorporated as a nonprofit in December 2015 under the goal "to advance digital intelligence in the way that is most likely to benefit humanity as a whole, unconstrained by a need to generate financial return" (OpenAI 2015). This was made possible by the billion-dollar backing from a group of wealthy technology investors, notably including Sam Altman, Elon Musk, and PayPal cofounder (and early Facebook investor) Peter Thiel. In 2016, OpenAI released Gym, for researchers to develop and compare learning systems, and Universe, a toolkit for training intelligence (Kay Jackson 2024). At the time, Elon Musk conceded "It's hard to fathom how much human-level AI could benefit society, and it's equally hard to imagine how much it could damage society if built or used incorrectly," (OpenAI 2015). From 2015 to 2018, OpenAI shared important scientific findings with the international AI community, allowing for great strokes in machine learning.

The goal was to expand artificial intelligence without the stress of commerciality and monetary success. Within a few years of incorporation, a "capped profit" subsidiary of OpenAI launched, OpenAI LP. Ostensibly, under the supervision of the nonprofit and with investment returns capped at 100 times initial investment (OpenAI 2019). Within a few months, Microsoft

invested $1 billion in OpenAI (Ostrovsky 2025). As with every influential technology company, there was executive infighting. Altman was fired from the board for three days and was quickly reinstated when most of OpenAI's staff threatened to join him. Atman went on to become CEO in 2019 (Kahn 2023). Musk fell out with Altman due to disagreements about business structure and went on to create his own AI company. He later sued OpenAI. In late 2025, OpenAI finished restructuring. They became a public benefit corporation (PBC). In doing so, they transferred the nonprofit's ownership of OpenAI's technology to the for-profit arm, creating zero profit cap. The nonprofit arm was turned into a foundation with $130 billion equity stake (Ostrovsky, 2025).

OpenAI first gained public attention in February 2019, when they announced their Generative Pretrained Transformer (GPT) model could create articles and essays (Hao 2020). They decided not to release the model due to the danger of spreading mass misinformation (Kay, Jackson 2024). With backlash from scientific communities, OpenAI decided to release increasingly powered GPT-2 in waves, eventually concluding there was "no strong evidence of misuse so far" (OpenAI 2019). Scrutiny continued from scientific communities, saying they were withholding for publicity despite earlier promises of transparency. In 2020, OpenAI introduced GPT-3, a 175 billion parameter language model, making it one of the biggest and most complex AI models at that point (Mucci). The program was able to produce human-like text, conversate, translate languages and create writing from prompts (Mucci). As one of the earliest examples of highly capable large language models (LLM), GPT-3's scale allowed it to perform many language tasks with very little training (Mucci). The next year, DALL-E, their AI art generator, was released with the ability to create realistic images. As further renditions of Dall-E were released, the generating ability of detailed images from text prompts became more complex

(Kay, Jackson 2024). For the first time, those with little graphic design training could create digital content.

In November 2022, OpenAI released their AI chatbot to the public under the name ChatGPT. The software went completely viral. Within two months, the website had 100 million weekly active users and became the fastest growing website platform in history (Haque et al. 2022). For reference, it took Tik Tok nine months and Instagram 2 ½ years to reach that level (Hu 2026). Everyone praised the technology from scientists to the Average Joe. In the beginning, the majority praised the revolutionary technology. As the time has passed, the perception has soured. While it's viewed as an incredible tool, especially for science and medicine, many concerns are being raised from an ethical and educational standpoint (Leitor et al. 2024) As of January of 2026, ChatGPT is one of the world's most visited websites with 700 million weekly active users. In just two and a half years since its release, over a quarter of United States workers report using ChatGPT for work (OpenAI 2026). This number increases every day. OpenAI's reach continues to spread as their AI technology becomes more advanced. In 2024, they partnered with Apple to integrate ChatGPT into all new iPhones and Siri. They have a continuous multibillion dollar deal with Microsoft (Douglas Heaven 2023). A little over a year before ChatGPT's release, OpenAI was valued at $14 billion, today it's worth $500 billion. There are less than 20 companies worth more globally (Udland 2025).

At the time of this writing, the most recent model is GPT-5.5. The model is highly autonomous and complex with incredible skill in "writing and debugging code, researching online, analyzing data, creating documents and spreadsheets, operating software, and moving across tools until a task is finished" (OpenAI 2026). Pietro Schirano, a former employee of Anthropic, Uber, and Facebook, stated that ChatGPT-5.5 "genuinely feels like I'm working with

a higher intelligence, and there's almost a sense of respect." ChatGPT continues to impact every aspect of life from politics to economy to education. As OpenAI advances their technology, other companies are sprouting up. It is too early to predict which company will win the Artificial Intelligence race. However, there is one other serious contender, Anthropic's Claude.

Anthropic

Anthropic started within their biggest competitor, OpenAI. Between 2020-2021, seven senior researchers left OpenAI together. At the front was the Amodei siblings, Dario and Daniela. They were OpenAI's previous Vice President of Research and Vice President of Safety and Policy. Among them was Tom Brown, one of the most-cited LLM researchers of all time and Jack Clark, the former policy director of OpenAI (Anthropic). Dario Amodei joined OpenAI as a founding member in 2016, holding the position of Team Lead for AI Safety. He quickly rose the ranks of OpenAI. Amodei played a large role in the release of GPT-2, becoming VP of Research by soon after in 2019 (Clay 2026). At a similar time, Sam Altman, stepped into CEO of OpenAI and began to shift the company towards a for-profit structure (Griffiths 2026). With the groundbreaking release of GPT-3, OpenAI was gaining notoriety. However, the extreme capabilities of the LLM began to create apprehension surrounding AI. The founders noticed a shift in OpenAI with the release of GPT-3. After Microsoft's $1 billion investment in 2019 and the "capped profit" pivot, many held concerns for the company they were working for (Griffiths 2026). The founders of Anthropic emphasize their departure from OpenAI was due to misalignment of values. The company was no longer the one they had joined, and they wanted to create one that stood for their beliefs. Anthropic was built on the central idea that "safety research and capabilities research should not be separate teams" (Anthropic). The company wanted to create AI with safety as a priority and the goal of public benefit. While honorable,

maintaining this focus in a soon to be trillion-dollar industry is easier said than done (UN Trade and Development, 2025).

The name Anthropic was chosen to emphasize their focus on humans (Griffiths 2026). The company officially launched in early 2021. More OpenAI employees left to join Anthropic's mission, now ran by the Amodei siblings and at least nine previous employees (Moss 2021). According to AI Business, only one of Anthropic's initial employees has not previously worked at OpenAI. In late 2022, Anthropic introduced their renowned training method, Constitutional AI. Anthropic trains their model based on a "constitution" that frames the values they would like instilled in their AI for safety and ethicality (Lambright 2025). The company sets fundamental principles for their programs on human rights, privacy, legality, and equality. The goal was to have AI systems capable of monitoring themselves for harmful outputs (Bai et al. 2022). Anthropic's AI model was first released in 2023 named Claude, positioned as "helpful, honest, and harmless" (Anthropic, 2023). The name was inspired by Claude E. Shannon, considered the "father of information theory" (Pazur 2025).

Since then, many renditions of Claude have been released. In 2023, Claude 2.1 was launched. The model had unprecedented context length, how many images and text the model can consider at once (Lambright 2025). In the following year, Claude 3 introduced Anthropic's model family: Haiku, Sonnet, and Opus. Each model focused on different abilities such as speed, balance, and capability. One of Claude's biggest issues compared to the competition was lack of accessing the internet in real-time. It was trained on data to the time of release. Finally in March 2025, Claude was able to access the internet, a gamechanger for the pushing the model to wider use.

Anthropic has not done this on their own. They initially raised $124 million from investors, led by Jaan Tallinn, the co-founder of Skype. Other investors included Dustin Moskovitz, co-founder of Facebook, Eric Schmidt, the former CEO of Google, and the Center for Emerging Risk Research (Anthropic 2021). Since 2023, Amazon has invested $8 billion and Google has $500 million with plans of $1.5 billion in the future (Pazur 2025). As of 2026, Anthropic has raised more than $72.3 billion over 18 rounds of funding (Tracxn 2026). At this point, Claude is technologically comparable to ChatGPT. Now it has become a battle of the brand. With two companies that have minute technology differences, the only way one can pull ahead is innovate or position.

ChatGPT v. Claude: The Best Is Yet to Come

> "In the most important ways, the 2030s may not be wildly different. People will still love their families, express their creativity, play games, and swim in lakes. But in still-very-important-ways, the 2030s are likely going to be wildly different from any time that has come before. We do not know how far beyond human-level intelligence we can go, but we are about to find out."
>
> – Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI

No one knows where Artificial Intelligence will be in 10 years and everyone has an opinion on it. Nuremberg Institute for Market Decision (NIM) found that only 20% of people trust AI (Buder 2024). This section draws conclusions based on facts and history, focusing on the current position of leading companies, techniques they are implementing, and subsequential results. Everything beyond current trends, is a guess at best. History, however, can be a guide. In the year of this writing, 2026, OpenAI and Anthropic are neck-and-neck in the race for AI supremacy.

Both companies' most recent AI models, OpenAI's ChatGPT-5.5 and Anthropic's Claude Opus 4.7, are generally comparable in features. ChatGPT is feature-rich with image generation

and intensive researching skills. Claude is aesthetically forward and puts privacy on a pedestal (Circelli 2025). ChatGPT 5.5 is considered the all-in-one tool with a full spectrum of add-ons. Claude Opus 4.7 can be deeply integrated with outside programs and has advanced coding and creative skills. (Kane 2026). ChatGPT is the Swiss army knife of AI while Claude has curated refined features. ChatGPT has the advantage of being the first mainstream LLM with greater AI training models, documentation, and third-party add-ons (Intuition Labs 2026). Essentially, ChatGPT has more embellishments. While less impactful for the average user day to day, the professional user might find it a leg up. On ChatGPT, you can use your phone camera and ask questions about what it shows. You can also create custom GPTs for others to work with and train (Kane 2026). However, ChatGPT is known for untrustworthy data practices, higher level of misinformation, and less integration with outside software (Hua et al. 2024). Claude is more aesthetically designed and features a more natural writing style. Anthropic also has higher data safety and collaboration features (Intuition Labs 2026). Claude Code has become the top choice for developers, owning 54% of the enterprise coding market as of December 2025 (Tully et al., 2025). The model can be incorporated into most programming software. Programmers describe what they want, and Claude Code works autonomously checking in occasionally for input (Kane 2026). Claude struggles with less capacity, community knowledge, and third-party integrations (Intuition Labs 2026). The two companies' main point of separation comes to user experience, which ultimately that comes down to preference (Kane 2026). With similar technological advancements, brand strategy and positioning are left to sway the consumers. ChatGPT reigned supreme from 2022 to 2025, but starting 2026, Claude is pulling ahead because of a few crucial strategic decisions.

ChatGPT was declared the winner early into the race, but Claude is gaining speed. ChatGPT has made mistakes and Claude is capitalizing on it. In March 2026, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman announced they would partner with the Department of Defense (DoD) to provide AI technologies for classified military operations (Metz 2026). This came after the dissolution of the original DoD contract with Anthropic. The partnership dissolved because Anthropic wouldn't allow their technology to be used for AI-enabled autonomous weapons or mass surveillance (Metz 2026). Despite Altman stating his early support for Anthropic's decision, the later agreement between OpenAI and the DoD banked on the belief that they will use the technology "lawfully" (O'Donnell 2026). The DoD has since fully blacklisted Claude with Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth proclaiming "no contractor, supplier, or partner that does business with the United States military may conduct any commercial activity with Anthropic" (O'Donnell 2026). Anthropic lost their contract but gained supporters. OpenAI's DoD contract was announced on February 27, 2026. On March 2, 2026, Claude exceeded ChatGPT in weekly U.S. app store downloads (Sensor Tower 2026). Also released that day? An update from Claude that allows you to transfer your data from other AI platforms. Around the same time, U.S. app uninstalls for ChatGPT raised by 295% (Sensor Tower 2026). A movement called "QuitGPT" gained traction starting in January 2026 based the political and ethical concerns of the company (Wells 2026). Super Bowl LX served as a public stage for the escalating tension between the two companies.

ChatGPT went for the "Kleenex of artificial intelligence" method as Ad Age called it. The company aired its first Super Bowl commercial, a 60-second spot titled "You Can Just Build Things," showcasing how ChatGPT can be used for everyday hobbies (Sloane 2026). A later commercial depicted a fourth-generation seed farm in South Carolina and how ChatGPT helps to completely digitize and continually organize their farm logs (OpenAI 2026). They also aired

three regional commercials profiling how ChatGPT helps run American small businesses. The ads are an extension of their campaign released in September 2025 (Beer 2026). OpenAI's strategy emphasizes the utility of their model for the average person to conquer everyday tasks. Their technology acts a tool to better achieve your goals. OpenAI's CMO Kate Rouch noted "Millions of people are using ChatGPT every day to do meaningful things in their lives that extend their sense of what's possible and help them in real ways," (Beer 2026). All OpenAI's commercials leaned into human craft, being shot on 35mm film (Cowan 2025). There's a level of irony, using the some of the oldest tools of creativity, real people and film, to advertise the entity threating it (Cowan 2025). ChatGPT rode the positive reception from these ads to their Super Bowl commercials. Although, their commercial failed to gain any true traction compared to the stark statement of Anthropic's ad.

Many AI companies put their hat in the Super Bowl, but very few made a splash. Anthropic's made a cannon ball. The Super Bowl was Anthropic's first foray into advertising and they went straight for the throat. They published four ads and aired two, a 60-second commercial 30 minutes before tip-off and a 30-second in-game spot (Blancaflor 2026). Each ad hyperbolized someone vulnerably asking for AI help and the AI person giving them monotoned advice, hijacked half-way with a tone-deaf sales pitch for a product. Each ad ends with the message "Ads are coming to AI. But not to Claude" (Anthropic 2026). Anthropic never names OpenAI but directly references their recent announcement. In early January 2026, OpenAI stated they would start including ads in their free version and basic "Go" subscription (Duffy 2026). Anthropic saw a chink in OpenAI's armor and attacked before they could form a defense. They touched on, that while AI is inherently impersonal, the interactions users have with it are not. Felix Richter CCO of Mother, the agency behind the ad, said

> "All the time, we see proof that advertising works brilliantly in the right context. We're using advertising's biggest stage to ask a simple question: Does it belong everywhere? So we made funny ads about how unfunny it would be. People asking AI about their health, their relationships, their business. Then a sponsored answer. We don't need to explain why that's wrong. We just need to show it" (Blancaflor 2026).

Altman pulled the ultimate positioning faux pas, writing on X that the ad "clearly dishonest" after it aired (Spangler 2026). Nevertheless, after the Super Bowl, Anthropic saw real results. It is a fickle game directing advertising against the competitor, but the risk paid off. According to CNBC, Anthropic has seen an 11% jump in daily active users and 6.5% in website visits after the Super Bowl. ChatGPT only saw a 2.7% increase in daily active users. (Subin 2026). The Patriots were not the only one to take a serious hit at the Super Bowl.

Both AI market leaders are implementing humanized approaches in vastly different ways. ChatGPT is the current owner of the category as they were first and are synonymous with AI. ChatGPT serves as an everything all-in-one tool built for everyone. Their brand represents learning, creating, and growing. Anthropic, on the other hand, is the challenger. They are doing everything in their power to reposition ChatGPT by emphasizing their own positives and exploiting OpenAI's flaws. They innovated by creating a feature exclusive to their platform and gave consumers a reason and easy route to leave their competitor. Anthropic represents trust and authenticity in the cold AI world. The mistakes of OpenAI could prove fatal with their ethically questionable partnerships, especially when paired with Anthropic's aggressive advertising. If Myspace is any indicator, adding advertising could be a colossal mistake. However, it is a nearly impossible battle going up against the entity that brought AI to the laymen. ChatGPT's gap in public trust leaves them vulnerable. No matter what benchmarks are held, the true war is fought in the mind of the consumer. Today, ChatGPT wins that battle. For Anthropic, and AI companies that may not be on the scene yet, sometimes you must lose a battle to win the war.

Conclusion

Every day it becomes harder to make an impression in the consumer's mind, especially in an industry that never stops evolving. In the past, new technology was exciting. Technology companies took groundbreaking innovations out of a nerd's basements and into your grandmothers' hands. Now, with the distrust from Artificial Intelligence and lack of authenticity on social media, people are cautious of new technology. We are forced to question everything. To believe, we require further reasoning and proof. However, if society disregarded every innovation we feared, we would not have half the technology we do today. In the early 19th century, people feared trains because they did not believe humans could handle over 30mph (Welle 2023). Society comes around. People do not fear invention; they fear loss of what was. The past reminds us how to move forward. You cannot look ahead without first looking back. Throughout the four case studies, we have covered almost 70 years and discovered a few truths in between.

The leader must work significantly less to enter the mind of the consumer. They introduce society to the technology and become inherently associated with it. However, they also take the responsibility of educating consumers on the product's purpose and use. Myspace pioneered social media, and ChatGPT did the same for AI. The challenger benefits from this understanding and can build on the leader's mistakes. Even so, the challenger must work twice as hard in every other regard to measure up to the original. That hunger is often what drives them to succeed. As the case studies show, the leader often plays not to lose while the challenger plays to win. Winning, as it turns out, has many definitions and even more ways to get there.

One route to success is the art of repositioning. To reposition the leader, is to reframe how consumers see the leading brand. The challenger shifts the leader's strengths into a reason to

choose something different. Both Apple and Anthropic utilized this technique through strategic commercials. In Apple's "1984" and Anthropic's Super Bowl commercials, they associated the fear of new technology with the leader. In turn, they positioned themselves as the saviors, leading the authenticity revolution. Likewise, repositioning a category means changing the way consumers perceive and think about a product category, shifting that perception to favor their brand over the competition. Internet Explorer consolidated the category by making their browser an all-in-one package, portraying Netscape as a frivolous add-on. When Facebook defined their website as a "social utility," they made hectic Myspace seem like a childish side hobby. The succeeding companies set a clear identity and consistently maintained it. Many companies have failed by straying too far from what they were known for. Myspace changed under the corporate eye of News Corp, shifting from a place of creative liberty to a profit-focused mess. Similarly, in hopes of competing with Microsoft, Netscape broadened their offerings too wide. Rather than concentrating on being a reliable browser, they tried to make the internet universally accessible, ultimately diluting their brand. This speaks to a broader truth, people enjoy freedom, but only to an extent. Myspace made this clear with their extreme customization, which quickly became overwhelming. Successful companies find to balance consumer input and creativity without losing control of the product. Apple and Internet Explorer encouraged programmers to build applications for their platforms, expanding functionality without relying directly on consumers. Since programmers are users themselves, their work naturally reflected shared experiences, giving users a voice without compromising core design. Consumers love to be included but not making the brand decisions.

All paths lead to one conclusion: focus on the people. Many companies mistakenly prioritize the product, but it is the consumer's mind that matters most. Features can be copied, a

position in the mind cannot. In every case study, the succeeding company focuses on the people. Apple humanized their technology through aesthetics and taking down “Big Blue.” Internet Explorer tapped into the human desire for convenience, packaging all their products in one. Facebook put connection at a forefront and emphasized the importance with quantified popularity. Both OpenAI and Anthropic are consistently focusing on how AI helps the ordinary person, not the technological capabilities. The art of positioning can determine the difference between a company being a nostalgic memory or the prevailing powerhouse. In today’s media landscape, it is increasingly difficult to be a fish in any pond. The necessity of positioning has only gotten more important. It’s sink or swim.

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