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Business

‘People mistake innovation for creating something new’: Apple’s former head of music on keeping things simple

New book discusses Steve Jobs, U2’s automatic album download and the culture of secrecy at one of the world’s biggest companies



Steve Jobs unveiling the first iPhone in January 2007. In his new book, Neil West says Jobs could be 'abrasive, rude and extremely direct', but colleagues understood it 'wasn't personal'.

Frank Dillon

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Neil West, the former head of music for Apple in Europe, feels he is stuck in a moment with U2.

When Apple decided in 2014 to upload the band’s album Songs of Innocence to the libraries of hundreds of millions of iTunes accounts without permission, it caused a backlash over privacy and overreach. Twitter, Instagram and Facebook exploded.

“Woke up this morning to find Bono in my kitchen, drinking my coffee, wearing my dressing gown, reading my paper.”

Apple was forced to apologise and issue a removal tool while Bono took his share of the blame for a stunt that backfired.

The author of a new book on Apple entitled It Just Works: The Nine Simple Rules of Apple’s Success, West says it’s the issue he is most asked about to this day, and it was a rare example of Apple breaking its own rules.

“One of the foundations of Apple is predictability, and with the free U2 album all of a sudden iTunes was behaving in an entirely new and unexplained way. If it’s a U2 album today, what might it be tomorrow?” he tells The Irish Times.

One of the secrets of Apple’s success is simplicity, he says. Simple solutions are more effective, more resilient and easier to understand. They reduce friction and they help cement relationships with customers.

Apple has mastered both simplicity and the “jobs to be done” idea that people don’t purchase products, they hire them to do a specific task. The iPhone packs all the functionality you need daily with a phone, a camera, a music player, a browser and apps. AirPods pair seamlessly and remove the tangle of traditional wired earbuds. Apple Pay removes the need to carry a physical wallet while the App Store makes it simple to add functionality to your devices.



Tim Cook, who stepped down as Apple CEO in September after spending 15 years in the role. Photo: Jim Wilson/The New York Times

The customer experience is another vital element. Consider unboxing. The iPod was the first mass market product to come fully charged, a small tweak at the manufacturing stage that delighted customers. In the same manner, bundling a little screwdriver into the Nest thermostat removed a friction in what was otherwise a simple installation. As Tony Faddell, the creator of both the iPod and Nest, puts it: “It may not be your fault that the customer doesn’t have the right screwdriver to hand, but that won’t stop them feeling bad about your product.”

Not all additions are welcome, as the U2 experience shows. When the iTunes Music Store launched, West suggested adding a £10 iTunes gift card to the box of every new iPhone and iPod sold. Steve Jobs hated the idea and shot it down. This was a battle of philosophies between a team with a tactical marketing plan versus Apple’s devotion to the user experience.

“It was a distracting call to action that would force the customer to pause their emotional journey with their new product and think about a separate transaction,” West says.

Apple is famous for this type of exceptionalism, and Jobs personified it, with his genius, volatility and creation of a culture of intense secrecy at the corporation. West’s 16-year period at Apple covered both Jobs’ and his successor Tim Cook’s tenures at the top, with their radically different styles.

“It’s no secret that at times Steve could be abrasive, rude and extremely direct,” West says. “At the same time, everyone who worked directly with him will tell you that was almost immediately forgiven because it wasn’t personal; it was in pursuit of greatness and he more than proved that his methods led to greatness.

“I don’t think anyone [now] would hold up Apple under Steve Jobs as an ideal and healthy working culture and Tim very much took steps to make Apple a more supportive, inclusive place to work.”

A frequent critical observation about Tim Cook’s tenure was that it was characterised by incrementalism and a lack of the radical innovation seen under Jobs. West disagrees.

“It’s very easy to look at the headlines about the things that were launched under Steve Jobs and miss the innovations that changed the world, but let’s not forget that Tim raised Apple’s value by around 14-fold,” he says. “It’s a fun game all right to imagine what world-changing products Apple might have launched had Steve still been with us, but I think the more adult business perspective is to imagine what mediocre, unpolished products might have been released by Apple had anyone other than Tim Cook been leading it.

“People mistake innovation for creating something new. Apple has always seen innovation as being about making things better. The fact that so many years after its invention, the iPhone is still the world’s favourite premium smartphone is proof that incremental change is absolutely the best strategy.”



John Ternus, Apple's new chief executive, holding the iPhone Duo which was launched in September. Photo: Jason Henry/The New York Times

Inevitably, the process of innovation involves developing ideas that ultimately never come to market. A classic example is Project Titan, Apple’s secretive plan for a self-driving electric car, which was reportedly abandoned in 2024 after around a decade of development.

West says that a cornerstone of Apple’s success over the years has been what Jobs used to call “ownership of the whole widget”, and he feels it would not have been feasible for Apple to manufacture its own cars. “Apple was going to have to surrender a great deal of control over how the car was made and that was always going to weaken its ability to develop something great in the same way it can with iPods or iPhones.”

On the culture of secrecy at Apple, West feels that this is a combination of normal competitive practice and Apple’s long-standing desire to make exciting surprise announcements.

“I had absolutely no visibility at all regarding the car project, for example. I didn’t need to know, so I didn’t know. Secrecy can seem arrogant, but it is a very competitive business with other companies looking at your strategy and adjusting theirs accordingly.”

In the area of artificial intelligence, Apple has taken a strategic bet to let others lead in the creation of AI models. West says his hunch is the major battle here may not be about who has the most powerful models but who can use AI to solve the most problems for people and that Apple may be on the money here. “I think it will be a winning strategy. As far as AI in the home is concerned, I think Apple is perfectly positioned.”

Apple has recently appointed a new CEO John Ternus, who comes from a hardware engineering background, in contrast to Cook, who came from corporate operations, and there is much speculation about the direction the corporation will go under his leadership. “I have heard only good things about him from former colleagues,” says West who notes that the new CEO has dampened down speculation about radical new departures from the current winning formula.

West’s book provides some interesting colour about the inside of Apple, while never compromising his relationship with his former employer who he clearly retains huge affection for. He returns constantly to the theme of simplicity. In a world of information overload, this is one of the keys to a winning business strategy, he concludes.

It Just Works: The Nine Simple Rules of Apple’s Success by Neil West, is published by Macmillan Business.

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