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20 Moments From The Past 20 Years That Moved The Whole World Forward

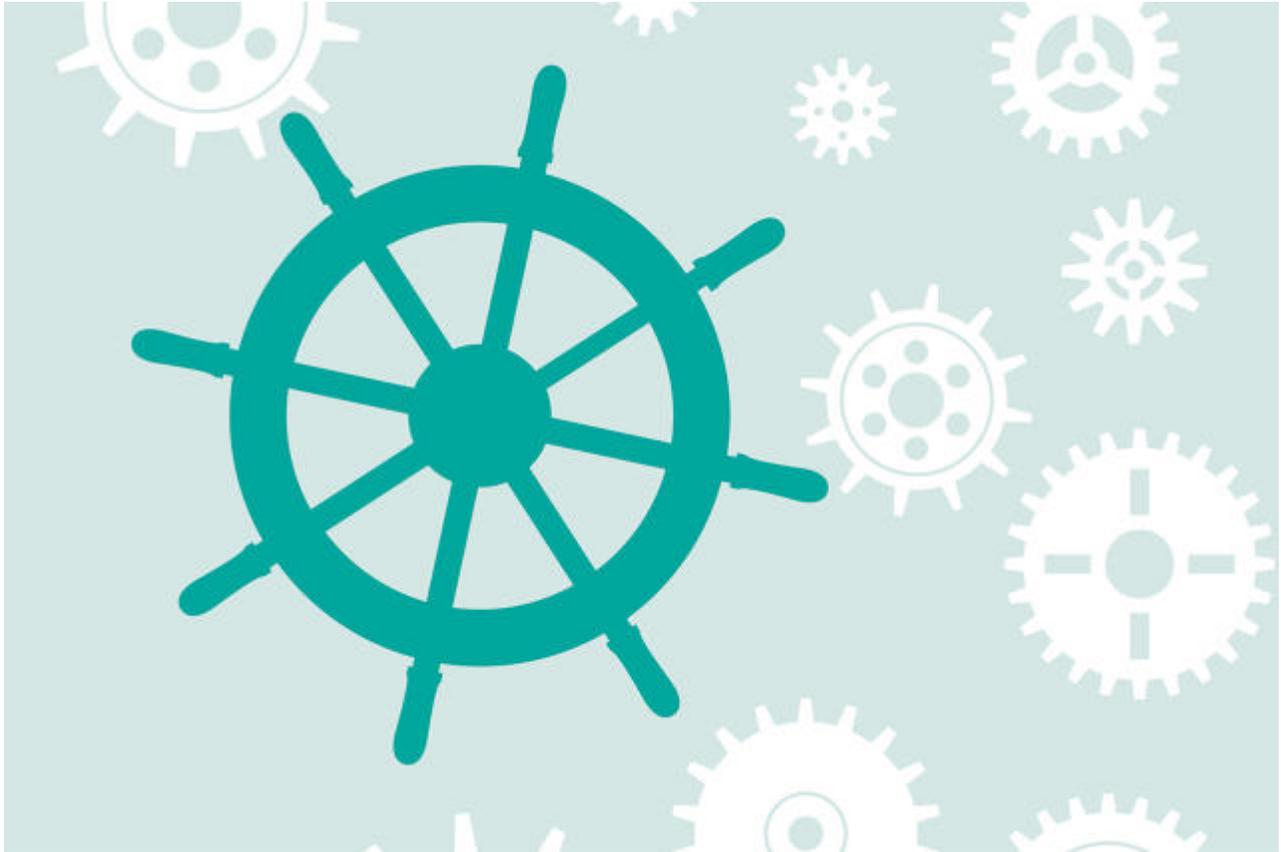
From 1995 to 2015, *Fast Company* looks back at the people, products, and ideas that have transformed business and culture.

By [Fast Company Staff](#)

Do you remember the day when Netscape became a \$2 billion company, or when Amazon upended our online expectations by introducing 1-Click shopping? How about when Napster faced down Metallica and Twitter showed us what was really happening on the streets of Tehran? These are the moments of innovation that changed our world and continue to point us to the future.

1995: The birth of the fast company

It was the IPO pop heard round the world: How Netscape's triumph signaled the arrival of a new business model—and a new mind-set.



I first realized that August 9, 1995, would be a day to remember when two coworkers bet each other on the opening and closing price of a new stock issue from a Mountain View, California–based company called Netscape Communications. Their excitement was electric, and it only grew as the stock doubled its offering price from \$14 to \$28 that morning; by the time it started trading after 11 a.m., the stock had risen to \$71. It ended the day at \$58.25, giving the company a market capitalization of more than \$2 billion. Not bad for a 16-month-old startup with just \$16 million in lifetime revenues.

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That sort of thing simply did not happen, but Netscape's IPO symbolized many things about the profound changes set to take place in business and culture. Netscape represented a bet on the potential of the Internet to transform society. It was the original Internet platform—something virtually every technology startup now aspires to be. And it was the proto-example of twentysomethings moving to California to create a company and seek their fortune, led by a visionary like [Marc Andreessen](#).



Marc Andreessen, pictured here in Netscape's heyday, inspired a generation to seek their fortune in the digital world. Photo: [Robert Burroughs](#), Getty Images

But what came to be young Netscape's defining characteristic—and its most lasting contribution to business—was speed. At a time when software was still sold on disks in shrink-wrapped boxes, Netscape started releasing beta software on the Internet month after month. It would get feedback from customers and pump out two new versions by the time those software boxes even reached stores. Its pace of innovation—and its rush to an IPO—made it the company to emulate. In November 1995, *Fast Company* [profiled Netscape](#) as the ur-example of a company living the new rules of competition, writing, "In an economy where even breakthrough technologies become obsolete within a few years, where even the deadliest competitors must change their game in the face of changing circumstances, Netscape Time may be the company's most enduring invention."

Today, we expect—and even demand—the constant iteration that goes into improving the software that runs out lives and our work. And speed is the value that determines winners and losers in our hypercompetitive culture. So it's ironic, then, and a little sad, that speed killed Netscape. The company moved so fast that it never settled on a business model and didn't see the opportunity to transform itself into a portal until it was too late. Many people, even Netscape employees, blame Bill Gates's anti-competitive practices for the company's demise. Fact is, by late 1997, Microsoft had built a faster web browser than Netscape. Netscape's breakthrough technology had been eclipsed, and it didn't adapt to the new reality. Being first has its advantages, but agility is what's required to win. —*David Lidsky*

1996: The classifieds come to life

When Craigslist launched online, it revealed the power—and value—of free information.

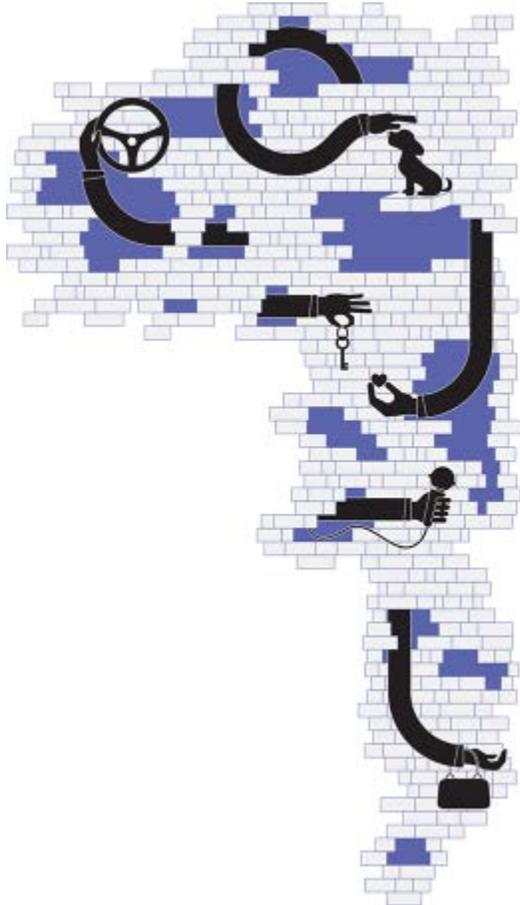


Illustration: [Steven Moreau](#)

If anything captured the early promise of the Internet, it was Craigslist. Everything about the classifieds site—its open environment, freewheeling nature, democratized content—embodied the information superhighway. A community hub that evolved into a place where you could look for an apartment, find a job, sell goods, and search for love, Craigslist also *looked* like the Internet, with its blue links and HTML—gray borders and text boxes. And it still does. What’s most impressive about the site, though, is that its utility is so profound that it has not only survived but receives a whopping 50 billion page views per month. And while Craigslist might’ve contributed to the decline of the traditional-media business, which long relied on local classifieds for revenue, it also gave rise to an endless number of online services, from real estate sites to dating apps. Where some saw simple listings, others saw (and still see) opportunity. Founders of companies such as [Zillow](#), [Hinge](#), and [TaskRabbit](#) found inspiration—and much room for improvement—in Craigslist’s stripped-down design and no-questions-asked approach.

"Craigslist was one of the first websites to publish real estate listings in real time, and that changed the landscape for home shopping," says Zillow CEO Spencer Rascoff. "But when they didn't innovate, they set themselves up for disruption." —*Austin Carr*

1997: Instant gratification

The launch of 1-Click was just the start of Amazon's speed quest.



Photo: [Mauricio Alejo](#)

In the mid-1990s, a mere 8% of U.S. consumers felt the web was secure enough to make purchases with a credit card. This was before PayPal and iTunes, when it was still common for people to complete eBay transactions by mailing cash or a check. All that changed in 1997, when Amazon introduced a small feature called 1-Click, which enabled customers to securely store their credit-card information online and make all future purchases with a single tap of their mouse. Not only did it make shopping exceedingly and addictively easy, it also brought the magic of the Internet to life, helping to usher in an era of increasingly seamless e-commerce. CEO [Jeff Bezos](#), naturally, patented the 1-Click idea, and even Apple felt that the technology was so core to the future of shopping that it licensed it for its online store. (Barnes & Noble, on the other hand, ended up in a lawsuit with Amazon after attempting to skirt the patent with its own Express Lane checkout option.) The feature remains a staple of the Internet and is arguably a precursor to many of today's mobile apps, including [Uber](#), [Instacart](#), [GrubHub](#), and [Starbucks](#). Amazon, in the meantime, has continued to [reduce the friction](#) of shopping, from its introduction of [Prime](#) in 2005 to the [one-hour delivery](#) service it's currently testing in a handful of U.S. cities.

—*Austin Carr*

1998: Design for the masses

Business travel got a lot more interesting with the launch of W Hotels.



Illustration: [Daria Savina](#)

Before the first W opened on a quiet stretch of Lexington Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, staying at an American hotel chain usually involved starchy floral comforters and sad, beige carpeting. Though trendy boutique hotels like the Royalton and the Mondrian were already prioritizing design at the time, the W was the first to take a high-end aesthetic and make it available to everyone regardless of status. By the following year, when the young brand opened its 10th outpost, W Hotels were packing in celebrities, socialites, and—most significantly—loyalty-points-hoarding business travelers.

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The W was the vision of former Starwood Hotels & Resorts CEO Barry Sternlicht, who, a few years earlier, had realized that while brands such as Pottery Barn and Banana Republic were bringing a new sensibility to the shopping mall, most hotel chains were still peddling an outdated look and feel. So he pulled together a team of architects and designers to try to change that. Their mandate: "To bring good design to people who had never experienced it in a hotel before," says Theresa Fatino, W Hotels' former VP of brand development and design. The first W offered chic, minimalist residential rooms and dramatic public spaces with gossip-page-worthy restaurants and lobby lounges. It was an intoxicating formula, and W Hotels quickly became a white-hot brand.

Today, the chain includes 47 hotels around the world and has 40-plus more in development. Its formula has been much-copied: Every major hotel group now has a boutique line (including Marriott's Edition and Hyatt's Andaz), and even the trendsetting [Ace hotels](#), with their gathering-spot public spaces, owe a debt to Sternlicht's original vision of inclusive design. With the W, ordinary travelers could finally enjoy a sophisticated design sensibility along with a good night's sleep. —*Amy Farley*

1999: A virus named Melissa

One email—not Y2K—presaged our current cyberhavoc.

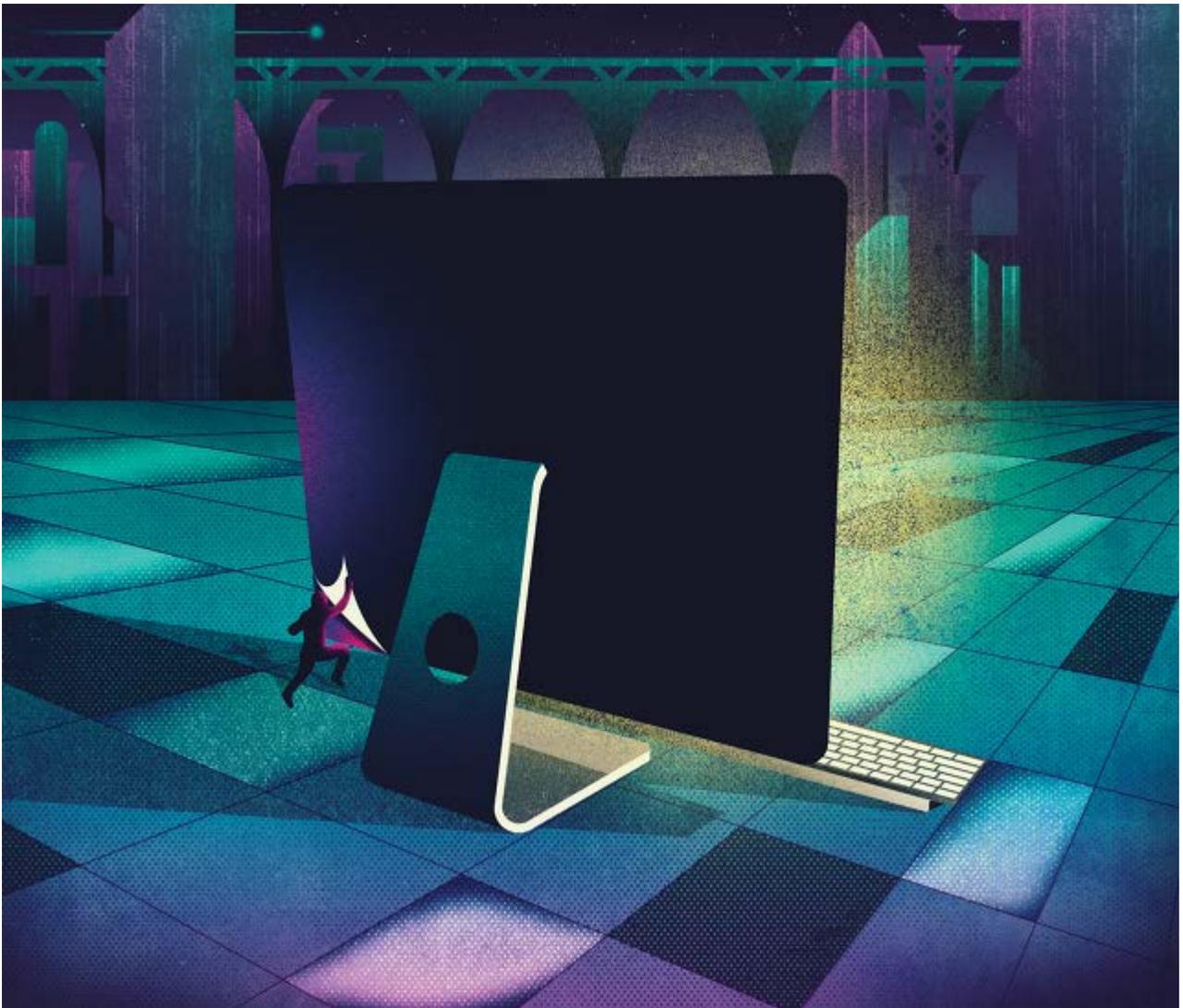


Illustration: [Pavlov Visuals](#)

People were nowhere near as jaded about email in March 1999 as they'd eventually become. So when a missive claiming to be an "Important Message" began popping up in inboxes around the world, many folks reflexively clicked on it—and then, as instructed, opened the Microsoft Word file attached.

Bad move. The Word doc—seemingly a list of porn sites—was infected with a virus and automatically emailed itself to the first 50 people in the recipient's address book. It set off a nasty chain reaction that spread to as many as 20% of the planet's business PCs, according to some estimates.

The virus's author called it Melissa (after a Miami stripper) and ended up spending 20 months behind bars. The scheme was more annoying than malevolent, but because it was so effectively (and socially) engineered, it was the first cybersecurity attack that many people experienced directly. In the years since, online threats have grown far more widespread and dangerous, with hackers finding ways to steal credit-card details, sensitive corporate data, and even celebrities' private photos. —*Harry McCracken*

2000: Napster in the spotlight

When the file-sharing service got sued, it fueled a debate that continues today.



From top: **Shawn Fanning**, **Lars Ulrich**, and **Sean Parker** were at the center of a lawsuit that helped shape music's future. Illustration: [Electra Sinclair](#)

What is music worth? For decades, the answer had been simple: whatever it cost at your local record store. But with the launch of Napster in 1999, things got confusing. Suddenly there was no reason to hit Tower Records if you wanted the new Metallica single. You could download it—along with pretty much any other song you could think of—without leaving your house . . . and without spending a cent. Music fans went nuts for Napster, and while many artists were also excited, others pushed back. Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich was the most outspoken opponent, and in April 2000, his band filed a lawsuit against Napster. It was the first time an artist sued the file-sharing service, and it helped usher in a profound reorganization of the music industry. Napster cofounder [Sean Parker](#)—who was also [Facebook's](#) founding president and today is on the board of [Spotify](#)—reflects on his company's revolutionary impact. —*Rob Brunner*

Fast Company: Why did Napster connect in such a big way?

Sean Parker: The obvious part is it was about music. It was the first time ever that the entire catalog of recorded music was available in one place. And it was also the first product that was truly a pure expression of what the Internet could do. Nothing up to that point had captured the possibility of hundreds of millions of people coming together and sharing media.

How did you react when you heard about the Metallica suit? It must have been terrifying.

What's amazing is that nobody was ever terrified. There was just a sense of disbelief. Suddenly you're thrown into this dreamlike world where mass-media icons and celebrities are filing litigations against you. You have an understanding that Napster is just symbolic. It's not that they're after you, as much as they're after this cultural shift that they're about to be left out of. Napster was deeply offensive to the cultural norms that existed at that time and to the power structure of the recorded-music business that existed relatively unchanged for [many] years.

You could almost talk about it in fantastical terms. We had created this as some sort of mad-scientist experiment. We unleashed some kind of suppressed force in the universe. [It was as though] you're just an observer of this sort of spirit force that's going to war with some existing system. You have a front-row seat to watch this epic showdown, but you're not functionally in control of any of it. In hindsight, you realize that Napster has a huge level of importance in terms of this larger battle between the top-down centralized mass media and the bottom-up decentralized social media we were moving into. Napster is that critical turning point: the first battle that is fought in this war for the hearts and minds of the media business itself.

Lars and I have become friends. We hang out and reminisce.

Could you sort of understand where Metallica was coming from?

Of course. We really cared about music and were huge fans. So anything short of growing the industry and making sure artists got paid was not an acceptable solution. But the real battle wasn't between whether artists should get paid or they shouldn't. It was between the pre-Internet world of media—which is controlled by gatekeepers, completely centralized—and the post-Internet world of media that was social and decentralized. Napster became the first point where artists were forced to confront the reality that as this Internet thing began to catch on, the degree of control they were able to exercise over their content was going to change. Now Lars and I have become really good friends—so much so that he came to my wedding. We hang out in San Francisco all the time and reminisce.

2001: Organic goes mainstream

Whole Foods arrived in New York City with a new approach to eating and shopping for food.



With its plans to clearly mark all GMO products by 2018, Whole Foods is bringing previously unheard-of transparency to food labeling. Illustration: [Vanessa McKeown](#)

How does the country's [largest natural-foods grocer](#) prove it's not just for health fanatics? Win over the picky palates of New Yorkers: In February 2001, Whole Foods' Manhattan flagship opened in the Chelsea neighborhood, and its aisles were soon flooded with stylish urbanites. That year, the USDA created broad standards to regulate the influx of organic producers. "It was an affirmation that organic is real," says Margaret Wittenberg, global VP of quality standards at Whole Foods, which now has nine stores in New York City (and 400-plus nationwide). Today, 84% of Americans buy organic food at least occasionally, and Whole Foods continues to push the industry in new directions. It compelled competitors to make organic more affordable with the launch of its 365 Organic Everyday Value line of products in 2002, and brought prominence to sustainable seafood by requiring vendors in the U.S. and Canada to undergo audits of their products beginning in 2008. The grocery chain has also helped to grow the organic ecosystem by offering low-interest loans to small-scale producers. Next up: Whole Foods is bringing transparency to food labeling with its vow to clearly label all GMO-modified products sold throughout the U.S. and Canada by 2018. —*Jessica Hullinger*

2002: The new urbanites come of age

***The Rise of the Creative Class* was both a book and a movement.**

[Richard Florida](#) was a little-known urban studies professor at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon when he wrote a book noting a new dynamic playing out in American cities, one in which economic growth was being driven by a burgeoning force of creative workers. *The Rise of the Creative Class* became a best seller and, following the dotcom bubble, a handbook for cities hoping to engender their own creative resurrections by attracting the same kind of talent as Austin and San Francisco—from engineers and architects to poets and musicians. Florida's book also resonated with young people who saw themselves in the creatives he described: individualistic, meritocratic, and open to new people and ideas. Entrepreneurship and innovation, rather than traditional financial success, were their prime motivators. As this generation of self-conscious creators pursued their passions, they helped refashion cities in their image. High-end coffee purveyors, artisanal boutiques, and design-driven coworking spaces spread from Brooklyn to Oakland (and spawned countless parodies). Today, whether aware of Florida's book or not, the creative class continues its urban alterations, most recently in his former backyard. In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida criticized Pittsburgh for its failure to retain creative people. These days, the city is full of them. —Amy Farley