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[Home](#) : [Honolulu](#) : [Archive](#) : [2001](#) : [November](#) : [Week of November 19, 2001](#) : [Opinion](#)

Search

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[Detailed Search Instructions](#)
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Contents

[Breaking News](#)
[Exclusive Reports](#)
[Small Business Insights](#)
[In Depth: Pacific islands](#)

Opinion

[Calendar](#)
[Still More](#)

Opinion

- [Tech in need of some strong medicine](#)
- [Hawaii's lingering roadblocks to economic diversification](#)
- In My Opinion:* [Federal control won't answer security problem](#)

[Printable version](#) | [Email story](#) | [Check it out!](#)
[Today's breaking news](#)

Opinion

➤ From the November 16, 2001 print edition

Tech in need of some strong medicine

When Guy Kawasaki, Iolani grad turned Silicon Valley venture capitalist, finished his speech this week before a packed house at the University of Hawaii, it felt like you'd just swallowed a tablespoon of cherry-flavored Robitussin: You cringe at first -- as the child in all of us should -- but in the end, it kind of tastes good and certainly was needed to make you better.

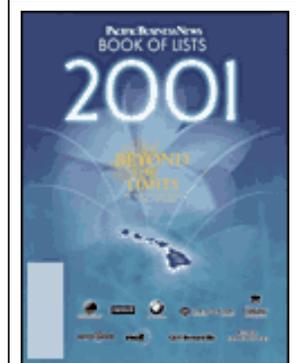
Kawasaki's diagnosis? Hawaii's approach to growing technology and assumptions about "natural advantages" are all wrong.

His antidote? Create a world-class science and engineering department at the university, sprinkle on some top-notch entrepreneurial training -- and watch the boatloads of money sail in.

Strong medicine is an unlikely metaphor for advice from a venture capitalist, except when it is delivered with Kawasaki's frankness and wisdom.

Kawasaki doesn't beat around the bush. His audience this week was an auditorium full of Hawaii executives and students who

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are probably on the progressive side but are nonetheless not used to hearing such straight talk in the hush-hush Hawaii business culture where criticism is kept to a minimum.

Talk between audience members prior to his speech was critical of Kawasaki's skeptical take on Hawaii technology as presented in an interview in that morning's Honolulu Advertiser.

On the whole, the consensus seemed to be that he shouldn't have been so harsh, that he should have "toned it down," perhaps, or kept his thoughts more to himself.

That's not an unusual expectation in Hawaii business or government. But the worst thing we can do is try to quell the contrarians among us who see missteps in our approach to economic growth.

Kawasaki shared these observations in spades, and in the end, few could say he missed the mark. Among his critiques:

- Hawaii can't create a vibrant technology sector through government decrees or 25-year plans. Silicon Valley, he says, came about not through master planning but through the serendipitous chaos that came about when Stanford "nerds", entrepreneurialism, money and greed collided.
- The "natural advantages" Hawaii has pinpointed as reasons for technology's potential here are totally off base. Our location between Asia and the West Coast is irrelevant. He summed this up with characteristic, cutting Kawasaki humor by saying flatly, "People fly direct."
- And the fact that we have "big pipes" -- referring to large quantities of bandwidth in the form of fiber-optic junctions converging in Hawaii -- is also irrelevant. "Bandwidth is cheap," he says, and people can get it anywhere.

In the end, Kawasaki received rousing applause from a crowd that just an hour before had felt unsettled by his attitude. It appears that many agreed with him -- or at least didn't disagree entirely. If straight talk like his is to be considered a form of prophecy, what's a state to do next?

Kawasaki advises a simple formula: Create an opportunity for superior science and technology education at our local schools.

"Throw money at the problem," he says. "Hire the world's best professors."

As has been the experience in places like Silicon Valley and

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Boston, he says, the brains will give birth to ideas, which will invite funding and venture capital, which will result in commercialization of the most legitimate and sellable products, which will make many people -- and state tax coffers -- very, very rich.

We agree with Kawasaki's assessment and would add these recommendations:

- Bolster education, but not just at the college and university level. Continue to chase the unrealized and elusive priority of having a public school system that allows students to fulfill their potential -- in a physical setting conducive to learning.
- The Hawaii Legislature has done a lot of the right things in making technology investment more attractive -- and competitive -- in Hawaii. And the University of Hawaii has strong programs in important areas -- engineering, medicine, research. That's a good base.
- But in addition to planting the tech seeds for the future and fostering them through education, there needs to be a compatible vision of focusing the future on areas where Hawaii has strengths or "core competencies." That includes ocean-based technology and science, astronomy and tropical ag. There are areas that can't be transferred elsewhere easily because they are part of the unique aspects of Hawaii.

What Kawasaki is talking about is making an investment and having the patience, the perseverance, the commitment, the patience to see it through. It's another investment in the next generation that Hawaii must make.



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