Sturgeon's Law

Idea In Short

Do not evaluate a field, market, or category by its average output alone. Sturgeon's Law is the blunt reminder that most of what gets produced in any domain is mediocre, forgettable, or worse. Theodore Sturgeon coined the line while defending science fiction from critics who treated its weakest examples as representative of the whole genre. The broader lesson applies well beyond literature. In innovation, investing, hiring, product design and strategy, large pools of output will usually contain a great deal of noise. Leaders who expect a high hit rate misunderstand how creative and competitive systems work. The practical implication is not cynicism. It is better filtration. When most output is low quality, advantage comes from selection, curation, judgment and the ability to identify the small minority that matters

Most fields produce far more material than any person can examine carefully. That simple fact has an uncomfortable consequence. A large share of what gets made will be forgettable, derivative, weak, or useless. Sturgeon's Law gives that reality its sharpest expression. It is less a literal measurement than a warning about judgment. If most output is mediocre in every field, then the real strategic advantage lies not in expecting quality to be common, but in getting better at filtering for the minority that deserves attention.

What Sturgeon's Law says

Sturgeon's Law is commonly expressed as the proposition that ninety percent of everything is crud1. The saying is attributed to Theodore Sturgeon, the American science fiction author and critic, who offered it while defending science fiction from critics who dismissed the entire genre by pointing to its worst examples. His response was direct. Science fiction might indeed contain a great deal of weak work, but so does almost every other field.

That context matters because the law is not mainly a joke about poor quality. It is a rebuttal to unfair comparison. Critics were comparing the worst science fiction to the best literature. Sturgeon corrected the frame by arguing that weak output is not unique to one genre. It is the normal condition of large bodies of work.

Historical accounts of the phrase note that the original wording was "crud" and that Sturgeon himself distinguished between what later became known as Sturgeon's Law and what he called Sturgeon's Revelation2. That nuance is useful, but the core idea remains the same.

Why the idea matters beyond literature

Sturgeon's Law survives because it captures a pattern visible in innovation, media, research, recruiting, investing and product development. The larger the field and the lower the barriers to participation, the more noise it tends to generate. Most ideas are weak. Most content is disposable. Most pitches fail. Most products do not matter. This is not evidence that the field is broken. It is evidence that large output pools naturally contain a lot of low-value material.

This matters strategically because average quality is often the wrong metric. A leader does not need an industry in which most opportunities are excellent. That leader needs a process capable of finding the few opportunities that are. Once that is understood, the goal shifts from complaint to filtration.

That is the deeper management use of the law. In environments with high variance, selection quality matters more than average quality.

Why people keep getting fooled by bad averages

Human judgment often fails when categories are compared unfairly. People compare the best examples of a favored field to the average output of a rival field. Or they encounter a string of bad examples and generalize from them too quickly. Sturgeon's Law warns against both mistakes. In most categories, mediocre output is abundant enough to dominate casual observation.

This is one reason the idea feels harsh but useful. It does not flatter taste, expertise, or managerial confidence. It says that low-quality artifacts are normal background conditions. If someone samples randomly from any large creative or commercial category, disappointment will often be the default outcome.

Science fiction references on the phrase preserve this original defensive context clearly: Sturgeon argued that ninety percent of science fiction was indeed crud, but then ninety percent of everything was crud and the important task was to pay attention to the ten percent that was not3.

What it means for innovation and portfolios

Innovation systems make Sturgeon's Law especially visible. Most new ideas fail. Most prototypes do not scale. Most experiments produce little value. Most strategic concepts collapse when they meet users, physics, regulation, or economics. This is not a sign that experimentation is irrational. It is what experimentation looks like in reality.

The implication is that leaders should not demand unrealistically clean funnels. A portfolio built to discover rare winners will naturally contain a lot of dead ends. What matters is whether the cost of exploring those dead ends is controlled and whether the organization learns quickly enough to redirect capital and attention.

Seen this way, Sturgeon's Law supports disciplined experimentation. If most output will be weak, then the objective is to generate options cheaply, filter rigorously and scale only what proves strong. The law is not anti-innovation. It is anti-naivete about hit rates.

Why curation becomes a source of advantage

When low-quality output is abundant, curation becomes economically valuable. This applies to content platforms, product marketplaces, software ecosystems, hiring systems and investment pipelines. Users and managers both face a search problem. The issue is not merely producing more options. It is identifying which options are worth scarce time, trust and capital.

This is where Sturgeon's Law becomes practical rather than philosophical. Organizations that build better filters can outperform organizations that simply consume more input. A team that reviews candidates more intelligently, screens vendors more carefully, or curates product opportunities more rigorously can create large gains without changing the underlying market.

Reference works on the phrase keep returning to this same general implication: the law is a reminder not to dismiss whole fields because so much of their output is weak, but to distinguish carefully between the majority that is poor and the minority that is worthwhile4.

Why the law should not be read too literally

Sturgeon's Law is an aphorism, not a statistical constant. The number ninety gives the phrase memorability, not scientific precision. In some fields the ratio may be better. In others it may be worse. The value of the law lies in the shape of the claim, not in the exact number. Most large bodies of output contain much more mediocrity than enthusiasts like to admit.

This limitation is important because literalism can make the phrase look glib. If someone treats it as a measured universal truth, the idea loses seriousness. Its real contribution is as a judgment tool. It teaches skepticism toward category-wide condemnation and caution toward average-case impressions.

Even quotation references that preserve the original wording often stress this point. The line works as a corrective against shallow comparison, not as a dataset pretending to precision5.

What leaders should do with it

First, leaders should expect low average quality in any large pool of proposals, candidates, startups, media, or product ideas. Surprise at that reality wastes time. Better filters matter more than emotional reactions to the amount of noise.

Second, leaders should compare categories fairly. Do not compare the best examples from one domain to the average examples from another. That mistake distorts investment decisions, partnership judgments and even internal culture debates. If the comparison matters, compare best to best or average to average.

Third, leaders should separate search from scale. In the search stage, much crud is normal. In the scale stage, standards should rise sharply. That distinction allows organizations to remain open to experimentation without confusing openness with indiscriminate acceptance.

The deeper lesson

Sturgeon's Law matters because it reframes disappointment. Encountering lots of weak output is not proof that a field lacks value. It is often what naturally happens when many people are producing many things under uneven constraints and incentives. The strategic mistake is to treat that noise as if it invalidates the whole category.

The stronger response is to build selection capability. Search broadly, judge carefully, compare fairly and back the minority that proves exceptional. This applies to markets, genres, technologies, content, recruits and strategic proposals. Theodore Sturgeon later framed the saying as part of a long defense of science fiction against critics who mistook the weak majority for the whole field[6].

That is the real managerial lesson. Most output will not deserve strong attention. The work is to find what does.

- 1Sturgeon's Law
- 2Sturgeon's Law: Ninety Percent Of Everything Is Crap
- 3SFE: Sturgeon's Law
- 4Sturgeon's Law
- 5"Sturgeon's Law" (C. 1951)
- 6Theodore Sturgeon FAQ

Summary

Sturgeon's Law endures because it strips away a recurring mistake in human judgment. People often dismiss an entire field after seeing its weakest artifacts, or overestimate their own category because they compare its best work to another category's average. Sturgeon's answer was sharper: low-quality output is normal almost everywhere. That does not make quality unimportant. It makes quality scarce and therefore worth detecting carefully. In business, this means leaders should expect many failed ideas, weak products, poor analyses and shallow trends around every genuinely strong opportunity. The real skill is not demanding a world without crud. It is building filters, standards and decision processes that help distinguish the rare ten percent worth backing