

Are You Spending Too Much Time in the Brine?

By Justin Locke
March 20, 2012

All my life, I have encountered people who claim that their insight into my clientele exceeds my own. But I've found a cheaper and much more reliable way to get that truly invaluable data.



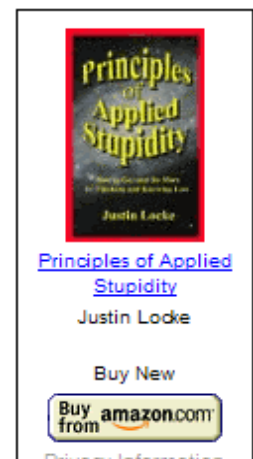
Double bass teachers have told me what conductors and audition committees want. Video editors have told me what TV viewers want. Book editors and literary agents now tell me what readers want. In just the past week, multiple “speaking coaches” have told me – without being asked – what my audiences want.

It may seem sensible to listen to such experts. They all speak with such a grand air of authority, and I am well aware of my own ignorance. We are a timid, social species and, like you, I like to avoid looking like an idiot or otherwise embarrassing myself.

The idea that I could go to some third party and safely and inconspicuously learn how to pick up girls – or discover the secret of great salesmanship, or acquire whatever other elusive bit of knowledge has been holding me back – sounds fantastic, as it totally avoids any frightening possibility of embarrassment or rejection. This desire is ubiquitous, and an entire industry has grown up to cater to it.

But every single time I have taken third-party advice on what an audience or a client wants, it has never worked. Instead, when I go directly to the consumer and ask what their desires are, I get a completely different answer than any advice-giving interloper told me to expect.

For example, when I wrote my first book (a memoir of my life as a bass player), several literary agents told me it would never sell. “It’s very funny,” they said, “But who wants to read a book about a bass player?” They did not see a market for it, nor did it resemble anything that sold well the year before.



I was similarly skeptical, but the book turned out to be an overwhelming commercial success.

Some years later, many people told me I should rethink titling my next book “Principles of Applied Stupidity,” given that “stupidity” is such an abrasive word. They certainly had a legitimate point, but right after I self-published it, I ran into a friend who hosted a local TV



show. “Oh,” she said. “What a fabulous title!” Ten days later I was featured on the local ABC network affiliate, not because it was a safe title, but because its humorous “offensiveness” was attention-grabbing. In publishing, publicity is key, and safe, polite titles do not get media attention. Third-party advice almost always skews towards the safest and least controversial method. Where’s the fun in that?

I know how faulty third-party advice is propagated. One person makes an observation or expresses an opinion, and bit by bit it gets repeated until it becomes accepted fact. People get comfortable with it, and it looks so wonderfully logical and correct that they stop gathering hard data altogether. Apparently no one else wants to go ask their customers what they think either.

There is a more familiar flip side to this: It can be hard, as a customer, to get through to a person in charge to tell a vendor what *you* want.

Years ago, I was a contractor for a sizable orchestra here in Boston. I found myself tremendously frustrated in my communications with freelance musicians. I called all the local professional music schools, and I offered to speak to their performance majors about how to interact with a real live orchestra contractor. I assumed they would leap at the chance. My gosh, when I was a young up-and-comer, I would have given my eye teeth to have a face to face meeting with a genuine orchestra contractor. After all, that was my number one target customer.

Amazingly, I was universally rebuffed. I was told, “We are already doing this, thanks anyway,” It was fairly obvious to me that they were not, but conventional wisdom becomes conventional for a reason – it’s often an easier sell than genuine insight.

All too often, third-party advice relies upon hand-me-down dogma and presumptions, rather than actual firsthand observation. It skews towards idealized theoretical versions of human nature, rather than hard data.

I am often invited to attend gatherings of authors or speakers, where some “expert” will tell me how to market myself. I realize that I might meet some interesting people and might get a few interesting tips here and there from talking to people in the business. But I am reminded of the great book by Gerald Weinberg, *Secrets of Consulting*.

One of his secrets was, “If you stay in the brine long enough, you become a pickle”

In other words, the more time you spend in a given culture, the more you take on the beliefs and attributes of people in that culture. You lose your unique perspective. Being unique is important to one’s “personal brand,” and I have never met any outside consultant who could tell me how I can be unique – after all, I’m not the only one they are looking to advise.



The only real way to figure out how to do things is to go directly to consumer. No theories, no books, just ask the people to whom you're selling what they think and what they like. The information is often shocking, but once you recover from that, it is consistently empowering.

There's always somebody telling me what my audience wants. And of course they want me to pay them for their insights. I appreciate the offers, but I think I'll just go ask the audience directly.

After all, they're right in front of me, and *their* advice is free.

Justin Locke is a speaker based in Boston. He spent 18 seasons playing the bass with the Boston Pops, and he is the author of several books, including "Real Men Don't Rehearse" (a musical memoir) and "Principles of Applied Stupidity," a look at how to be more productive and effective by going against the conventional wisdom. See more by visiting his website at www.justinlocke.com.

www.advisorperspectives.com

For a free subscription to the Advisor Perspectives newsletter, visit:
<http://www.advisorperspectives.com/subscribers/subscribe.php>