

# Seven Pieces of Wisdom on Consumer Research From Sandy, Quarter, Tommy, Matthew, Paul, Dave, and Dolly: a Love Letter to ACR.

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SEVEN PIECES OF WISDOM ON CONSUMER RESEARCH FROM SANDY, QUARTER, TOMMY, MATTHEW, PAUL, DAVE, AND DOLLY: A LOVE LETTER TO ACR

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Once a year, my wife Sally and I devote a long evening to watching the Academy Awards Ceremony, a television program watched by literally a billion people worldwide (Levy 1990). Typically, these Oscar Awards drag on for three or four hours and feature special announcements, sappy acceptance speeches, and bad jokes from some famous movie or TV personality like Jack Nicholson, Chevy Chase, or Whoopi Goldberg. It would be hard to argue that this program represents anything other than the best of the denominator in schlock mass-oriented low-brow pop culture. Yet invariably by the end of the night, at least one

sitting there with a little tear trickling down my cheek.

Why do I find the Academy Awards so moving? Why does Hollywood's crowd-pleasing celebration of itself tap so within me? The answer, I think, is that I have always dimly sensed how nice it would feel to be honored in that so

By contrast with the motion-picture industry, the teaching profession rarely inspires one's bosses, colleagues, or work" or "nice going" or "thank you." So receiving the ACR Fellows Award is probably the closest I shall ever co this occasion has made me extremely happy, proud, and grateful.

How do I plan to demonstrate this gratitude? The answer is that I want to share seven pieces of wisdom that peo to bestow upon me over the years. I would like to take this opportunity to pass them along to others. For the mo wisdom do not come from booksCat least not from marketing books or consumer-research journals. Rather, th fund of experience in the world around us and are part of the folk culture in which we live. All the more reason v write them down before we forget their importance and they disappear forever in the sands of time.

## ONE

The first piece of wisdom I wish to mention comes from my father Sandy and takes us back about forty years to eleven, more than anything else in the world I wanted my parents to give me a chemistry set. As I recall, the one company called Gilbert and came in an eye-catching wooden box complete with all sorts of powders in little bot mortar-and-pestle, and even a small microscope. Using this marvelous equipment, a kid could while away many like combining phenolphthalein with potassium chloride and watching the resulting solution turn bright red. I be about \$39.95 and could be ordered direct from the F.A.O. Schwartz catalogue.

My mom bought the chemistry set that I wanted so badly and hid it in the guest-room closet upstairs. I know thi the first weeks of December to inspecting the Christmas gifts that she had carefully hidden in this manner. So, as December approached, I eagerly anticipated all the fun I was going to have with my new toy.

Meanwhile, my father Sandy had other plans. Sandy was a physician in Milwaukee and was therefore intimately f test tubes, mortars, pestles, microscopes, and rare powders in little bottles. Apparently, Sandy took one look at t chemistry set that my mother had purchased, did a quick mental calculation, and computed that its entire conte dollars and sixty three cents. As a trained practitioner, Sandy knew that for \$39.95 he could put together a vastly flasks, tubes, and powders. And this is exactly what he proceeded to do.

Unbeknownst to me, Sandy copied down a list of each item in the chemistry set that I wanted so much, went to house, and purchased better versions of everything in the package. Instead of little imitation beakers and flasks, I type that a real pharmacist would use. Instead of tiny bottles of sulfur and acid, he got big jars reminiscent of wh apothecary. Instead of the tinny little microscope supplied with the toy chemistry set, he included a powerful on used in his own medical practiceCone that I have always kept, that has become an antique, and that is probably today.

But when Christmas morning arrived, when I put on my navy blue bathrobe and furry slippers to join my paren opening ceremony, and when I found this assemblage of chemicals and other laboratory gadgets, I felt an overw disappointment. True, I could easily see that every single item in my father's lovingly assembled collection was s item in the toy chemistry set. But Sandy had failed to notice that there was just one crucial ingredient missingCn

For the next several months, I spent countless hours in the basement of our house systematically finding out wh magnificent mortar and pestle to mix various chemicals together in various combinations and then heat them u that you get some truly dreadful smells. Often, these mixtures catch on fire or explode. Sometimes, they form s inside wall of the test tube that you have to throw it away. Also, if you put a beaker under cold water while it is st And if you try to ram some glass tubing through the hole in a rubber stopper without first warming the rubber a break and plunge into the base of your thumb and leave a scar that will prevent you from playing tenths on the p

These, I suppose, were all valuable lessons. But the most important lesson by far lay in the significance of the gift set together by a toy manufacturer and a collection of authentic chemicals and real laboratory equipment as a physician. The point, of course, is that like my father's well-intentioned but somewhat misguided Christmas present with an instruction book.

Only toy science comes with instructions included. In real science, you must figure out the rules for yourself and deal with bad smells, dangerous explosions, crusty messes, broken glass, and bloody fingers. But if this is true, how should the question brings me to the second piece of wisdom that I would like to offer, one that comes directly from my cat.

## TWO

Before he recently died of old age, Quarter the Cat shared our New York apartment for eighteen years, during which he wrote on a variety of topics, one of which bears directly on the question at hand and concerns the ways in which cats communicate (Quarter 1993a).

Briefly, dogs are obedient; they aim to please their masters; they want to do what we want them to do; they wish to please; they are DOGmatic. If there were an instruction book for pets, dogs would gladly live by those guidelines.

By contrast, cats are independent; they aim to please nobody but themselves; they really do not care what other people think; they ignore the whole concept of rules and regulations. In short, from the viewpoint of the dog fancier, they are CATastrophic. If there were an instruction book for pets, cats would insist on ignoring it completely.

Quarter the Cat exemplified this attitude to a highly refined degree. If you called his name, Quarter absolutely would come, whether hungry, in which case he would come whether you called his name or not. If you scolded Quarter for eating leaves on Monday, he would devote all his energies to eating some more leaves as soon as you left the apartment on Tuesday. If you tried to jump out of the fifth-floor window and live to tell about it, Quarter jumped and Quarter lived. Both of which he did just a kitten.

So like all cats, Quarter followed a simple but powerful philosophy that constitutes our second piece of wisdom. Like consumer researchers as well as cats, this tenet has an immediate corollary: Satisfy your curiosity. Explore. Do not cease to follow your nose into anything that interests you. Show some respect for the first person who had the courage to eat a leaf.

In the absence of an instruction book for science, these strike me as good principles for the consumer researcher. What I think is important. Investigate the issues that matter to you. Insist on setting your own priorities. As the anthropologist urged in his conversations with Bill Moyers, "Follow Your Bliss" (Campbell and Moyers 1988). Or, as urged by Lorna Catford, "What You Love, Love What You Do" (Catford and Ray 1991, p. 67).

But this advice immediately raises another tough question—namely, if we behave in this manner, how do we know when to stop? And this issue brings me to a third piece of wisdom, one given to me by my old piano teacher.

## THREE

Tommy Sheridan is a great jazz pianist with the technique of an Oscar Peterson, the refinement of a Bill Evans, and the style of George Shearing. But, rather than seeking the limelight and traveling extensively, he has lived happily as a devotee of his art and has dedicated his life to helping fortunate students like me share his boundless enthusiasm for jazz. Tommy's example has conveyed the importance of finding joy in what you do. Those who delight in ACR trivia will find the proceedings Beth Hirschman and I edited fifteen years ago is dedicated to Tommy Sheridan (Hirschman and Hirschman 1998).

One day, I came to Tommy with a question about an unusual chord progression I had devised that seemed to defy the harmonic substitutions he had been showing me. I played him a little passage that contained my musical discovery, which violated the accepted doctrine on permissible chord changes, and asked him if it was okay to do something like that. He replied, "It sounds good, doesn't it?" "Yes," I said, "I guess so." "Well," Tommy said, "If it sounds right, it is right."

Thirty-five years later, I found the same thought attributed to Duke Ellington: "If it sounds good, it is good" (quoted ed. 1993, p. 61). The sociologist David Sudnow (1978, ed. 1993) uses similar logic to teach novices to play the piano...needs to read music to pick out a melody" because "people can hear their own bad notes" (Miller 1993, p. from the movie *In the Line of Fire*, John Malkovich asks Clint Eastwood to "name one thing that has any meaning" replies, "I play the piano."

But, beyond such anecdotal support, many consumer researchers will be reassured to find comparable views of their favorite neopositivistic philosophers of science—namely, the late Sir Karl Popper. In his intellectual autobiography (Popper 1976) just after explaining the principles of falsificationism and using these to discredit Freud, Marx, and others as "unscientific" (p. 52) Sir Karl announces that "in all this, speculation about music played a considerable part of his admiration for Schubert, Brahms, and Bruckner and of his dislike for Wagner, Richard Strauss, and Schoenberg: an eighteen-page account of how this interest in music influenced his philosophy.

In general, Popper (1976) suggests that his experience with music shaped his ideas on "the logic of discovery" or "epistemology" (p. 55). More specifically Sir Karl emphasizes "an interpretation of the difference between Bach and Beethoven" (p. 60), claiming that this comparison prompted his deepest insights into the nature of an objectivist epistemology: "the distinct attitudes of Bach and Beethoven towards their compositions that I introduced...the terms 'objective' and 'subjective'—Beethoven followed the subjective route because he "made music an instrument of self-expression" (p. 61). But Popper, as a scientist, "tried to create "objective music" (p. 64).

We might wonder in what sense music could be "objective." Popper's answer hinges on his conception of falsificationism:

According to my objectivist theory...the really interesting function of the composer's emotions is not to be expressed, but that they may be used to test the success of the fittingness or the impact of the (objective) work: the composer may use himself as a kind of test body, and he may modify and re-compose...when he is dissatisfied by his own reaction to it... he will in this way make use of his own reactions—his own "good taste" (p. 67).

Here, clearly, Popper assumes that Bach and other composers conjecture that something will sound good, write it down, and thereby test it on themselves. If they like it, they consider it corroborated or at least not falsified. In the words of Arnold Schoenberg, "A musician cannot move others unless he, too, is moved" (quoted by Blum 1994, p. 25).

An exception that proves the rule occurred when jazz pianist Dave Brubeck studied briefly with the famed atonal composer Arnold Schoenberg. In Brubeck's words,

I brought him a piece of music I'd written.... He said, "That's very good. Now go home and don't play it again until you know why everything is there. Do you know now?" he asked. I said, "Isn't it good enough if it sounds good?" He said, "No, you have to know why." That was my last lesson with Schoenberg (quoted by Lyons 1980, pp. 208-209).

Schoenberg himself had a complex theory of how music should be constructed, no matter how bad it sounded. He believed that views should be strapped to a chair and forced to listen to his excruciatingly ugly *Pierrot Lunaire* all the way through.

Jule Styne—a more tuneful composer who wrote the music for such memorable songs as "Bye Bye Baby," "Gee," "The Things We Did Last Summer," "I Fall In Love Too Easily," "Just In Time," "Make Someone Happy," "Time After Time"—passed away on September 20, 1994. The *New York Times* reported his death as a featured story that gave him six-and-a-half feet of column space (Blau 1994), followed by a special tribute in the Arts and Leisure section (Holden 1994). By contrast, when Sir Karl Popper had died three days earlier at the age of ninety-two, the *Times* gave him 54 in a brief notice that ran only twenty-one inches. The *Times* quoted Sir Karl as claiming that "next to music and art, the most beautiful and most enlightening achievement of the human spirit" (Associated Press 1994, p. 54). Next to music...

In other words—to paraphrase Sir Karl, to echo Duke Ellington, to clarify David Sudnow, to extend Clint Eastwood, to contradict Arnold Schoenberg in favor of Dave Brubeck or Jule Styne, and to ratify Tommy Sheridan—if it sounds good, it is good.

Suppose that you happen to agree with the three pieces of wisdom proposed so far. You realize that science has. Therefore, you decide to do what you want. And you hope that you will recognize what is good by what sounds. you happen to make such a discovery. The next question is what you should do with it.

Here, I wish to draw on a fourth piece of wisdom dispensed by someone whom I shall call The Unknown Respondent. A person participated in a survey conducted by my wife Sally for her doctoral dissertation in clinical social work. A questionnaire, in a space designed for open-ended comments, The Unknown Respondent wrote, "This study show your light under a bushel."

Neither Sally nor I had heard this expression before, but it certainly sounded like good advice to the social scientist. If you found some truth, don't be bashful. Get out there and talk about it. Present it at a conference. Send it to a journal.

Nonetheless, we continued to wonder where the expression came from. One day, I ran across the same figure of speech called A Letter To Three Wives. So we knew that it did exist in the vernacular, at least back in the 1940s. We then found its source. Indeed, I developed the habit of asking almost everybody I ran into if they had ever heard the phrase originate. No one had and no one could.

Finally, one of our more religious friends suggested that it sounded like something from The Bible. This hint sent my husband, who has a degree in theology and who ultimately provided our answer. It turns out that the expression comes from the source named Jesus Christ. It appears in the midst of the passage from St. Matthew (Chapter 5) that recounts the Sermon on the Mount. Soon after the familiar part about the poor being blessed in spirit and the meek inheriting the earth, showing references to committing adultery in your heart and turning the other cheek, Christ says:

14 Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.

15 Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light to all that are in the house.

He then follows with words so important that they have been incorporated into Christian church services all around the world.

16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven.

So this strikes me as excellent advice that we have acquired on good authority. Translated into the context of my own work, it suggests that after we have given up on finding an instruction book for science, do what we want to do. It sounds right to us. We should put it on a candlestick and let this light so shine before both men and women that we can't hide it. In other words, we should show it to the world by publishing it.

## FIVE

This is the point at which we encounter the problems posed by reviewers, editors, and publishers. I have spoken about this (Holbrook 1986) and shall not now repeat myself on the ethical problems that infect the review process (Holbrook 1986) that some recent motion pictures have treated relevant publishing-related themes.

First, the film based on Stephen King's novel called Misery tells the story of what can happen when authors fall under the hands of readers in general or under attack by their critics in particular. James Caan plays the part of a writer held captive by an obsessive fan. In an Oscar-winning performance, Ms. Bates undergoes a cinematic transformation from the role of an adoring fan to a psychotic who ultimately destroys the author's work. Misery thereby illustrates the damage that can occur when reviewers perform their tasks too aggressively.

Second, in Husbands and Wives, Woody Allen, who has proclaimed to the world in real life that he feels no need

accepted views on ethical propriety. Coates himself as a professor who teaches across the street from Columbia University. Then, in *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, Woody works as an editor at a well-known publishing company in New York.

Third, another film deals even more directly with the essence of the publishing business. It stars Michelle Pfeiffer in the title role of *Wolf*. Below the surface of the rather conventional werewolf story, this movie suggests the lupine qualities needed to succeed in this line of endeavor.

In sum, at the hands of reviewers, editors, and publishers, even good work is likely to receive savage treatment. The better the work is, the more likely it is to be mistreated.

This fifth piece of wisdom surfaces in a recent commentary by Joshua Gans and George Shepherd (1994) entitled "Fallen: Rejected Classic Articles by Leading Economists." Gans and Shepherd chronicle stories told in self-reports of economic scholars who have won the Nobel Prize or the John Bates Clark Medal but whose most influential papers were rejected with amazing regularity and apparent injustice. These abused economic geniuses include such prominent figures (on general equilibrium models), James Tobin (on probit regression), Franco Modigliani (on his consumption function), competition and democracy), Robert May (on chaos theory), Robert Lucas (on rational expectations), Gerard De Long (on change), Kenneth Arrow (on inventories), and George Akerlof (on the market for lemons). One noteworthy example comes from James March:

I have certainly had articles rejected.... I recall on one occasion a referee filing a two paragraph commentary...suggesting (in the first paragraph) that the key theorem involved was trivially obvious (in the second paragraph) that it was wrong. I thought on the whole that he ought to choose (quoted by Shepherd 1994, p. 174).

The point is that even masterpieces by Nobel laureates routinely get trashed in the review process. Hence, our first point is articulated by Paul Samuelson:

Yes, journals have rejected papers of mine, some of them later regarded as "classics." ... the quality of the paper I had at first rejected is not less than the quality of papers accepted at once (quoted by Gans and Shepherd 1994, pp. 165-166).

## SIX

How, one might ask, can we possibly find happiness in a world where reviewers, editors, and publishers constantly reject our work? I once proposed an answer to this question (Holbrook 1989) by suggesting that we should emulate Bach, anticipating Popper's advice by writing cantata after cantata until he finally got it right in *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (Cantata #80) and in *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben* with its wonderful chorale movement that we call "Desiring" (Cantata #147). Or we should follow Mickey Mantle, on damaged knees, limping to the plate again and again to hit a home run. But, in an ironic sort of postmodern reflexivity, my comments on Bach and Mantle were themselves rejected. Since then, I have recalled that Bach borrowed the theme for *A Mighty Fortress* from Martin Luther, who had been used by students used to sing while getting drunk in the beer halls. And, amidst great publicity, my hero Mickey Mantle had been trying to dry out at the Betty Ford Clinic (Brady 1994). So the old question still haunts us: After losing the instruction, wanting to get it to sound right, trying to show it to the world, and suffering the inevitable slings and arrows of our critics, how do we turn for comfort?

I believe that a partial answer, which I offer as our sixth piece of wisdom, comes from an experience I had in Fieldston. My teacher conducted some classes on business writing. As an exercise, we all completed an assignment in which we wrote letters to corporations requesting various sorts of free materials. Our teacher selected the letter by Dave Smith (fictitious name) for the class, except for one minor problem near the end, and read the entire communication out loud:

Dear Sirs [remember this was 1953],

I am a student in the fifth-grade class at the Milwaukee Country Day School and am interested in

company and in the work that you are doing in the production of automobiles.

I would be grateful if you could please send me your annual report and any other available information describing your business, such as relevant photographs or other free materials.

Thank you in advance for your kind consideration.

Love, Dave

The teacher viewed Dave's closing salutation as a tragic flaw in his letter, but I have always considered it the letter ending seemed to imply that seven in the world of business love is a relevant concept. Unintentionally, he echoed great writers through the ages from Saint Thomas Aquinas to Dante to James Joyce to John Lennon and Paul McCartney. "I have all you need."

The aforementioned Sermon on the Mount clearly anticipated the inequities of the review process when it emphasized wisdom:

44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and be ye kind to them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.

Paradoxically, following the advice of Christ can get you in a whole lot of trouble. Indeed, as He Himself found out, love almost guarantees that some people will treat you badly.

For example, this strategy ensured my rejection from the Harvard Business School. In its MBA application form, I wrote a personal essay on the candidate's three most valuable qualities. I suppose they expected things like (1) the ability to negotiate while negotiating multi-million-dollar corporate mergers; (2) the overwhelming motivation to succeed financially; (3) the desire to donate large sums of money to one's alma mater. Unfortunately for me, I mentioned the capacity to love as a quality considered worthwhile. Somewhere, even today, a retired Harvard admissions officer probably collapses in helplessness. I recall this incident. At any rate, the Harvard Business School responded to my misguided plea for a grade by rejecting me. I gain maturity by joining the Army. By the way, this was in 1965 at the height of America's military build-up.

So Harvard taught me that love is not necessarily a virtue admired by all. Nonetheless, we might aspire to the spiritual. The letter written long ago and signed "Love, Dave." Many of my marketing colleagues have probably been surprised with the words "Love, MCC." But, if you've been wondering, that's what I learned in my fifth-grade English class.

## SEVEN

Some people probably think that all this sounds rather sentimental. Indeed, sentiments, emotions, or feelings pervade consumption experiences in ways that lie very close to my heart as a consumer researcher. My work with Robert Schindler has focused on the role of nostalgia in consumer behavior. And nostalgia depends on the form of a bittersweet longing for the past (Holbrook 1993b; Holbrook and Schindler 1991, 1994).

These intertwined themes of love, sentiment, and nostalgia return, circle-like, to the place where I began my career in ceremonies in general and for the Oscars, Emmys, Grammys, and ACR Fellows Awards in particular. Surely, the phenomenon of nostalgia has surfaced in our contemporary popular culture, especially at some of the recent Grammy Awards (Holbrook 1993c).

A couple of years ago, Natalie Cole revived an old song called "Unforgettable" that her father Nat had first recorded. Her performances of this and other nostalgic favorites won a total of seven Grammy Awards in 1992, including the top award for best song, and album of the year (Pareles 1992).

Something similar happened again this year when Whitney Houston reached back to a song written and recorded by Ms. Houston included it in the soundtrack for her film *The Bodyguard*, which promptly became the best-selling

the most popular recording of 1993 (ten million copies sold), and winner of the 1994 Grammy Award for album performance of Dolly's old song also receiving Grammys for best female pop vocal and record of the year (Pare

To conclude by returning to my opening theme and its connection with the awards ceremonies, the words of D gratitude for the Fellows Award, express how I feel toward my friends at ACR, and reflect what I now offer as my personal piece of wisdom. To quote Dolly:

I hope life treats you kind.

And I hope you have all you dreamed of.

And I wish you joy and happiness.

But, above all this, I wish you love.

And....

Well, you all know the rest.

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