



## MANUFACTURING MANAGEMENT CELEBRITY

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In 1995 Business Week published an exposé into an operation to systematically increase the sales of a book titled *The Discipline of the Market Leaders* by Michael Treacy and Fred Wiersema. This purchase operation had the effect of improving its position in lists of best-selling books including that published in Business Week and in the New York Times. Business Week's investigation revealed that the authors, and the consultancy for whom they worked, had spent around \$250,000 to steadily purchase around 10,000 copies of the book from bookshops across America. In essence, they employed staff to use company credit cards to place the orders in a host of different bookshops so that these corporate purchases, which would normally be excluded from sales data, appeared as personal sales and so were included in the calculation of the overall sales of the book.

Although this incident was a uniquely reported event, it does raise a more general question about why such a purchase operation would be developed? Why was it so important to create a best-selling management book? The answer is that those associated with such popular management ideas, whether the authors or their consultancies/ companies, enjoy very significant enhancement to their reputations. Consultancies are recognised as being thought leaders at the forefront of management knowledge and attract an increased number of assignments and clients. The consultancy involved (CSC Index) had already benefited from a significant increase in revenues arising from being associated with Michael Hammer and James Champy's Business Process Reengineering, one of the greatest blockbuster management ideas of all-time. Similarly, an earlier book by Peters and Waterman – *In Search of Excellence* – had a significant impact on McKinsey where they both worked at the time of writing.

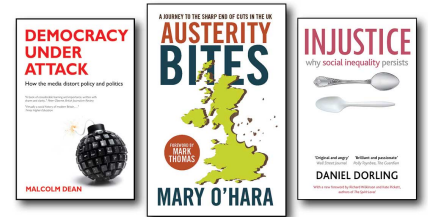
For the individual authors, for whom such sales lead them to be ascribed guru status, however, their personal renown overtakes any particular organizational affiliation, whether it be a consultancy or university, as it is driven not by their consulting or academic activities but by the level of media attention they and their ideas attract on the basis of the success of their books and public performances on the management lecture circuit (to which both Treacy and Wiersema continue to contribute).

For example, Tom Peters is associated with 'Excellence', Michael Hammer and James Champy with 'Business Process Reengineering' and Peter Senge with the 'Learning Organization'. In this respect, they become celebrity consultants whose public status emerges from a 'process of celebrification that focuses on the increasing visibility of their ideas'[1]. From this point of view, the inherent value of the ideas being projected is not as critical to their success as gaining attention and visibility. Management gurus and their ideas do not arrive spontaneously and ready-made but rather are the result of careful and co-ordinated production that seeks to ensure that they catch-on quickly once launched.

When authors reach the point of being credited with guru status they enter a premier league in which the financial and reputational benefits are considerable. But what is this process of celebrification? How are their

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ideas moulded to increase the chance that they will strike a chord both with the management audience and the zeitgeist?

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Our research indicates that management gurus have to be communicators par excellence in two areas – books and lectures. Before we briefly discuss some of the conventions that underpin, but do not guarantee, their success it should be noted that management gurus are just one kind of actor in a management knowledge arena. Other actors are typically identified as consulting firms, business schools, management academics and publishers. Whether these different agents compete, or on occasion collaborate, they are in a competitive race to constantly launch ideas that have the potential to become popular by attracting the attention of a large number of members of the managerial audience.

Whether their ideas have actual value and performance benefits is therefore less important than whether they are packaged so as to have an immediate appeal with the intended audience. Gurus are critical because without their 'authorization' and communication skills, it is unlikely that a particular idea would become popular and fashionable. The successful launch of a popular management idea is therefore tied to their ability to communicate it in such a way that it obtains initial stickiness and traction. How do they try to do this?

A number of authors have examined the issue of what features make a management book readable and attractive such that it becomes a bestseller. Notwithstanding the problem that no one can guarantee that a particular book will become a bestseller since there are many factors out of the control of authors and publishers, unless they engage in the unusual practices we outlined at the start of this article, commentators have stressed the importance of a number of factors. These include a simple writing style using language that is accessible to a wide audience with a general education; using memorable and pithy concepts; a focus on a single factor that accounts for successful performance improvements; contrasting old practices with those of the author(s) such that the latter are presented as qualitatively better and superior in that they are an advance on the past out-of-date ways of working; populating books with descriptions of case studies of outstanding success; emphasizing the practical relevance of the book by referring to well-known and respected managers and organisations that already use the techniques; stressing the universal applicability of the ideas; presenting the context in such a way that change is presented as urgent and the adoption of the ideas as unavoidable in these circumstances; and, linking the ideas to highly treasured management values (i.e., competitive advantage; enhanced performance).

By drawing on these conventions, gurus and their publishers seek to design a book so that the contents – regardless of their inherent value – are presented in ways that resonate with the expectations and needs of different audiences for information and, in doing so, heighten their chance of becoming a bestseller.

Commentators have consistently argued that the gurus' public performances are critical to their popularity and success and help to promote and sustain the visibility of their ideas. This arises in part because very few gurus are the authors of more than one bestselling book. Although Tom Peters is unusual in that he has published a number of successful books, he is nevertheless invariably associated with the book that established his guru status – *In Search of Excellence*. Other gurus, such as Daniel Goleman, Gary Hamel and Peter Senge, are generally associated with a single bestselling book. Given that they cannot rely on a steady stream of bestselling books, gurus therefore have to find other ways to maintain the longer-term prominence of their ideas and reputations as innovative thinkers. The main way in which they do this is by giving live presentations on the international management lecture circuit. Whilst the popularity of their most successful book, in terms of sales, may last for a few years, they can remain prominent speakers for decades. They achieve this by gaining a reputation as an effective, entertaining and powerful orator and thereby building loyal followings with audiences of managers that lead to high levels of re-attendance and re-booking.

Research by the authors, based on detailed analyses of video recordings of a number of gurus' lectures, reveals that their oratorical prowess is founded on a number of pillars. First they are very skilled at using a range of rhetorical techniques associated with 'persuasive' talk in other forms of public speaking. Many of these were known to the Greeks and Romans and have been shown to underpin the oratory of such acclaimed speakers as Churchill and Lincoln[2]. These include the use of rhetorical devices – lists, contrasts, puzzle solutions, combinations of these devices and so forth – which have been shown to both highlight key messages by foregrounding them from surrounding speech materials and, when delivered in a particular way, enable audience members to coordinate their responses (generally laughter, very occasionally applause) around clearly projectable message completion points. By combining these rhetorical techniques with body, facial and hand gestures, and often packaging them within appealing stories, the gurus are very effective at generating collective audience laughter during their lectures[3].

Second, to address the fact that they talk to many different groups who vary in the extent to which they may agree with their ideas, they either invest their messages with multiple sources of humour, or invite displays of affiliation with values that do not derive directly from their core management ideas and visions. This means audience members can laugh for a number of reasons and not necessarily display agreement with the guru by laughing.

The point is that gurus are expert at obtaining displays of affiliation/ laughter from audiences even in circumstances in which audience members disagree with, or are ambivalent to, their core ideas. This enables the gurus to enhance the entertainment value of their lectures to a very broad range of people making their messages more memorable and the audience members potentially more amenable to the recommendations they are conveying. In this way management gurus are able to build a sense of cohesion and intimacy, which

may well soften-up the audience and make them more receptive to their messages. Gurus are unlikely to persuade audiences to empathize with their positions unless they create a sense of goodwill and like-mindedness with audience members. Humour is one means through which gurus and other public speakers create the conditions necessary to win and retain converts.

In addition to humour, story-telling is another mechanism through which gurus emphasize their ideas. Their stories often precede and therefore highlight their key messages by relaying something that is both interesting and entertaining. The stories frequently relay the personal experiences of the gurus, changes they or others have undergone as well as epiphanal moments in their lives that purportedly account for the identification of the ideas for which they are known. By telling a story prior to delivering a key message, particularly one that is funny and of personal significance, the gurus generate attention and cohesion before delivering a key message. In this way their core messages are highlighted and conveyed to a more sympathetic and receptive audience.

Whilst a small number of management ideas become popular as a result of the coalescence of thousands of independent decisions, we have suggested that their potential attractiveness and positive reception is heightened by the use of a small number of conventions. However, this does not guarantee their success.

Furthermore, just as the conventions that underpinned what accounted for successful public speaking changed as a result of speeches being broadcast on TV (for example the close-up and microphones removed the need for exaggerated body and vocal mannerisms) so the conventions and routes of awareness for management ideas are changing with the emergence of a digital world.

The importance of books is likely to persist but they may increasingly be read via tablets/Kindles which may require modification of presentational conventions to maximise the possibilities of these technologies.

The public presentations/lectures of gurus are becoming more widely available. Previously managers and others either attended the performances or viewed them via relatively expensive training videos, usually whilst attending training courses. People (and not only managers) can now view them on the internet at little or no cost, as often as they like. However, the 'publishing' of presentations/lecturers/speeches on the web may not only broaden the range of individuals involved in communicating and 'receiving' management ideas but may also ultimately reshape the conventions associated with the oratorical communication of management ideas.

This arises because speakers have to adjust to the conventions surrounding **new formats for presenting talks** (e.g., TED Talks). They also have to consider the fact that recorded lectures will often be viewed by individuals (alone) rather than by groups attending training sessions.

Thus, the two key media through which management ideas have traditionally been communicated will persist but in new forms sensitive to digital platforms and surrounded by a range of supplementary channels of communication involving social media, email, blogs, tweets, etc. To remain successful, current and future gurus will need to expand the ways in which they communicate and master the conventions that attach to successful communication via these digital media.

#### References:

[1] Guthey, E., Clark, T. and Jackson, B. (2009) *Demystifying Business Celebrities*. London: Routledge.

[2] See Stephen Bungay 'His speeches: How Churchill did it' (<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-about-winston-churchill/his-speeches-how-churchill-did-it>); Garry Willis (1992) *Lincoln and Gettysburg*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

[3] Greatbatch, D and Clark, T. (2003) 'Humour and laughter in the public lectures of management gurus', *Human Relations*, 56 (12), 1515-1544.

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