

20 Business Lessons Learned from Monty Python

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People who think that all relevant business lessons can only be learned from business books or blogs are mistaken. One can look to the arts for an abundant amount of inspiration and insight into today's corporate climate. For example, of all the treatises and analyses written about the current economic crisis, no statement places the situation more bluntly than Polonius' quote from Shakespeare's Hamlet: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be ...". Had more consumers thought about the ramifications of borrowing, the economy might not be in such a troubled state.

Similarly, while audiences laugh at the brilliant comedy of Monty Python, a closer examination of the show reveals its incredible insight into many aspects of the human existence, especially business and commerce.

Skeptical that there are indeed lessons to be learned from Monty Python? These 20 pearls of Pythonic wisdom will show you the light.

Branding

1. ["Well, before he went he left a note with the company, the effect of which was how disappointed he was with your work and, in particular, why you had changed the name from Conquistador Instant Coffee to Conquistador Instant Leprosy. Why, Frog?"](#)

In the quest to be new and innovative, brand managers sometimes feel the need to tinker with success (think "New Coke"). Their ego gets the better of their judgment and they push forth ideas they think are creative but are unsuccessful in the marketplace. The end result is that revenue tanks. If brand is strong, don't mess with it; just adjust the peripherals in order to increase sales and industry share.

2. "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition! Our chief weapon is surprise, surprise and fear, fear and surprise ... our two weapons are fear and surprise ... and ruthless efficiency. ... Our three weapons are fear, surprise and ruthless efficiency."

A corporate brand should have a consistent definition in the marketplace. If public confusion exists about what the brand represents, sales will suffer. If the corporate executives can't even come to a solid definition of brand, how is the public supposed to properly evaluate its offerings?

Marketing

3. "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."

Obvious exceptions aside, conversations about your brand in the marketplace are usually a good thing. Consumers are overwhelmed with options, and if they see or hear something about your brand at the time they need to make a purchase decision, they are far more likely to choose it. If marketing professionals can keep a continual ongoing dialogue about your product in the public sphere, your company should see improved revenue.

3. "It's just a few friends call me Two Sheds and that's all there is to it. I wish you'd ask me about my music. I'm a composer. People always ask me about the sheds, they've got it out of proportion. I'm fed up with the shed; I wish I'd never got it in the first place."

Marketing also needs to strategically guide the marketplace conversation about your brand. A brand can get tarnished with a high profile blunder that can be very difficult to overcome. Such an association could stick in the minds of consumers and cast a pall over any future branding and marketing initiatives.

Sales

5. "Yes, it's one pound for a five-minute argument, but only eight pounds for a course of ten."

Incentivizing bulk purchases is always good for business. In today's economy, coupon-related searches are skyrocketing because everyone is looking for a bargain. Give the customer more reasons to spend more money with you: The margin might be less but the profit will be greater.

6. "Ah well, this is your free dead Indian, as advertised. -I didn't see that in the adverts -No, it's in the very small print, you see, sir, so as not to affect the sales."

A good way to irritate customers is to offer “disagreeable” terms and conditions that they don’t learn about until their transactions have already been completed. Sure, the customer might have “consented” and the vendor might end up collecting the additional revenue. However, this same customer will bombard customer service with angry calls, tell all of his or her friends about your company's poor policies and post hate messages on the Internet. It’s always more cost effective to generate repeat business from existing customers than acquire new customers, so companies should treat their patrons well.

7. “I'm afraid I'm not personally qualified to confuse cats, but I can recommend an extremely good service.”

Unless your business is the size of Wal-Mart, it can’t be all things to all people. It will be more successful if you do a few things very well instead of doing everything badly. If you can’t do a good job for a customer, you are better off referring him or her to someone who can better address his or her needs. You will gain goodwill both from the prospective customer (who will come back to you when he or she needs your core services) and from referral partners (who will refer relevant business to you).

Marketplace and Competitive Research

8. “So, in, er, three years you've spotted no camels? -Yes in only three years. Er, I tell a lie, four, be fair, five. I've been camel spotting for just the seven years. Before that of course I was a yeti spotter.”

It’s important to take an unbiased look at prospective commercial opportunities before investing much time and capital. Many potential business models appear to be new and innovative, but if demand doesn’t exist for the service or product, you won’t make money. It’s also important to dispassionately judge the success of these investments — if a mistake is made, better to cut your losses early than continue on an unprofitable path.

9. “The whole problem of Whicker Island is here in a nutshell. There are just too many Whickers. The light-weight suits. The old school tie. The practiced voice of the seasoned campaigner.”

Many marketplaces are overcrowded and past their peaks. If there are too many similar established products or service offerings, a new player will not likely be able to penetrate the market in any meaningful way. If the newbie can’t significantly distinguish themselves from the established “old guard,” the new company is much better off finding a less crowded market that offers more opportunity for visibility and growth.

10. "Oh, I see. I hadn't correctly divined your attitude towards your tenants. You see I mainly design slaughter houses."

Before making a presentation pitch to a prospective client, it's extremely important to research what they're about. An off-target pitch will waste time and kill any chance for a prospective business relationship.

Customer Service

11. "Now I'm going to ask you that question once more, and if you say 'no' I'm going to shoot you through the head. Now, do you have any cheese at all?"

The key to excellent customer service is honest, open, direct communication. It's better to tell customers something they don't want to hear rather than string them along only to ultimately disappoint them. When a customer believes he or she was misled or she or she wasted a lot of time with no meaningful result, the customer tends to become irate and act accordingly. It's not a sin to tell customers that you can't service their needs and they should go elsewhere.

12. "I feel the time has come to complain about people who make rash complaints without first making sure that those complaints are justified."

It's true that many consumer complaints are unwarranted and that some people have a propensity to whine about anything. However, an organization still has to take these folks seriously and treat their complaints as if they were justified. Trying to disprove the validities of these complaints would be a serious mistake; it would waste corporate resources and likely embolden the complainer. The right personal touch can turn these people from headaches into zealous advocates of your brand.

Employment

13. "I didn't want to be a barber anyway. I wanted to be a lumberjack."

Many successful people have had rough starts to their careers. They've switched jobs multiple times until they found their calling — and once that happened, they excelled. However, if you stick to a career path that you don't like, you will ultimately have incredible personal and professional dissatisfaction. Do what you're passionate about, and you should be able to figure out how to make a living from it.

14. "Of course, it's a bit of a jump, isn't it? I mean, er ... chartered accountancy to lion taming in one go ... You don't think it might be better if you worked your way towards lion taming, say via banking?"

When you do decide to make a career change, especially a radical one, make sure there is good reason and rationale for your decision. If you're questioning whether you're making the right choice, make the transition gradually and leave yourself an

“out” in case you later decide you’ve made a mistake. Also, remember that you’ll be taking any and all emotional baggage from your old career to your new one, so try to proactively deal with the issues that hindered your former employment in order to avoid them in your new setting.

15. "I clean out public lavatories. Is there a promotion involved? Oh yeah, yeah. After five years they give me a brush."

Many people don’t effectively research a new position or employer. They are so excited that someone wishes to hire them that they forget to do due diligence on salaries, career path, bosses, co-workers, marketplace competition, etc. As dissatisfaction mounts, job performance drops and soon, the person is unemployed again.

16. "I am not a loony! Why should I be tied with the epithet loony merely because I have a pet halibut?"

The days of corporate drone employees have long since passed. Some of the best and most productive organizational members might have more than just a few quirks and eccentricities. It’s true that these folks might be scrutinized a bit closer by their supervisors. However, bottom-line business performance ultimately is all that matters in an organization, not the personal characteristics of its members.

Business Tactics and Strategy

17. "The only trouble is, you gave me the idea before I'd given you the pound. And that's not good business. -Isn't it? -No, I'm afraid it isn't. So, um, off you go."

Relationships with prospective partners that contain confidential business intelligence should always be governed by contract. Free and open sharing of information is done at the peril of the one sharing in absence of a contractual relationship because the recipient of the information could utilize it without giving consideration to the person that came up with the idea.

18. "The rules are very simple: each week we get a large fee; at the end of that week we get another large fee. If there's been no interruption at the end of the year we get a repeat fee which can be added on for tax purposes to the previous year or the following year if there's no new series."

In a tough business climate, it’s advantageous for a business to lock down a secure income stream. A company that doesn’t need to spend as much time in the sales channel can focus more efforts on marketing and product development which should lead to higher longer-term revenue. Also, it’s smart to lock in bonus incentives into any contract as it gives excellent incentive for peak performance.

19. "[It's only a flesh wound.](#)"

No matter how tough the marketplace situation, a business must put forth the image of a strong player. Consumers will sense "blood in the water" and shy away from a weak company, forcing the business to cut profit margin in order to keep generating revenue. If this vicious cycle continues to perpetuate, business stability will be threatened.

20. "[A nod's as good as a wink to a blind bat, eh?](#)"

In the business marketplace, you will run across players that are far less savvy and sophisticated than you. So long as appropriate business ethics are followed, it's quite acceptable to crush them with the force of a [16 ton weight](#).