

Listening vs. Leading (and why polls so often fail)

About eight years ago when I owned a gym in Melbourne we were making some changes to the class timetable. There was a new class we wanted to introduce, to make use of an empty time slot in the middle of the day. Plus, people had been asking us about a midday slot.

So what I did was, I put a poll into our Facebook group, I think we had 85 or 90 members then. And I provided some different time options, to ask which one would best suit people. As expected, the Monday 12pm time slot was the most popular, with at least twenty votes, and plenty of comments that people would want to come to that time.

So, we put the class on. One person showed up. Most of our classes had eight to fifteen. Then the next week, two people. But then instead of climbing, it went down. Back to one. After six weeks, and relentless internal marketing of this new class, it was still barren. I'd been duped. Of course it wasn't intentional, but I realised that what customers 'say' and what they do, are two totally different things. And from this point forward, I realised that 'listening' to the market is of course important, but 'leading' the market is even more powerful.

The other day I was talking to a good friend of mine who founded a big CrossFit gym down in Melbourne. It's an institution, and has held over 200 members for as long as I've known the guy.

More:

While still a co-owner, he's since moved north and started another training business.

Now the size and longevity of these businesses doesn't come by accident. I mentioned on the phone that I always thought he was great at World Building - which in a sense, is using creativity to build your unique business so it is like no other, that has elements of your personality, values and interests. He said something really interesting - and I'm paraphrasing here:

"It started with me building what I wanted. I built the gym that I wanted, with the music that I wanted. And the programming that I was interested in. Everyone else was doing this common CrossFit font, and it all looked the same. So I did something totally different. I built my own thing."

He went on:

"Once people started to come, then it changes a bit. You have to find that balance, where you're building something that you're proud of, but it's also for them. But you have to lead."

Very astute.

And his ability to make decisions and lead is largely why he is still going strong.

The other day I got an email from a woman running a pilates studio. They do a few workshops each year. A bunch of her clients had asked her for a gymnastics workshop with a specialty teacher. So, she eventually gave in, put it on the calendar, and started marketing it, expecting it to sell out. Well, once again, all of the people happened to be away, or we're not interested.

It turns out that listening to the market ain't always guaranteed.

And, that as a creator and service provider, you have to lead your customers.

But this isn't what you'd always expect. It seems like everywhere you go marketers are telling you to listen to your audience. And survey your people to get responses. There's polling services, survey monkey, and every social media platform is equipped with voting tools, and poll plugins.

It seems like every other day where you might open an email, or be on social media, and see someone asking the audience:

"Would you like it if I did this?"

"Which out of these would you like?"

"Which would be better out of these...?"

"What should I do about this..?"

And these get engagement. Just not always results, as we've seen.

I believe one aspect of this is that what we say as customers, and what we do aren't always the same thing, as was the case at our gym. A lot of times, we might give a response to a poll or question, so that we can be *seen* as a person that gave that response. Even when the results are anonymous, it still gives us a chance to say a certain message, even if it conflicts with our behaviour. I remember working with clients as a personal trainer years ago. They would often say that they had given up sugar or dairy, or some other vice over the past month, but then later talk about a certain kind of cookies they loved and had the last weekend, or something else that they had supposedly stopped having. I didn't even care about the food, they just brought it up in conversation - but it's always interesting to see the difference between what we consciously say, and perhaps unconsciously do.

Another factor I believe is that we love to be led, surprised, and in some cases, directed.

A few months back I was at a nice restaurant in town. I took a few guys out for a meal, and straight away the waitress came up and ran us through the menu. She outlined how the degustation worked, and as each meal came out one of the head guys would come out and explain the dish, and what they had created.

Every season or so, they change the menu.

No customer feedback.

No survey forms.

No polls on social media to ask what to do.

They take the creative and emotional risk to make the changes themselves, and lead the patrons to something new and exciting.

This is the risk we take when we start a business.

If you could just poll the public to ask them what they want and what they would pay for it, then go ahead and make that for less money than they would pay, then you would instantly have a risk free business. But that aint the case. Business must have risk in order to have reward. And thus leading and creativity is part of the job.

So what does listening to the audience really mean?

Surely there is value to listening to the audience or your customers?

Of course. But it might not look the way that we think. And 'asking' your audience ain't the same as 'listening' to them. A few years back I ran a business retreat, and brought in some guest teachers. One guy was a free diving instructor, and we took about twenty business owners through their first free diving session. He taught them all kinds of breath holds, and relaxation techniques. It was a big hit. Did the group ask for this? No, it was a total surprise. But at the same time, I was 'listening' to this audience before I booked the guy. Basically what I mean by that is they all were adventurous kinds

of people and when I would watch what they're doing and what they were interested in it was always cool stuff. Then I would post things about free diving or spearfishing, and they would get into it. So they could never have thought of doing freediving at a business retreat, but if you did ask them before, they would say (or show) that they like adventurous things.

'Listening' to your audience is really watching your audience's behaviour, and then using creativity and innovation to come up with new ways to help them.

There was a famous clip which was a caller that called up the Howard Stern show because he wanted to give him some 'feedback' on the show.

And Howard basically told the guy that he didn't want his feedback. That it was his show, and he was running it the way he wanted. The guy said that it was a community, and Howard Stern just told him to go find another community who cared.

It was a little extreme - and I'm not recommending you do that exactly. But the point of it is still there.

If he changed the radio show because this guy told him to, then he would have to start listening to all of his callers. What's going to happen when the 100th caller chimes in with changes to make to the show? By the end it would look like total trash.

I'm not for or against Stern - I've never listened to his show. But this clip makes it clear that he gets that it's his role to lead the audience. Sure to 'listen' to what he sees that they are looking for and find entertaining, but then to 'lead' them in his work.

Conclusion

I don't know if this is helpful for you. Except to say that if you're looking for your audience or market to give you ideas directly, or tell you the best way to run a program or service, then you may want to go deeper. See how you can 'listen' to them by watching what they do, how they act, how they buy, and what they struggle with, before looking for direct verbal advice.

Look for ways to take what you are seeing, or things that you think they might want, and creatively wrap solutions around that.

How can you lead your audience or clients more powerfully?

Something to think about.