

The Beatles Principles (Part II)

The Fab Four sold over 1 billion records, tapes, and CDs, and 36 years after their breakup they remain, in many ways, the world's most popular band. Most importantly for us, they managed to create a whole that was far greater than the sum of the parts—no doubt the goal of any services firm. This article is the second in a three-part series on lessons from the most successful pop group in history.

Last month, Part I of this article presented the first three Beatles Principles:

Beatles Principle Number 1: Invest in and build face time between team members well before they are asked to pitch to a client.

Beatles Principle Number 2: Evolve your “songs” and bring the same level of ideas, new perspectives, excitement, and enthusiasm to your hundredth meeting with a client that you brought to the first.

Beatles Principle Number 3: Cultivate humility and self-effacement in your dealings with others, especially when you're on the heels of great success

Now let's look at principles 4, 5, 6, and 7:

4. Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da: Using Humor to Connect

Journalist: “What excites people so much about your music?”

John Lennon: “If we knew that, we'd start another group and become managers.”

Journalist: “When are you going to get a haircut?”

George Harrison: “I had one yesterday”

Journalist: “What do you think of the campaign in Detroit to stamp out the Beatles?”

Paul McCartney: “We've got a campaign of our own to stamp out Detroit”

The Beatles charmed the press, their fans, and each other with an endless flow of spontaneous and often self-deprecating humor. This playfulness at once disarmed their few critics and helped defuse the inevitable tensions that periodically and inevitably surfaced between the foursome. No one was immune, and this irreverent humor shined through even when they were down-and-out. When they had just finished auditioning for George Martin at the Parlophone recording studio—it was their last hope for a record deal, as they had been turned down by every other record label in the UK—Martin asked the group if they had any final questions or comments. “Yes,” piped up George Harrison, “I don't like your tie.” Even the normally reserved Martin burst out laughing at the absurdity of the comment, and he shortly afterwards offered them a contract.

You may not think you are humorous, but you can be. There are funny things all around us. Make fun of yourself and your shortcomings. Make light of the absurdity of life. Just say the opposite of what people expect, and they'll laugh—it's almost guaranteed.

Beatles Principle Number 4: Use humor, especially self-deprecating humor, to ease tensions, show you are human, and create an emotional connection with colleagues and clients.

5. With a Little Help from My Friends: A Role for Everyone

The Beatles' early success was driven mostly by the John Lennon–Paul McCartney songwriting prowess, but they quickly had to accommodate what turned out to be four star personalities in their own right. The band used a number of strategies to manage these tensions. For example, drummers always feel underappreciated in rock groups, and Ringo Starr was no exception. So Lennon and McCartney would write a song for him to sing on almost every album (e.g., “With a Little Help from My Friends” on Sgt. Pepper), giving him a special platform with the public. As George Harrison’s compositional talents developed, the other members of the group began ceding song tracks to him in deference to his contribution. Famous Harrison songs include “Here Comes the Sun” and “Something” on the Abbey Road album.

As the Beatles matured as a team, they worked even harder to recognize and embrace each player. It worked: The individual Beatles became brands within a brand.

This is, of course, exactly what modern professionals need to do: develop personal brands that complement their firm’s brand.

Keeping stars together is not easy, and younger professionals, especially, often feel underappreciated on teams. It’s great to feel part of a whole, but in the end everyone needs a sense of personal importance as well. Why not give team members an idea or project, like a new song for Ringo Starr, that makes them look good in their own right?

Beatles Principle Number 5: *Help team members become brands-within-a-brand by giving them a song — an idea or proposal — that will help them to shine.*

6. Here Comes the Sun: Honing Your Opening Measures

The Beatles assiduously and tirelessly worked on the opening measures of their songs to create a “hook” that grabs the listener and pulls him in. From the jazz-like opening melody of “Michelle” to the jarring E minor sixth chord that announces “A Hard Day’s Night,” almost every Beatles song is instantly recognizable. In some cases, the hook arrests your attention through an interesting melody or unusual sound, in others, such as in the song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” the instrumentation creates a particular mood. Regardless of the particular technique they used, the Beatles’ opening measures make you want to stop, put everything down, and listen.

When trying to persuade, your opening hook is everything. A friend of mine, a former partner at a large consulting firm, he once called on a senior executive at a global telecommunications company. The executive had little interest in the meeting, and spent 10 minutes explaining how his company had already launched a large reengineering initiative and, therefore, absolutely did not need the services of my friend’s firm. He waited until the executive had finished, and then said, softly: “We used to do reengineering.” The client froze in his chair. “What? What do you mean, ‘used to’?” he stammered incredulously. He was hooked, and my friend went on to lead the sale of a multi-million dollar consulting engagement to the company.

Executives have less time than ever to hear your message, and they are bombarded by pitches all day long. Unless they hear something compelling right up front, they will lose patience and tune out or simply delegate the matter to a subordinate.

Beatles’ principle number 6: *Carefully craft the first 60 seconds of all your communications—the opening measures of your songs—to command your audience to listen.*

7. P.S. I Love You: Liking Your Public

Late on a summer evening in 1968 in London, Paul McCartney leaned out the window of his apartment and

shouted to the diehard fans camped out at his gate, “Anyone still out there?” Then, perched in the window with an acoustic guitar, he played and sang his exquisite tune, “Blackbird.” Fans felt loved by The Beatles, who were in turn loved back. Once, when John Lennon’s psychedelic Rolls Royce was being mobbed by fans who were starting to tear it to bits, he told his entourage, “Let them do it—they own it.” The four Beatles, unlike many stars, always gave their public the sense that they genuinely liked them.

Implicitly or explicitly, we all want to be liked by the people and companies we do business with. Liking leads to trust, which leads to loyalty. Why, for example, is there usually no love lost between consumers and their healthcare insurers? Why do movie audiences clap whenever these companies are bashed in a movie script? It’s because no one feels liked or even cared for by them. On the other hand, there is fierce consumer loyalty to organizations like Apple Computer and The Four Seasons hotel chain, which somehow convey that they really like the customers who use their products and services. Despite all the talk about managing vendor relationships and cutting prices, clients and customers want to be liked and cared about by the professionals and companies they patronize.

Beatles Principle number 7: *Show your public—your clients, in every interaction, that you truly like them.*

Next month: look out for Part III, which concludes The Beatles Principles.

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