

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Break Conventions

Hindsight is 20/20 may be the most common cliché in the business world. We each have decisions we would have made differently if we hadn't followed the "conventional wisdom." Conventional wisdom is just an idea that people generally believe to be true. Of course, what people believe to be true is constantly changing. Our hindsight keeps confirming that conventional wisdom is often wrong, yet we blindly accept in the present.



'Seeing through the conventional wisdom and becoming a better decision maker is challenging, but possible.'

When a guitar department opened in my dad's music store in 1965, the Fender Jazzmaster and Jaguar were the top of the line guitars the Ventures and the Beach Boys played. The Strat and Telecaster were the guitars of old guys like Buck Owens and Buddy Holly. That was the conventional wisdom until Eric and Jimi picked up Strats and George was seen playing a rosewood Tele in the "Let It Be" video about five years later. Today, hardly anyone but Elvis Costello plays a Jazzmaster, but everybody has at least one Strat.

From the '50s to the '80s, church committees and school boards clung to the conventional wisdom and bid out the venerable Baldwin 246 school studio piano, until the upstart Yamaha P2/202 displaced it. It was hard to get them to even consider Kimball or Wurplitzer studios. Actually, in the mid-70s, the conventional wisdom was that Japanese or Korean manufacturers would overtake the piano and guitar industries. Nobody had a clue that Indonesia and China would become our largest suppliers.

Recently, we had five of those old pianos in our used department at the same time. The Kimball was better than either the Baldwin or the Yamaha. We were surprised that an obscure experimental Currier, with neither a plate nor posts — rejected en masse at the time — out performed them all; even the Steinway 1098. Clearly, the conventional wisdom had school pianos wrong.

RESISTING THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

Early in the '80s optimists thought cheap portable keyboards would create a new generation of pianists. By 1990, conventional wisdom had school music dead. Five years later, Mars

Music threatened the existence of independent MI merchants. Armageddon seemed on the horizon in 2005 when Guitar Hero poised to hijack a generation of potential guitarists. Like the Y2K scare, all these notions evaporated.

The conventional wisdom held it impossible a haberdasher, a Catholic, a peanut farmer, an actor, an African American or a woman could be elected President. Strangely enough, conventional wisdom still holds hope for time travel and flying cars.

There are economic consequences for dealers who succumb to the conventional wisdom and follow the path of least resistance when merchandising. Invariably, products favored by the conventional wisdom retail at low margin because they are widely distributed and because manufacturers are smart enough to keep the lions share of the profit for themselves. They call it brand equity.

How is it that we are so seduced by the group think of our time, and how can we make smarter decisions and avoid costly or foolish errors based on conventional wisdom?

The seduction breeds in repetition and ferments conformity. If we see or hear an idea often enough we are naturally inclined to accept it, especially in the absence of conflicting information. If we hear it repeated by

those we respect, the idea gains credibility.

By second grade most of us had learned to conform; to get along ... go along. Besides, what is to be gained by challenging the status quo?

If all our friends liked the Monkees better than the Stones, it was easier to just suck it up and listen to the Monkees. One person doesn't have much influence on the conventional wisdom. But just stepping back, thinking the subject through and challenging an idea might be all you need to escape its seduction.

CHALLENGE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Seeing through the conventional wisdom and becoming a better decision maker is challenging, but possible. Of the countless volumes written on the subject, three books stand out:

- *Gut Feelings: Short Cuts to Better Decision Making* by Gerd Gigerenzer proves that in complex matters our gut feeling (or intuition) is actually more reliable than our analytical skills. Most of us hate to admit this because we think we are so damn smart. That is, we prefer to rely on the analysis of our upper brain. Gut feelings are the result of our lower brain factoring all the information we have acquired on a subject, filtering it through our personal biases and preferences producing an instant inclination. All of us have said, "I should have just followed my gut," at some point or another.

- Joseph T. Hallinan makes a big mistake in his book *Why We Make Mistakes* by telling us in the first few pages that we make mistakes because we are really good at BS-ing ourselves — making the purchase of the book unnecessary. Stop BS-ing yourself. Save it for your customers.

- Jonah Lehrer dissects the decision making process in *How We Decide*. In the end, great decision making is the exact opposite of BS-ing ourselves. Great decision makers are always seeking contrary evidence. Most of us actively seek conformation. We like having our prejudices and preconceived ideas re-enforced. Our middle brain secretes a little shot of the happiness hormone dopamine every time conformation occurs. Looking for contrary evidence is like arguing with your Monkee loving friends. It is no fun, and there is no dopamine. Challenging your ideas is the only way to really test them. In the process you will achieve confidence that

you are right or you will be forced to re-examine something that needs re-examining. That is how you get to a better decision.

A few weeks ago I saw my favorite pianist Lang Lang, a 32-year-old Chinese superstar at Artis Naples near my home. I gained admission to the concert with tickets purchased online, drove to the theatre in an electric car and heard the performance perfectly through nearly invisible hearing aids. At some point, the conventional wisdom had all of those circumstances near implausible.

We see today's world filtered through the conventional wisdom of our time. Someday, we will look back on 2014 with 20/20 hindsight. Maybe with regret, maybe with smug conviction. Before you act on the conventional wisdom, step back, challenge your assumptions, seek contrary evidence, listen to your gut — and for heaven's sake stop BS-ing yourself. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Naples, Fla. He welcomes questions and comments at greg@steinwaynaples.com.

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