



By Richard D. Czerniawski

## BEWARE OF EXPERTS AND BECOMING ONE

I believe I've always been somewhat skeptical of "so-called" experts. My placing the words "so-called" in quotes reflects my questioning their status of eminence. Think about it: when experts are called to proffer their conclusions in a court case, those for the prosecution and defense differ widely. In fact, they're typically 180-degrees apart. It's rather commonplace to find an expert who will support the position you want to take on virtually any issue. How can that be possible when they're supposed to be "experts," where there can be only one correct answer.

I guess this skepticism was reinforced by my reading *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice*, by Shunryu Suzuki, when I first became interested in Zen. He states, "In a beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in an expert's there are few." As highlighted in the paragraph above, the expert's few are probably not correct either. I think this is why I don't like to be referred to or consider myself as an "expert."

There's also the belief and attitude that the expert has reached the peak of knowledge. There is nothing else to learn. The expert knows it all. But anyone who has achieved a high level of mastery in any realm sees what s/he does yet not know and how much deeper s/he can go in learning yet more. Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu provides an instructive example. Practitioners create new techniques every day—regardless of their level of mastery. These techniques are developed to counter what in the past were considered unstoppable offensive or defensive techniques. The body of knowledge is forever growing and expanding.

Proclamations by experts don't always prove accurate. One week the news reports that experts assert that consuming eggs is not healthy. The next week, month or year, they claim that they are healthful—eat up!. The most eminent authorities have told us that eating fat is harmful. Now we're informed that fat is good for your health and can even help you lose weight—just ask those who subscribe to a Keto diet (which is 70% calories from fat, 25% from protein, and only 5% from carbohydrates).

Experts declared that the Affordable Care Act would reduce the cost of health care. Well, what's the result? Skyrocketing health care costs. So much for the experts. I'm not making, nor do I care to make, a political statement! What I hope I'm expressing is that it doesn't matter the subject area, there's ample evidence that we should not favor eminence over hard evidence. It's a primary reason why we should test, test, test, before going broadscale with any scheme.

Marketing is no exception to the plague of experts. There's another group of so-called experts within the marketing or, more broadly stated, corporate community that troubles me, SMEs—the acronym for Subject Matter Experts. My experience in working with them is that they are far from being experts—unless you consider Suzuki's view that they see limited possibilities. Possessing a level of expertise or mastery is not in the label but the doing. Unfortunately, the vast majority of those crowned with the title of an SME evidence poor performance in applying proven principles, best practices, and quality processes. The proof of expertise is in the proverbial pudding. You can't be considered an expert marks(wo)man without hitting the bull's-eye reasonably consistently.

The other problem with SMEs—or anyone designated an expert for that matter—is that the title infects many with hubris and arrogance. They think because they believe or say something that it is now correct. After all, they've been dubbed a Subject Matter Expert. This belief is exacerbated by the desire to go with the flow, be part of the herd, in seeking consensus. The thinking goes that if someone else believes what you believe, then it must be correct, and you're validated as an expert. Just as these marketers believe they are smarter than the competition, they think they know more than all others who are not designated as an SME.

There's a story in the martial arts about achieving the coveted black-belt—what is believed to represent expert skill. One begins the martial journey with a white belt. The white belt becomes soiled following consistent, frequent practice over months and years, turning gray and over time grows black. The black-belt signifies that one has ascended to the top of the martial arts mountain. However, something curious happens as the black-belt martial artist continues to train. The black flecks-off revealing the white lying beneath it until it returns to its original white state. This return to a white belt represents the beginner's mind and recognition from the martial artist that there is still much more to learn.

Now in my 48<sup>th</sup> year in marketing, I'm proud to admit that I still have much to learn. I don't want ever to be dubbed a so-called “expert.” It would end my journey. It will end yours too. Let's stay humble and continue to open our minds to learning.

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