

Part 3: Winning Through Your "Guru Quotient"

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Third of a series

This series considers the question of "gurus" - business professionals with a particularly high level of skills, knowledge and expertise that allows them to stand out from others. Previous articles defined the idea of "guru" and what makes them different from a garden-variety business advisor. This third article looks at ways gurus can make that difference known.

How does a guru stand out?

A guru stands out according to actions that make that body of work and the expertise public. The way to do this differs by market. However, there seem to be certain common elements:

Books

In a world of interactive CDs, the Web and multimedia, publishing a book is still *the* distinguishing mark of a guru. Why is this?

Partly, it's because of an age-old respect for published authors that has stood from before the development of the printing press. "Having a book" still has that mystical charm. Also, having enough knowledge to fill a book seems to indicate that one has something substantial to offer. It demands either a lot of original thought or a lot of research (or both) to fill 300 or so pages, or more.

This showed up in a conversation I had at a professional speakers' association meeting with a member who was just a little bitter about the success of a colleague. He felt the other man was no better as a speaker, but he "had a Book" and so was able to get substantially higher speaking fees and better gigs. His book made him visible as a guru and raised his credibility.

Magazine articles

Many consultants and other professionals write articles for magazines to demonstrate their knowledge, but the writings of a guru are different.

Type of article: Instead of writing how-to articles, gurus tend to write articles that describe a trend - how it originated, where it is now and how it will develop. They also write opinion articles that showcase their high-level understanding of the issues.

Pushing the envelope: These articles discuss new ideas, methodologies and concepts, beloved of publications such as the Harvard Business Review and the Sloan Management Review.

In prestigious publications: instead of writing for the local business magazine, gurus are published in publications that are either highly respected (such as HBR) or widely circulated. One distinguishing mark of a guru is being *asked to write* for the publication, instead of having to present an idea to the editor.

Speeches and seminars

Regular experts give workshops, industry luncheon presentations and "concurrent presentations" at conferences; gurus give keynotes. Gurus' pictures are on the cover of the conference program and their bios are longer than those of other presenters. They are often the lure intended to attract attendees.

One can know a great deal about very little, with a breathtakingly narrow range of expertise, and still be a guru. Therefore, an expert in a particularly arcane area of strategic planning may be at the pinnacle of success, enjoying the congratulations of his or her peers, after "keynoting" a conference with just 50 attendees.

Media interviews

Journalists are always on the lookout for credible sources to interview for their articles and to put in front of a microphone or camera. Having been a reporter and editor myself, I can confirm that they have certain criteria for "sources." This includes many of the factors that make a guru.

If an ordinary "expert" is quoted briefly in smaller newspaper stories, the guru is once again in an entirely separate class. A guru is quoted towards the top of the newspaper story, on the front page rather than tucked away inside. Appearances on TV news shows are usually reserved for gurus, particularly on network programs.

Community events

In this case, "community" does not mean the geographical area of one's home. Rather, it is a group of people in the same industry, profession, sphere of interest or other work-related aspect. It may be global in scope and is a true community, even though its members may rarely meet each other in person, perhaps just at a once-a-year conference. A guru is given a place of honor in such a community.

She or he serves on the editorial boards of publications of record and sits on industry and government task forces.

A guru should be a major player in relevant industry or professional organizations. It may involve sitting on certification committees, being part of panel discussions and other high-profile activities.

Why become a guru?

Understanding what a guru is and does will give anyone a pretty good idea of the desirability of becoming one.

Interesting work. Far from the one-foot-in-front-of-the-other world of the garden-variety professional, gurus can choose work that is really interesting to them. It's more strategic in purpose. Instead of implementing an organizational change process, for example, a guru consultant helps determine the course that the change should take.

Choice of work. Because of the star power and marquee value that gurus have, they can choose which assignments to take, when, and for how long. They also have the rare privilege of "firing" a client if they want (anyone can do this, but the consequences may be more severe).

More money. Generally, acknowledged gurus can bill out at multiples of the rate charged for a garden-variety professional. This means that they can either earn more per year, or spend more time on other worthy pursuits. Depending on their priorities, this might include attending their child's T-ball game, perfecting that golf swing, or climbing the highest peaks on all seven continents.

More stature and fame. Their names are recognized by people in their community, and in a positive way. What's not to like?

Popularity. People laugh at their jokes even if they're awful, pick up the check at lunch, and buy drinks.

Worth having? Maybe. But, it's not yours just for the asking. In the next article in the series, we'll look more closely at how to determine the best steps for a would-be guru to develop the attributes of a guru.

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