**How to Get Yelled at By a Rotarian**

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***(… aren’t all Rotarians supposed to be nice?)***

by [Kurian M. Tharakan](https://strategypeak.com/about/)

The last two months have been busy for [speaking gigs](https://strategypeak.com/sales-and-marketing-keynote-speaker/). I’ve done four full workshops, two keynotes, and two presentations to local Rotary Clubs.

Over the years, I’ve spoken to several Rotary Clubs in the region. I like Rotarians. They are community minded, values-driven, and usually nice people. I met the President of the 2nd Rotary Club at a gala, and they invited me to speak to their group on the topic of **“Steve Jobs’ Three Foundational Pillars for Creating the Ultimate Brand.”**

*… tiny Apple’s strategy for creating a colossal brand …*

Like many long-established service organizations, this club was facing some challenges in recruiting and retaining new members. But most importantly, members that shared the same values, would embrace the service mission, and then stick around. The Steve Jobs presentation would be perfect because it would illustrate how tiny Apple’s strategy for creating a colossal brand had allowed it to be an industry force for over 40 years, and eventually become the world’s most valuable company. This Rotary Club could adopt the same principles to attract the perfect cohort of new members.

On the morning of the presentation, I arrived early to set up and was able to meet everyone as they came in. (I was surprised at how many people I knew.) The President was not able to be there, but the Past President greeted me and made sure that I was getting settled in. He also gave me some background on this club, and how one of its charter’s pillars was “humour.”

The meeting started promptly, we had breakfast, and then went through the standard list of items I have seen in every other Rotary meeting:

* sing the national anthem
* recite the invocation
* new business
* old business
* other updates
* introduction of guests
* fines
* etc.

As I watched the proceedings, I thought to myself,*“I’ve seen this exact timetable of steps happen a hundred times before.”* As I looked at the audience, it was also similar to every other Rotary Club I’ve been to: older, mostly male, not very diverse, and a striking lack of young people in the ranks.

I was then introduced as the guest speaker, and I took the floor.

*This is so simple. I need to apply this in my business now!*

“Steve Jobs’ Three Foundational Pillars for Creating the Ultimate Brand” is an entertaining and insightful multimedia presentation. I’ve never left the stage without the audience being left in a state of imaginative overdrive, saying to themselves, *“This is so simple. I need to apply this in my business now!”* My presentation ends, raucous applause ensues, and the floor is opened for questions. After 25 years of speaking to every possible type of audience, I should know that this is where the danger begins.

The first couple of questions were easy lobs:

* *What’s the easiest way to start applying these strategies in my business?*
* *What would you tell your 20-year-old self-based on what you know now?*

… and then comes what looks like a simple query:

* *What do you think of the brand experience of this Rotary Club?*

Brand experience is one of Steve Jobs’ 3 Pillars, and I was quick with my assessment. I casually said, *“You are an average (i.e. typical) Rotary Club. I’ve spoken to and visited many clubs over the years, and they all do the same things in the same way. What you need to do is differentiate yourself with a unique brand experience. Otherwise, you will remain just like everyone else.”*

People laughed at my candour, and I hear some shout comments like, *“Way to tell it like it is,”* and *“Call a spade a spade.”*These folks recognized the truth in my statement.

*… in front of stunned onlookers …*

I was then thanked for my presentation by one of the members, and the Past President adjourned the meeting. I immediately have a group of people come up thanking me for the show and requesting a copy of the slides. I’m also approached by the Past President, who interjects with the statement, *“So you think our club is average, do you?”* And then, in front of stunned onlookers, he proceeded to berate me for 10 minutes on my presentation, speaking style, and general lack of respect for his Rotary chapter. He also suggests that maybe I should consider doing some community work because I would then understand the value of what his club does. Mr. Past President then storms off, and I’m left standing with several other bewildered people in front of a Rotary banner displaying their 4-way ethics guide:

1. Is it the TRUTH?
2. Is it FAIR to all concerned?
3. Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?
4. Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

Mr. Past President, you have just failed your 4-way test in all four ways.

*… bobbing and weaving … *

Remember, I used the word average to mean typical, as in there was no differentiation from any other club I’ve been to. But Mr. Past President took it to mean that I had given the club a C-minus grade. Boy, talk about being sensitive about something I didn’t even say. And what happened to the humour pillar your club is founded on? Where was that hiding? I must have missed it while bobbing and weaving during the previous 10-minute verbal smackdown.

Besides being contrary to every Rotary value, this incident was also just plain stupid. Let me explain.

Brands at their core are about the deep meaning they impart to their audience. Steve Job’s three pillars are:

1. Brand Vision
2. Brand Experience
3. Brand Values

If I say the name NASA, or Disney, you will immediately have an idea of what these three pillars mean for each organization.

But the frightening part is that ALL brands have a slow leak. Unless new life-giving oxygen is regularly pumped into the brand, IT WILL DEFLATE, and cease to be relevant. Take a look at these names:



* Brown Shoe
* Studebaker
* Collins Radio
* Detroit Steel
* Zenith Electronics
* National Sugar Refining
* Armstrong Rubber
* Cone Mills
* Hines Lumber
* Pacific Vegetable Oil
* Riegel Textile

*… 88% of the 1955 Fortune 500 disappeared from the list …*

All of these names were in the US Fortune 500 in 1955, but NONE OF THEM were on the list in 2014. In fact, 88% of the 1955 Fortune 500 disappeared from the list in just six decades. But Fortune 500 companies are not the only ones that need to remain vigilant. Take a look at this list:

* Optimist
* Ruritan
* Sertoma
* Torch
* Gyro

These are all names of service clubs founded with great fanfare in the 1910’s – 1920’s. Today, they all have a fraction of the membership they did at their height. The great work these clubs did, the energy and community loyalty their members had, simply could not save them from the slow leak that all brands have. Once again, if you are not continually pumping new life-giving oxygen into your brand, IT WILL DEFLATE, and cease to be relevant.

If you belong to a service club or any other business, I invite you to examine every one of your attributes under Steve Job’s three pillars. These are the only things that can attract and RETAIN new, and especially younger, members (customers). Without this brand renewal, ALL BRANDS will become victims of their own slow leak.

Epilogue: I still like Rotarians. You folks do great work.