

Maintaining Standards While Listening to the Consumer

Every market, minor and major, must listen to the desires of the consumer if it is to do business. **The consumer knows what he/she wants. Unfortunately what he or she wants is not always the highest quality or the most advantageous for him/her in the long run.** There is no arguing with consumer desires, however, because a free market means free choice based on *any* personal standard of judgment. That is as it should be. Unfortunately, this puts traditional martial arts schools in a bit of a quandary.

Does the traditional martial arts instructor give consumers (i.e. students) (a) what they say they want, (b) what statistics say will “sell,” (c) what the instructor thinks is best for them, or (d) what is the most accurate representation of the art he/she is teaching? In today’s **World of the Martial Business**, (a) what they say they want, and (b) what statistics say will “sell” rule. In the **World of Traditional Martial Arts**, (c) what the instructor thinks is best for them, and (d) what is the most accurate representation of the art he/she is teaching dominate. This is one reason why most martial arts businesses do not teach to a high level or in great depth. It doesn’t sell. It smacks too much of school, of mental effort, and advanced martial arts instruction simply does not instantly fulfill fantasies. **Advanced traditional martial arts schools survive for the minority market: those who love to work hard and feel terrific rewards as a result of their labors, and those who love plummeting the depths of a subject that seems to never end.** Even in this minority market, however, one cannot afford to ignore consumer preferences.

When I started teaching, students (adults as well as kids) would ask me, “When are we going to get to jump kicks [or defense against group attack, or weapons, or defense against weapons, or defense against a group attacking with weapons while performing jump kicks]?” I explained that I wanted the instruction to be both informative and fun, but I did not want to teach fantasy. It was the rare student who overcame his desire to be the new James Bomb and blow up the bad guys. Those who stuck with the program discovered other, more mature, and more realistic rewards. **The students who wanted to be matinee idols rapidly grew idle.**

The fact is: no school can be all things to all students no matter how hard it tries. What it gains in breadth, it loses in depth. What it wins in variety, it loses in sincerity. When it offers what’s in vogue, it loses any meaningful focus. That is why there are many types of schools (as outline in a previous article) with many different emphases.

Those martial arts businesses for which business is more important than budo handle consumer desire in one of two ways. The first is that they adapt to the latest fad (selling Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles paraphernalia when they are in style or having Mighty Morphin Power Ranger parties when they are in style.) They taught Kung-fu during the Bruce Lee seventies, Ninjutsu during the Ninjutsu eighties, Kickboxing in the nineties, and ground grappling ever since. Because they were not knowledgeable in any of these styles except for a weekend seminar and a few DVDs, they simply changed uniforms and told students that they had been

cross-ranked by a visiting master. These schools rake in the do-re-mi for a short time. When adults feel that they are being ignored for the kids market or when the art they have grown to love has been taken away from them in favor of this year's art-of-choice, sincere interest wanes and is replaced by those interested in the fashion of the decade.

The second way martial businesses handles a wandering consumer desire is to demand that no student be exposed to any other "inferior" art. After all, it will dissipate their efforts. Besides, what we do is much better than any other art on the planet!

Traditional schools, on the other hand, may simply ignore varying student interests. There are some things we simply will not do, they argue. Maintaining an accurate, un-watered-down martial tradition is at least as important as satisfying the fickle consumer. But there is another, more positive, more creative way to subsume wandering interests while staying close to home. A traditional martial arts school can offer a carefully worked out curriculum that brings the student to an understanding of similar martial arts through its unique emphasis. The reasoning goes like this: it is hard to "major" in both English and Biology. Both take sincere concentrated effort. You can do both, of course, but at twice the work. You can't take a semester of English and two of biology and a fourth in Humanities and suddenly graduate as a Bachelor of Varietal Brilliance. In the real world (one that minimizes fantasy), there ain't no such degree. Those who think such a degree exists are probably in another sort of institution. **Creative traditional schools therefore offer two alternatives: seminars to satisfy the need for variety, and a deeper study of their own art to reveal aspects of the art that actually may overlap other interests.**

The latter is not a fantasy solution foisted upon an ignorant student body; rather, it is a very high level of study that integrates seemingly different martial practices by discovering and then re-interpreting familiar forms, movements, and uses of energy.

Although few schools offer this sort of solution to the problem of maintaining traditional standards while listening to consumer desire (BUSHIDO-KAI being one of them), it is a time tested way to produce jacks of many trades while deepening the mastery of one.

Next time, we'll talk about The Cost of "DŌ"-ing Business.