THIN SLICING YOUR WAY TO SUCCESS
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When we meet the right person, we 'just know'. However, looking at the divorce rate, it seems we're correct about half the time. That's pretty good odds though, taking into account the complexity of human personality. The ability to find patterns based on very narrow slices of information is called thin slicing. And we can be remarkably good at it – if we know what to look for.

John Gottman is a psychologist who also studied mathematics. The result is a 500-page treatise on the Mathematics of Divorce. Gottman believes that there is a marital DNA – a unique pattern in the interaction between husband and wife. Notwithstanding his extensive study, he claims to be able to thin slice marital health by measuring only four traits: defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism and contempt. But he takes it even further – if just one of the partners in a marriage shows contempt, it is the single most important indicator that the marriage is in trouble. Why is contempt such a strong indicator? Because it's hierarchical – it places the person at another level, and once you're on a different plane, well … that's it.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book Blink, describes an experiment where perfect strangers visited the dorm rooms of students, and were asked to rate the personality of the occupant (without ever meeting the occupant). All they had to go on was the 'behavioural residue', such as dirty laundry, books and CDs.

The results were then compared to evaluations by longstanding friends. Compared to the friends, the perfect strangers were more accurate in determining three personality traits: conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness. Considering that these are three of the 'Big 5' personality traits, they beat the close friends 3 to 2 (the remaining traits of trust and extraversion seem to depend more on actually meeting the person).

So, if you need to know how self-disciplined, stable and imaginative a prospective employee is, you'd be better off visiting their home (when they're not there), than the countless hours spent in interviews.

There are however times when thin slicing works against us. Those who enter the military learn very quickly that many first-impression judgements you made about fellow-recruits were often wrong. Someone you would never have associated with before can become your closest ally.

Inaccurate thin slicing can also have disastrous consequences. In the latter part of the 1800's, no one looked the part of a president of the USA any better than Warren Harding. With steel-grey hair, excellent build and a healthy

complexion, he just looked like a good president. However, what he was good at was: playing poker, golf, drinking and chasing women. Most historians would agree that he was one of the worst presidents in US history, and his term of office is now referred to as the 'Warren Harding Error'.

As a marketer, the ability to thin slice probably indicates that you have sufficient past experience to determine an outcome from a thin slice of information. For example, when a specific ad campaign is 'not working' (sales are below expectation), the algorithm I use is a simple one:

Is the message clear?

Does the message promise value?

Did the message receive exposure?

Was the brand readily available?

Although there may be numerous reasons cited for non-performance, ranging from corporate culture to the weather, when taking the temperature of a non-performing brand, these are the only four questions I have had to ask. Finding the solution, however, can be somewhat more complex.

Reference: Gladwell M. Blink, The Power of Thinking Without Thinking. Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2005.

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