

The Better Your Product, the Better Your Life

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One day, when I was growing up, I had a pain in my foot and my stepmother took me to see a podiatrist. I had never heard of a podiatrist and I have never been to one since, but I remember hearing the most unusual story at the time about a girl who became a podiatrist.

Several years ago, some friends of one of my parents' had a daughter who completed a few years of college and was pretty out of control. She had gotten horrible grades, had gotten into all sorts of trouble, and seemed to be heading in the wrong direction. She was planning on going back for her third year of college when her father stepped in and told her he was not going to send her to school anymore, because he knew that she would just spend that time partying, goofing off, and being unproductive. At the time, she was getting a degree in English or something along those lines, which the father figured would not give her any real valuable skills. He had spent his life as an accountant and believed that it was always important to have a "valuable skill" of some kind.

The man told his daughter he was perfectly willing to pay for her college, but would only do so if she spent two years going to a podiatry school. I recall being told that he chose podiatry school because the girl had always been very good at science and he knew she could pass the classes. More importantly, one of his accounting clients had attended the school and was able to pull some strings to get her admitted.

The father's client had set up a little practice doing podiatry and was making a very good living. The girl's father figured the smartest thing for his daughter to do was to attend the school for two years; then, if she wanted she could go back to college for a few more years. I do not know what the requirements for going to podiatry school are now; however, back then the young woman was able to gain admission after only completing a few years of college.

The message from her father was clear: "I do not care if you go back to college in two years once you have your podiatry degree, or if you want to go be a groupie in a rock band. All I know is that you need to have a valuable skill and you need to have the ability to support yourself."

To make a long story short, the woman went to podiatry school and I do not think she did particularly well or badly. After graduating, however, she got a job and within a few years was a very successful podiatrist doing well financially with a respectable job.

I was reminded of this yesterday while I was waiting in line to buy a soda in a drug store. I saw a doctor who must have been in his 90s telling the pharmacist something about a prescription for one of his patients. The way I figured, he must have graduated from medical school in the late 1930s. Here he was, close to 70 years later, working and being productive. All of the knowledge that he learned in medical school provided him the foundation of a lifelong skill. I remember looking at the doctor with respect when he walked by.

We respect people with skills. If we have a skill then we will always have opportunity.

I have seen so many older doctors in my life, I cannot believe it. Almost all doctors I have ever known have been in their 70s at least. They are always working because they have really valuable skills that the world wants. Having a valuable skill, something that people are willing to pay for, provides you with a way to make a living--and it also gives your life a sense of purpose.

I am going to back up a bit and relate to you a couple of stories I know about artists, musicians, and others. I know plenty of people who chose these paths for their lives. It is fascinating to me to see how their lives have turned out in terms of what they were able to accomplish with their skills.

The first person is someone I knew when he was younger. He was an extremely talented artist. However, instead of just "being creative" and being an artist, he went to a very prestigious art school and studied graphic design, at which he really excelled. He did not have much of a choice. See, he was not on speaking terms with his father, and his mother and stepfather did not have the financial means to support him. He knew that he would need to look out for himself once he got out of school and that he did not have any kind of financial safety net.

This young man did not so much concentrate on paintings or abstract art. Instead, he made sure to develop a skill that he could use in the world--something people would be willing to pay for. When he got out of school, he got a job with a couple of prestigious design companies. A few years later, he started his own design business and the business grew. This person has become wealthy and successful based on his skills. He is an artist, but he chose to develop his artistic skills in a calculated way, such that he would be able to earn a living. I have a tremendous amount of respect for this guy.

The graphic artist is no different from the podiatrist I referred to earlier. The podiatrist was studying English originally, but her father realized this may not lead anywhere, so he got her involved in studying podiatry instead. He wanted his daughter to have a valuable skill that the world is willing to pay for.

Your career and life revolve around precisely this one important aspect: having a valuable skill that the world is willing to pay for. The payment can be food, it can be money, it can be shelter, it can be goodwill. Whatever the payment, you must have a skill that others are willing to pay for and the skill should be enduring.

- The ability to get along with people can be a commodity.
- The ability to perform exceptionally well at a given athletic activity can be a commodity.
- The ability to do given tasks and achieve specific goals, like sales, is a commodity.
- The ability to cut hair is a commodity.
- The ability to do hard manual labor can be a commodity.

- The ability to wait tables can be a commodity.
- The ability to write legal briefs can be a commodity.

Whatever it is, your ability to succeed in the world and in your life will be directly proportional in most cases to the perceived value of the product/commodity you are offering. So many people lose track of this idea, and this creates incredibly unhappy lives for so many people. If you do not have a valuable skill, the world is probably not going to have much interest in you.

The example of the graphic artist is the best-case scenario. However, most of the examples of artists I have encountered in the past are not good examples like this one. Most of the artists I know are the children of rich parents; these are kids who never really worked hard in school and applied themselves. They decided that they would be artists when they realized this was something that they could do that did not require much academic acumen or other skills. Whether a singer, a potter, or a sculptor, most of the people I have known who became artists had parents who were able and willing to pay for their children's artistic pursuits, in some cases supporting their children right into their 30s, as they moved from country to country in Europe, painting on the hillsides of France, or singing in obscure nightclubs. Since art is subjective, it is very difficult for people to judge bad art from good art and so we typically just say "they're an artist" and do not judge the artist as being a good or bad artist--the way you might judge a salesperson's performance, for example.

I love music and I love art, but the truth is that most artists I have known do not have the skills to do what they are doing professionally. In fact, they have nowhere near the skill to do what they want to do professionally. Accordingly, what ends up happening to these people is that they get into their 30s and they become resentful and angry that they do not have the skills to get where they would like to be.

- They become angry at society and do not understand why people are not buying their paintings or showing up en masse.
- They get angry with their parents for not supporting them with more money.
- A part of them often resents the path they took to become artists, as they see their friends who have skills purchasing houses, nice cars, and so forth.
- They attempt to improve their product, but nothing changes for them professionally.

These are not nice things for me to say, but I have seen this situation repeat itself since I was young. The high school I went to, Cranbrook Kingswood School, even had a graduate program art school, and my grandmother worked in the library there for twenty-plus years, so I have had enough exposure to this stuff to know that failure is epidemic with artists, and it rarely works out.

The problem with it "not working out" is that the artists never have money, rarely have health insurance, and many of them are just waiting for their wealthy parents to die so they can inherit some money and become "independent." In fact, a large part of the "identity" and sense of importance derived by many of the artists I have known throughout the years seems to relate to the fact that their parents are wealthy.

If they had some kind of valuable skill, none of this would matter.

Do you think the girl who became a podiatrist at the insistence of her father is sitting around talking about how cool she is because her father was wealthy when she was growing up--while waiting for him to die? She probably never looked back once she became a podiatrist. She had a valuable skill and it has served her well.

Having a valuable skill means everything to your survival and ability to enjoy a successful life.

Fraud is when someone purports to be offering something of value (a high return on an investment, in the case of someone like Bernie Madoff)--but is not really furnishing anything of value at all. Criminal acts such as robbing a house or setting fire to a building are crimes because they involve taking something of value from someone without giving the person a corresponding payment, good, or service.

When you are interviewed for a job, the employer is trying to decide how much value you offer and will furnish to the company. This is the essence of any job interview and it is exactly what goes on in the hiring process. The employer wants to know what skill you are offering, whether it is a strong or a weak skill, and whether or not it can be purchased for a good price.

Your career will survive and thrive in direct proportion to the perceived value of the product or service you are offering. Sending out résumés and promoting yourself is all in vain if you do not have a valuable skill that you can sell to the market. Companies, individuals, and others will only pay if you are offering something of value. You need to find where the value is in what you are doing, and what you have to offer that is unique.

Some people out there have unique and valuable skills that would boggle your mind. One of the most disturbing shows I saw recently was of people who clean up accident scenes after suicides and murders. This is a huge business and something that a lot of companies out there do, and it pays very well:

The police, the fire department and the [crime-scene investigators](#) who arrive at a crime scene perform crucial tasks in the aftermath of a violent death. But they don't, as a general rule, clean up. Mopping up after someone who dies violently is the responsibility of that person's family. And until recently, there were very few cleaning companies that would handle that kind of job, so the family members ended up having to do it themselves. If ever there were a situation begging for capitalism to step in and take over, this was it.

Crime-scene cleaners charge up to \$600 an hour for their service, and most people would pay a lot more.

<http://science.howstuffworks.com/crime-scene-clean-up.htm>

Six hundred dollars an hour is pretty good pay. The show I saw about these people talked about what a good business this is and how great it pays. This is a skill. It is not a skill I would want to have, but it is something that supports people and provides them a good living.

I had a professor in law school who knew someone who had started a bunch of Swisher franchises and became very rich. Swisher franchises are the ones who clean toilets in restaurants. This is not something I would be interested in but, again, it is a valuable skill and a service that people need. Not even the restaurants are interested in cleaning their own toilets.

In the newspapers these days there is one story after another about towns around the United States that have been devastated by various factory closings. When an automobile plant closes, for example, the reason it is closing in most instances is that it is not offering a product that the public is willing to pay for. In the event that the plant is closing because it is relocating overseas, since American workers are too expensive, this simply means there are other workers willing to offer

the same product (their labor) at a better cost than the American workers.

I cannot tell you how many people I have met in my career and how many stories I have heard about people who lose a job in their 40s or 50s and suddenly have nothing to offer the world. One of the most astonishing instances of this came about when I was a [legal recruiter](#) in 2000. An attorney from a stellar New York [law firm](#) called me one day and wanted help switching firms. At the time he was earning around \$275,000 a year, but now he was losing his job. The reason? The IRS had recently outlawed a certain type of financial transaction that this attorney had spent his entire career working on. He was more than 15 years into his legal career and suddenly he did not have a marketable skill. To me, this entire thing seems crazy, but the guy ended up not finding another job and moving back to England, where he was from, to do something else. He had a skill that suddenly became unmarketable.

What does all of this mean for your career and life? You need to have a product, something of value that you are offering the world, which people are willing to pay for. You need to have a skill--and a good skill, one that you keep getting better and better at. Your product should have numerous characteristics such as longevity and marketability. The 90-year-old doctor is still working because people are willing to pay for his service.

Your product can be morbid and unusual (like being a mortician) or it can be beautiful (like being a professional flower arranger). But whatever your product is, it must be something the world needs and is always willing to pay for. Once you have your product, the more of your product you can offer, the more efficiently you produce your product, the higher quality your product and the better you market and sell your product--the better off you will be. However, before you do any of this, you need to find and develop your product. If you do not have a product, you cannot succeed.

So many people spend their lives and careers never settling on one thing. You need to pick something and focus on it, and go forward doing it to the very best of your ability. The better your product, the better your life.

THE LESSON

You must think of yourself as a product, something of value for which people are willing to pay. Your career will thrive in direct proportion to the perceived value of the product you are offering, so you must present yourself as something that the world wants and is willing to pay for. Pick something, and focus on doing it to the best of your ability. The quality of your product will determine the quality of your life.

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