Frost & Sullivan Awards: Recognition of Excellence or Cargo Cult?

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In today's world, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish fact from fiction (or alternative facts?!), friend from foe, advertising from independent editorial. Most things in life are not black or white, but grey, and it does not help that many are intentionally exploiting this ambiguity for their own ends.

It is impossible to personally verify everything that crosses one's path, and so unavoidably at times one must rely on third parties regarding whether to trust, buy, adopt or believe something.

Richard Feynman wrote about "Cargo Cult Science", referring to cults such as the "John Frum cult" that formed on the island of Tanna, Vanuatu at the time of the Second World War. He described it best himself in a 1974 commencement address at Caltech [1]:

"In the South Seas there is a Cargo Cult of people. During the war they saw airplanes land with lots of good materials, and they want the same thing to happen now. So they've arranged to make things like runways, to put fires along the sides of the runways, to make a wooden hut for a man to sit in, with two wooden pieces on his head like headphones and

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bars of bamboo sticking out like antennas—he's the controller—and they wait for the airplanes to land. They're doing everything right. The form is perfect. It looks exactly the way it looked before. But it doesn't work. No airplanes land. So I call these things Cargo Cult Science, because they follow all the apparent precepts and forms of scientific investigation, but they're missing something essential, because the planes don't land."

Feynman goes on to say that "**The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool**."

Part of the human condition is the desire for recognition, status and success. When combined with a tendency to believe compliments much more easily than criticisms, it creates a vulnerability to exploitation.

A personal story will illustrate this point:

Many years ago, not long after I started working as an engineer, I received an email from Marquis Who's Who, stating that, based on my impressive contribution to the engineering field, I have been selected to be taken up in the next global edition of Who's Who in Engineering.

I was very flattered, and wondered which of my (very minor and insignificant) contributions at the time led to this wonderful recognition. I had heard about Who's Who by that time, the term having become so common that it had been taken up in the vernacular.

I verified online that it was in fact *the* Who's Who, and this added to my being 'flattered' and 'humbled' as award recipients like to describe their emotional state.

Thus, I proceeded to engage with this company in providing my bio and other information as required to be taken up in the directory. I got duly listed, and I proudly added this listing to my CV as an accomplishment.

Disillusionment started setting in as I got bombarded with emails and letters from Marquis Who's Who, offering all manner of accoutrements and embellishments to "celebrate" or "recognise" my "achievement",

such as a splendidly leatherbound hard copy of the directory, a plaque, a medal, a ring, a certificate, etc. All of these at a substantial price, of course.

It finally dawned on me that their whole business model is built on ego, and that the only people that read the Who's Who are the people listed in it!

Needless to say, I was seriously embarrassed, and immediately deleted mention of Who's Who from my CV. I now see it as an "idiot badge", like those bracelets that supposedly tap into some magical universal energy flow to improve overall performance and intelligence.

It was a valuable lesson that I remind myself of ever since to try and avoid falling into the trap / trappings of ego. As Feynman said, "…you are the easiest person to fool", indeed!

Enter 2017, and receiving the excellent(?) news from Frost & Sullivan that my company has won an award. Frost & Sullivan being a well-known global company with a good reputation, I was pleasantly surprised about this development.

A few warning signs started to appear, however. Firstly, in the first few conversations, I got the strange feeling that the award was being 'sold' to me. I could not understand at the time why a well-known company offering prestigious awards would see the need to convince me of the value and prestige of the award.

The reason for this behaviour became clear, however, when in a subsequent conversation mention was made of "copyright" to the award. When probing further, I discovered that one actually has to ***pay*** for the award! And not an insignificant amount, but in the order of R200 000 (about US$15 000).

I had a very negative reaction to this, since according to me paying for an award creates a perverse incentive for all parties involved in such a transaction, especially the company offering the awards.

I was then assured that the payment is not for the award itself, but rather for the right to ‘license the copyright’ to the award. What that turns out to mean in practice, however, is that you are not allowed to mention that you won the award if you do not pay for it. (The value of an award is mainly to serve as a third-party validation of the value-add or contribution of a company or person, and so not being able to mention or publicise an award basically renders it meaningless.)

The disillusionment culminated in the actual awards banquet held in honour of the recipients. Still being under the impression that the actual award is handed out even if the ‘copyright’ has not been paid for, I attended this event. As it turns out, only ‘paid’ awards are handed out (or, as Frost & Sullivan staff members prefer to call them, “licensed” awards).

From the outside the event is very impressive, and for all intents and purposes looks and feels like an actual prestigious awards ceremony. However, once you realise that all the recipients on the stage paid a lot of money to receive their awards, it loses all its authenticity.

I had a google to see if I was the only one being disillusioned by this practice, and found at least one other blog post questioning the methodology and value [2].

It is disappointing that a company held in high esteem by many seems to have resorted to such practices to make money (and build close relationships with recipient companies).

Justifications include that the awards are “research-based”, and that the research costs money, but I can confirm that, at least in my own case, the research consisted of public domain material obtained from a single article written by ourselves. We also had to assist in finalising this research material.

What makes an award have value?

For an award to have value as a third-party validation or proxy for quality or achievement, the following basic components should be present:

1. The nomination and selection process / methodology should be transparent;

2. The criteria should be openly published and known;

3. The judges should be independent;

4. There should not be any conflicts of interest or distorted incentives;

5. There should not be many awards and award categories (i.e. criteria should be tough, and few should qualify).

Unfortunately, none of the above seem to be present in the Frost & Sullivan Awards.

It makes me think of the quote from Warren Buffet about integrity in the business community:

“I want them [the CEOs] to judge every action by how it would appear on the front page of their local newspaper, written by a smart but semi-unfriendly reporter, who really understood it, to be read by their families, their neighbors, their friends. And it has to pass that test.” [3].

If the newspaper headlines about the awards mentioned that recipients pay the judges to be able to announce them, how would it impact on public perception of their value?

References

[1] Website: http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/51/2/CargoCult.htm. Last accessed: 18/08/2017.

[2] Website: https://ipvm.com/reports/should-you-trust-frost-&-sullivan-awards. Last accessed: 18/08/2017.

[3] Website: http://www.thebusinessquotes.com/warren-buffett-quotes/. Last accessed: 18/08/2017.