

Fawlty Towers and the art of prediction

 By [Damon Stapleton](#)

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The legendary comedian John Cleese is being interviewed on the radio. He is explaining how arguably the most successful television series, *Fawlty Towers*, was liked by very few when it began in 1975. In fact, when the *Daily Mirror* reviewed the show the headline read "Long John Short on Jokes."

Cleese says it's a fallacy that anybody knows anything will be successful in the beginning. There is no certainty. One of the comments from a BBC commissioning editor was apparently that the show might be a lot better if Basil Fawlty got out of the hotel more. Ridiculous right? Except, the creative world is littered with artists getting stupid advice, stories of famous bands like The Beatles and U2 getting rejection letters and great actors or artists being rejected over and over.

It would seem, when it comes to creating the future, passion and belief are just as important as the opinions and so-called wisdom that created yesterday.



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The radio interview continued and Cleese spoke about a man called Philip E Tetlock. Tetlock is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He has studied forecasting and the art of prediction for the last 30 years. One of his discoveries came from soliciting opinions from 284 experts that ranged from government officials to professors, journalists, Marxists and free marketers. This gave him roughly 28,000 predictions. The result? These experts were only slightly more accurate than chance. His work also suggested a perverse inverse relationship between fame and accuracy. In other words, the more famous somebody was, the less accurate they were likely to be.

In short, his research shows nobody really knows anything about tomorrow with great certainty.

So, the lesson is: beware of anybody who tells you they absolutely know anything about the future. And the advertising and marketing industry is full of people who say they know.

As I write this, Vine is being closed down by Twitter. Think about that. Four years ago when Vine was launched, our industry was all over it. As late as December of 2015, it still had 200 million users. I remember all sorts of people telling me Vine was the future. The Holy Grail. Very few experts, if any, would have predicted it would die four years later because it didn't move fast enough to differentiate itself from Instagram and Snapchat. Any experts out there want to predict their future?

The other lesson for me, especially from a creative perspective, is that perhaps intuition, chance, luck and belief are far more important than we realise. Great things are very rarely made with absolute certainty. They are often made with diverse, strange and often unintended ingredients. If you ignore them, you will only ever make what already exists.

I will give you one fantastic example. While I was learning about all this stuff I stumbled on an interview with Rowan Atkinson.

He was asked about *Blackadder*, arguably the second best British comedy series behind *Fawlty Towers*. He was asked why they had chosen all these historical settings for each series. His answer was that *Fawlty Towers* was so good they knew anything they wrote they would be compared unfavourably with *Fawlty Towers*. They decided they didn't want to compete with a great show that until only recently had been panned by so called experts. So, they decided to set it in Medieval times so it wouldn't be. This choice made it different. This choice made it great.

In essence, *Fawlty Towers*' success became the essential unintended ingredient that created the genius of *Blackadder*.

The sad truth is most experts would have looked at the available data and tried to do another *Fawlty Towers*. It would have been terrible. A pale imitation.

This is why creativity is important. It breaks old successful patterns and creates new ones.

This is something I see in our business. More and more, we are trying to create certainty. To do what has worked before. To discard unintended ingredients. Find the middle and follow the pattern. Do not make a mistake. There is no time for that.

Yet, while this conversation is happening, there is another conversation that is happening about something just as important as certainty and safety:

Exponential growth

How will companies grow? By doing what they did yesterday? By following the pattern that exists or trying to create a new one?

Those two conversations eventually smash into each other. They always do.

And, there has only been and will only ever be one winner.

Creativity may be seen by some as unpredictable. However, the unfortunate and very predictable results of not using it do not seem to be a viable option when it comes to creating the future.

Many think creativity is always about massive risk.

Many forget, it is also how you create massive reward.

"Most successful pundits are selected for being opinionated, because it's interesting, and the penalties for incorrect predictions are negligible. You can make predictions, and a year later people won't remember them." Daniel Kahneman.

ABOUT DAMON STAPLETON

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