

What Useful Knowledge Means to Me: A Rebuttal to Responses on “Where Does Knowledge Com From?”

ELMAR Contribution by J. Scott Armstrong
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The replies to my essay, “Where Does Useful Knowledge Come From?” were reassuring. Why? Because I love to uncover evidence that contradicts commonly held opinions.

There seem be differences as to what constitutes “useful knowledge” as opposed to “common knowledge.” I see useful knowledge as evidence that could contribute to better decisions than would have otherwise been made in given situations. Ideally, such knowledge would be formulated as condition/action statements. A medical analogy might be a stream of research findings concluding that if you administer treatment A rather than the current treatment B to an organization with symptoms X, Y, and Z, you will improve the health of the organization.

Rossiter asserts that authors such as Ries and Trout add to the store of knowledge. I disagree. They merely provide opinions. An example is Ries and Trout’s (1993) Immutable Law #1: “It is better to be first than to be better.” Note that this is a condition-free law (making it less likely to be useful). More importantly, no evidence is provided to support the law. They only give examples, and even these are unconvincing. They do not, for example, address who marketed the first electronic spreadsheet or who developed the first TV. (Interestingly, in describing their law, they predicted that *USA Today* would fail). In fact, there is much evidence countering this so-called “law” (see Armstrong and Collopy 1996).

Their other “Immutable Laws” are no better. Consider Law # 17, the Law of Unpredictability: “Unless you write your competitors’ plans, you can’t predict the future.” This is incorrect because the firm’s future involves many aspects that can be predicted; moreover, Green (2002) showed that opponents’ actions can be forecast by simulated interactions (a form of role-playing).

I agree with the commentators that practitioners are creative and they play a role in the development of knowledge by coming up with new ideas. Sometimes, but not often, they run experiments to test their ideas. On those rare occasions when they are able to get feedback about their experiments, they learn. Occasionally, they publish their results, and they might even include the details of their work. For example, a practitioner, John Caples, helped to develop and communicate knowledge in advertising (although I have been unable to find any published details of his experiments). In view of the above problems, practitioners’ contributions are small compared to those by academics.

Why is this discussion important? Because current approaches, including journal articles, business periodicals, books, and management courses have been ineffective in finding and transmitting useful knowledge. I believe that academics should focus on the development of useful knowledge by formulating principles. The principles should be transmitted through books, websites, and software. This would allow researchers and practitioners to inexpensively draw upon cumulative useful knowledge.

References

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