

Thoughts of a Quizmaster

This article was written by Paul Coombs, alias 'Professor Propellerhead', who was a quizmaster at a number of North London quizzes, including at various stages the Bailey, Priory Arms and Snooty Fox. He died in 2007. RIP.

Several times in my life I have made my way towards a pub, sometimes one I have never previously entered, carrying a sheaf of questions and some answer sheets. It is the start of a new quiz night. Often the pub has never held such an event before but, if I am lucky, there has been some pre-publicity. It is always a tense moment. How will the locals react to the quiz? Will they regard it as an intrusion or as entertainment? Will there be a team of "professionals", hovering like vultures around some fresh meat? Will there be some oaf who calls out answers, right or wrong, throughout the evening? Will they all come back next week? It is a daunting experience, but it can be a rewarding one too. If all goes well, the number of teams will grow, the quiz night will become the highspot of the week and the landlord will be happy. Job done. If things go badly, no one but the same two or three teams will reappear and the whole thing will become somewhat of a ritual.

So why do I do it? Yes, for the money. The pay is not great but there are a few more tenners in the pocket at the end of the evening. However, there are other, less tangible, motivations. It is always rewarding to create something from nothing - and in getting a little cheer from an expectant audience when once they would not even have looked up when you walked in. Quiz-setting is showbiz - maybe the lowest rung, but for someone like myself, who doesn't get stage-fright, who is not scared of a microphone but unfortunately lacks any other talent, this is the only path to stardom. I could be the new Chris Tarrant, Anne Robinson or even...gasp!...Richard Whiteley. Although, now I come to think of it, none of them started their quizmastery or (quizmistressy) in pubs...

Like most aspects of showbiz - and indeed most aspects of life - running a quiz can be done well or badly. It is a job everyone thinks they can do - being a DJ or a football commentator fall into the same category. All anyone sees is someone reading out some questions and marking the answers. Easy money, right? But no one stops to wonder where those question sheets, the picture rounds, the pop music intro tapes and the rest of the paraphernalia have come from. Yes, you can buy lists of questions or get them from quiz-books - but as any experienced quizmaster will tell you, this will not work. Such questions are dull, dull, dull - a type that I always characterise as "What is the capital of Guatemala?" With these, you either know the answer or you don't. But if you *don't* know, are you going to be in any way thrilled, interested or entertained once you find out? An evening made up entirely of questions like this is boredom incarnate, like many pub quizzes I attend when I turn from gamekeeper to poacher. It gets to the stage where I can almost predict what question is next (I even recognise the quiz-books, sometimes) and the whole event becomes a gift to "professional" quizzers - a topic I will come to later.

So there is an aesthetic to pub quiz questions. The perfect one has three attributes. The first is that either the question or the answer should be interesting. "Who met on 'Pie Saturday'?" is an intriguing question, regardless of how dull the answer may be. On the other hand, "Where did millionaire Dennis Tito spend his holiday in 2001?" might not seem too fascinating a question but it acquires some interest when you find the answer. The ideal is that people will be springing these questions on their friends, relations and workmates the day after the quiz - "Ere's one for yer. Oo's got a cat

called Snowball II?" The second attribute is that the answer should be somewhere just on the edge of knowledge. There is no point in asking a question that nobody in the pub could ever get right. On the other hand, if there are too many "gimmies" then the entire competition will hang on just one or two questions, which makes it unfair and something of a lottery. The ideal question should invoke a look of pain followed by the words "I *know* that" and a prolonged banging of head on table. Good ones for this are pop lyrics and current affairs; it is surprising how soon you forget the name of someone who is currently all over the newspapers as having put his hand on the queen's bottom, or whatever. The final attribute is that the answer should not just be something you know, but something you have to think about. If I asked "Who painted *Nude Descending a Staircase*?" then you either know or you don't - but if you don't then there no way that you are going to derive or guess at the answer. On the other hand, if I asked "Where was Leonardo da Vinci born?" then if you don't know you *could* work it out if you were intelligent enough - and that's what quiz night is all about. So I favour questions like "What word connects circle, rehearsal and maker?" or my recent favourites of "cryptic clue" questions - "Which London district is clued by 'Tom and Henry'?" Of course, not every question can adhere to *all* these ideals. Indeed, I am still questing for the holy grail of pub quiz questions, although "What was George VI's first name?" is pretty close. Of necessity, there has to be a number of "Capital of Guatemala" questions but these have to be leavened with contemporary items, and puzzles where you actually have to think.

Now to subjects. The pub quiz relies on four favourites: films, TV, pop music and sport (by which I mean football, not polo). It is a rare evening where one of these does not come up, and indeed sometimes there is nothing else. Maybe in the "Soprano's Head" at Glyndebourne or the "Aristotle Arms" at Oxford the subjects major on high rather than popular culture. But not in Crouch End. However, to the four basics I have been able to add rounds on subjects as esoteric as potatoes, glass, sleep, babies, bells and sweets. In fact I find it harder to think of new and interesting subjects than to devise the questions, so I have resorted to the cunning plan of asking for suggestions from the audience. This has yielded rounds on socks, the sun, and "tractors and their wheels" - I'm still grappling with that last one. With judicious question selection, it is possible to avoid the *Mastermind* syndrome where one person's specialist subject is completely incomprehensible to everyone else.

Currently, most of my audience are happy with downmarket popular culture questions but there is a vociferous couple (vociferous after a few white wines anyway) who always demand more opera, ballet and the like. I have called their bluff on occasions and predictably found that they know nothing about these subjects either. Which brings me to another topic - the bores who come up at the end of every evening to tell me that (a) that the quiz is too hard, (b) that one or more of the answers is wrong (c) that they should have won but were robbed by reasons (a) or (b), and (d) that they know a great deal more about one of the questions and are very keen to tell me about it. Perhaps the scariest example of (d) was when I asked about the death of Jack "The Hat" McVitie. Who'd have thought so many pub regulars would have been present?

With regard to (a) I might point out that every question was successfully answered by someone, that the winning score was 35 out of 40 and if I made it any easier there would be a multi way tie with everyone scoring maximum points. But no, the bore insists that I put in some easier questions so that he and his mates can get an answer - "who's shagging who" was a recent suggestion for such a subject. Let me take an analogy. I am not particularly good at tennis - a problem I solve by not having a

racquet and never getting anywhere near a court. However, for some reason, pub quizzes seem exempt from this logic. Everyone thinks they should be “fair”, by which they mean that their team should win as often as any other. And the most aggrieved are the pub regulars who need to borrow a brain cell in order to work out which way up to hold their glass, but who nevertheless feel they ought to win occasionally because...err...they drink in here a lot.

At the other extreme are the “professional” teams. Yes, we know who you are. I suspect members of such teams have some other job in between wandering about scooping pub quiz jackpots, so maybe “professional” is not quite the right word - “experienced” is better. Anyway, I am usually told that such teams, or indeed any team that wins consistently, should be banned, handicapped or split up. This is usually accompanied by the observation that such teams are only ever seen in the pub on quiz night. Such an attitude misses the point in two ways. Firstly, the reason the landlord has contributed the prizes and the exorbitant fee that allows me to live a life of showbiz luxury is that quiz night gets more people into the pub. Banning a team that has come along specially and which is spending money over the bar rather defeats that aim. Secondly, while I hate to see the same team win every week, if they get the most points then they are entitled to the prize. I doubt that splitting them up will help - I can’t prevent communication between teams. And handicapping is equally impractical - the mix of people between teams is too fluid and I can’t keep track of everyone who has ever won. The solution does not lie with me but with the other teams. The Williams sisters keep winning at tennis but no one suggests that they should be banned or be obliged to play one-handed. It is up to the other players to raise their standards until they can compete on equal terms. As quizmaster, all I can do is avoid those questions that play right into the hands of the “professionals” - questions that they have heard a million times before. I can make them think, concentrate on this week’s news, or even ask about who’s shagging who; and if they still win then good luck to them.

Every quiz seems to have a different format. Some don’t work, some seem unfair and others drag on interminably. As an example of unfairness, one well-known quizmaster (now retired?) was fond of distributing bonus points halfway through the quiz, bringing stragglers up to the same level as the leading teams. This seemed to negate the purpose of having a first half at all, but people seemed to like it. One attribute of a good format is that the entire quiz should not take too long; one hour, including marking time, is about right. Also, the format should help ensure that the same team does not win every week. My own solution to this is to have three different subjects every week. If this week’s choice happens to match the skill and knowledge of your team then you will do well, if not then there will be a different combination of subjects next week. The format should involve a mixture of media - pictures and sounds as well as straight questions. These things take more effort to prepare but make the evening more interesting and again help prevent the same teams winning every week. And finally, there should be a jackpot rollup that pays out a big prize from time to time; this creates a good buzz and encourages entries from people who would not normally enter the main part of the quiz. There are many ways of presenting the jackpot question but the use of mobile phones needs to be considered - I will turn to this later.

So what are the other attributes of a good quizmaster other than, of course, to be as much like me as possible? Firstly, you should not fall in love with your own voice. It is great to have a microphone and a captive audience. But they have not come to hear

your jokes, observations on life or meaningless waffle. Nor do they need the rules and prizes explained at length several times during the evening. Conversely, a pub quiz is not an exam. You don't want total quiet and you shouldn't be reading the questions in a dirge-like voice as if conducting a funeral service. It is an entertainment - showbiz, remember? Heckles and banter should be encouraged. The dirge-like intonation is usually caused by the fact that the quizmaster is barely literate and is having difficulty with long words like "Nicaragua". Which brings me to the next attribute - the quizmaster should have the ability to recognise an answer that is "near enough". For example, if the question is "A 'sloe' is the fruit of which thorny shrub?" then if you have put "May" when the quizmaster has "blackthorn" it should not be marked as wrong. Clearly, the quizmaster cannot know everything (or else he or she would have a better job than asking stupid questions in some sleazy backstreet boozery) but a good general knowledge does help. The final attribute is the one I found hardest to learn myself: Don't argue. Sometimes your answer will be wrong; you will be made aware of this by the howling mob that appears shortly after you have announced it. More often, you know your answer is right (having looked it up but hours before) but directly in front of you is some klutz who is convinced otherwise. However, nothing is gained by argument in such circumstances. Give the klutz his point (or at least look like you are doing so), allow the mob their answer and admit that you could be wrong. It costs nothing, you still get paid and they will all be back next week. The quiz is showbiz, remember, not an opportunity to show how smart you are.

So what of the future? It is far from uncommon to see people using mobile phones during a quiz or even deploying the pub's public call box in full sight and hearing of all the other teams - "Mary! Go and get the atlas. I think it's in the bookcase near the telly. No? Well it must be in the loft. I'll ring you back..." I have turned a blind eye to this in the past, mainly because I have some sympathy with the person left at home with the pile of reference books and the internet tuned to Google. And it doesn't seem to help all that much. But now it is possible to buy handheld devices with full web access, the balance may shift. At present the connection fees are larger than most of the prizes you are likely to win, jackpots excepted, but for how long? It is easy to announce that such devices are banned but in practice this is unenforceable (although mobile phone jammers can be purchased - maybe one will soon be a part of every quizmaster's armoury). I don't think raising the difficulty-level of the questions is the answer either - few questions do not eventually succumb to a protracted internet search, and finding or phrasing questions that cannot be googled is mighty hard. So we are approaching a crisis except in the smaller pubs where everyone knows each other, the prizes are small and cheating is neither possible nor worthwhile. And maybe that is where the pub quiz should stay.

I hope that has given a flavour of the thoughts that go through the head of a typical quizmaster. As I say, the job is one everyone thinks that they can do, but few do well. So next time the quiz drones on interminably, the questions are predictable and all your correct answers are marked as wrong, don't shoot the quizmaster, he's doing his (or her) best.

Professor Propellerhead

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