

I Just Have **1** Question

Is That the Best You've Got?



by Doug Carpenter

I get it. You *want* what you *want*. Who *doesn't*? And when you *get* whatever it is that you want so badly, everything is just peachy, right? Well — that depends.

If you did, in fact, get it, was it *exactly* what you wanted? Or, instead of holding out [...for what I have to believe you were 100% positive you had coming...], did you “settle” for something slightly different, perhaps even *inferior*?

Maybe. Although I doubt if it was willingly. And you probably weren't exactly thrilled about it, either. But who exactly does one *speak* to when faced with such dissatisfaction? The answer, obviously, is *no one*.

Because as you already know, there *is* no official “Department of Personal Grievances” that you can storm into, filled with righteous indignation. No walk-up “Complaints” window to approach assertively, ready to demand satisfaction, only to be instructed to “Take a number and wait to be called.”

And even if there actually *were* someone with the authority to help you, they'll almost surely be “off for a few days” the very day *you* need to talk to them [...as undoubtedly will the only *other* person who knows when that *first* person will be *back*.]

It must be one of the first things they cover in Management Training 101: *How to Make It Look Like You're in When You're Out and Out When You're in*. You probably can even earn extra credit in Creative Delegating if you can get someone to take the course *for* you.



As goofy as it now seems looking back on it, though, I probably should confess that I really *did* like how *totally awesome* I looked — O.K., *thought* that I looked — in my madras plaid golf hat, which was [...for what *couldn't* have been more than a month and a half, if even *that long*...] my seventh grade classmates' idea of the *absolute epitome* of coolness.

Yet even with all the frustration we're forced to swallow on a pretty much daily basis, we still persist in *wanting* things. And not just *certain* things, either. But the *best* things — which I could understand if their relative “bestness” was established by our own sincere personal preferences. Oddly, however, that's *not* how it works.

To a surprisingly-frequent extent, we essentially farm that decision out to *other people*. And it's not that *they* impose *their* opinions on us in place of ours. We actually *expect* them to *tell* us what we should like.

So you may *think* you make up your own mind about the products you use, the foods you eat, the clothes you wear, the movies and TV shows you watch — virtually every choice you make. But guess what.

You couldn't have picked *any* of those things if you didn't know they *existed*. And how did you *find out* about them? Somebody *told* you. Maybe it was a family member, a co-worker or some other friend or acquaintance. Or *maybe* it was an

“influencer.”

It's a relatively new term for a long-established aspect of human culture, which now exists in a world significantly “influenced” by social media ranging from Facebook and Instagram to TikTok and whatever the *latest* thing is that I couldn't *possibly* be hip enough to *know* about [...tempting as it may be to indulge delusions to the contrary.]

And it's estimated that *tens of millions* of people around the world actually make their living today — and I'm guessing a pretty darn good one for some of them, considering that it's a multi-*billion* dollar industry — simply from telling *other* people what's “*hot*” and what's *not*. Basically, reporting what's been happening in the world during the latest “15 minutes” of our shared fascination with fame.

The methodic process of getting everybody talking about — well — whatever “everybody's *talking* about,” however, has been going on for as long as things *have* been going on. How it impacts our lives depends on where that talking is

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taking place.

Culinary reputations, for example, have been made and *unmade* — and dinner reservations rendered inordinately harder to secure — by the number of highly-coveted “Michelin Stars” high-end restaurants have been awarded — the highest numbers often accompanied by correspondingly-inflated staff egos. [Some waiters, though, are just plain snooty no matter *where* they work.]

In the world of motion pictures, box office proceeds inevitably soar when stoked by Oscar “buzz.” And tickets to Tony and Obie Award-winning Broadway shows can go from slow sellers to Standing Room Only overnight.

Ditto the perked-up popularity that traditionally comes with Emmy, Golden Globe or Grammy success, making music fans almost as energized about attending winners’ performances as the automated Internet ticket-buying “robots” are when they’re out there scooping up every concert seat they can get their little electronic hands on.

Those who bravely venture out into the world after they’ve been fed and entertained will no doubt *also* be impressed by the recipients of other major awards like the Nobels, the Pulitzers and the Clios — the last of which recognize those creative if mercenary souls who craft the ads that so cleverly enlighten us about all the stuff we apparently *need to buy* if we want our lives to have any *real* meaning.

Not that our self-interest really *needs* any help having its emotional buttons pushed. Not as long as we have good old “*peer pressure*” and its ever-reliable delivery

system “*word of mouth*” to plant the seeds in our psyches from which will ultimately sprout what we’ll honestly *believe* are our true desires.

It’s a process that starts a whole lot earlier than you may realize. Remember those extra-popular teachers back in our school days? The ones everybody hoped they’d get? I thought you might. But do you remember *why* they were on so many student wish lists?

Since we hadn’t *had* them yet, it’s not like we could’ve known how much *better* they were from personal experience. Ahh, but we had *heard*. “Easy grader.” “Takes classes on field trips.” “Has a good sense of humor.” “Occasionally falls for lame excuses.” You know the selling points. How could you go wrong?

It was like having the educational equivalent of those *Consumer Reports* “Best Buy” ratings that help people get a great deal on a quality car. And you didn’t even have to kick anyone’s tires. [...which most likely *would’ve* gotten you suspended anyway.]

The same goes for what we *wore* back in the day, when you desperately wanted to be “cool” but didn’t *know* if you were until others *told* you you were. [The little alligator on the front of your Lacoste polo shirt probably could’ve clued you in if its mouth hadn’t been sewn shut.]

We’ve also frequently “dressed for success” based on how people who’d *already* succeeded were dressed when *they* made it. And some of us have even allowed our decisions about what kind of *career* to pursue to be influenced by things that didn’t have all that much to do with how *we* actually felt about it.

Whether well-intentioned or selfishly motivated, family and friends often pushed us in the direction *they* thought we should go. Likewise, any profession that was made to look glamorous by TV, movies or the media had an early

lead in the race to be the star of our career aspirations. [That whole explosion of media-spread “influence” is starting to make sense now, isn’t it?]

It wasn’t until much later that we realized that, like certain lines of work and a *lot* of lines of fashion, not everything is a good fit for *everybody*, while *some* things don’t look good on *anyone* — no matter how nice they may feel when you try them on. [I’m looking at *you*, parachute pants.]

As goofy as it now seems looking back on it, though, I probably should confess that I really *did* like how *totally awesome* I looked — O.K., *thought* that I looked — in my madras plaid golf hat, which *was* [...for what *couldn’t* have been more than a month and a half, if even *that* long...] my seventh grade classmates’ idea of the *absolute epitome* of coolness.

Until, of course, it *wasn’t* — at

which point I naturally [...and quickly...] took the now “lame” hat off and, like everyone else, patiently waited to be told what the *next* ticket to superficial preteen popularity would be. [Admittedly it was *not* my individuality’s finest hour.]

Still, for at least a brief, shining moment, I remember feeling like I was actually part of the “in” crowd. *Almost*, anyway. But even if it wasn’t exactly what I *wanted*, it was the best there was to be *had*. So I made the best of it that I could.

Like we all do.

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Throughout *After 50*’s first 16 years, veteran WNY writer and columnist Doug Carpenter regularly shared his wry generational observations with readers as *Everyboomer*. He has now returned to write a uniquely-named new monthly humor/opinion column called *I Just Have 1 Question* — which he says he’ll ask and then bravely try to answer... without, he fervently hopes, looking excessively foolish in the process. [We wish him luck.]

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