

Don't be the best, be Unique

There's a great scene in that Phantom Menace movie, where Liam Neeson and Ewan MacGregor are whizzing through the sea in their Jedi submarine craft and an enormous antediluvian fish with fangs is chasing after them.

MacGregor agitatedly refers to the impending disaster while Neeson blithely seems to ignore it, and maintains a posture of perfect serenity.

Then, just as the maw of the mighty beast is about to snap, a gigantic undersea Tyrannosaurus Rex (what else?) moves in from the side, and ambushes the Star Wars equivalent of Jaws on Dark Side steroids, putting paid to its hunt and snacking on it instead.

"There's always a bigger fish", preens Neeson, and on our heroes go to continue their task.

So, think about this when writing your essays. No matter how much you feel you have done something amazing in terms of delivering results, the chances are that there is someone else who has quite simply done better than you in terms of numbers. If you think your trump card is having studied in Harvard for your undergrad, think about the person who got admitted to Harvard on scholarship because she was supported by her village in Africa. Brought in 100 million in sales for your department last year? Meet the billion-dollar (probably lying) wunderkind who claims credit for the Yahoo!-Microsoft (only theoretical at this stage) merger. Played at National level for your university soccer team? How about the Olympic finalist with an IQ of 200 and 6 years of venture capital experience in China?

Bottom line : no matter how hot you feel your results are, it's likely that someone else got it beat. Choose any individual superlative, and the odds are that someone else has done it better. Pitch yourself as top 1% in anything, and if someone else outdoes that statistic, you are second best in potentially a race of two people. It is, as those clever strategists in INSEAD would likely put it, a Red Ocean of competition on the obvious. It's no longer "low hanging fruit" to say "I'm a national chess champion". You are along with two hundred other applicants who are probably more economically disadvantaged, and who speak 6 languages besides.

Here's another way to think about originality. Think of it like an American (or any other country) Idol audition. You are the best Bruce Springsteen wannabe of your friends. You are sure the judges will never have seen someone do the Boss quite like you. Yet, after queuing for hours and confidently dismissing the other competition in your mind as too fat, too nerdy or too pretty, Simon Cowell groans and cuts you off after thirty seconds. So what if you once got complimentary feedback from your cousin who is a record producer? So what if all your friends think you're better than them? If you're not original, and don't look like you have something unique that can - with a lot of luck - be turned into the Next Big Thing, there no point being almost as good as the Last Big Thing. That's been done. And probably done a lot better too.

So, what to do when it comes to selling yourself to get on board the train to success?

You have to come up with an original point of view. And nobody can compete against that. Express it succinctly enough, with the right mix of humility and courage, and you are looking like a best kept secret (which is a much better way of saying you haven't really done anything extraordinary to date). After all, if you have an unique take on life, where you've come from, where you are going, you're going to be interesting. And that gets you added to the Review with Favour pile in the initial cull.

Here's a great example. Current client has a lot going for him. Kicking and punching his way up from poverty, he got into the best schools, ignored the snobbery of the elites and the narrow mindedness of the headmaster, and now he's a successful financier just past thirty with a long term goal of making it to national leadership. What's his biggest selling point? The old poverty line perhaps? There are poorer, even though he was under a lot of pressure. Good grades? Being third in your class is not something you can assume will take you to the next level. Success at work? Sure, he's done well, but someone who was in a better place at the right time will have numbers to trounce his.

Here's what I think sets him apart. One of his essay questions asks if there is anywhere that inspires him. There is, as a matter of fact, the Great Wall of China. Not really enough to go on, so I pressed him more. He commented that the Great Wall and Pyramids are the two major construction projects that have truly stood the test of time over the years. But, he's really clear on why he likes the Wall, not the Pyramids. Why is that? Well, he admits, both were built at great cost to the country, and indeed to people's lives. Both have lasted for millenia and have become icons of the countries they reside in. But there's one massive difference that he sees, that makes all the difference at the end of the day.

The Great Wall was built to protect the country, the Pyramids to flatter the ego of the ruler and assure passage into Heaven. The Wall was built over many generations, where one ruler after another inherited, as he put it, "a pile of rubble", diverted valuable resources to improving it, instead of meeting what could be considered more pressing issues,

and then left the value added as a legacy to the next ruler, knowing that the next ruler could be someone he personally hated, or even warred against.

And on and on the Great Wall was built until finally, it was ready. The irony of course, is that the treachery of one person destroyed the work of generations, yet the enduring legacy of the Wall has been even more significant than simply protecting the defensive integrity of the nation, the original intent. The Wall is a source of inestimable pride to the Chinese, who see it as a national treasure that was built to protect them and represents the submission of the will of the individual to the good of society and future societies. The Chinese of today can justifiably feel that they are the same society that built this wall at such tremendous cost of resources and lives for the betterment of the people. Its value only increases with time, and indeed with the population of the country, as it serves to act as a common thread for all Chinese people, mainland or third generation expatriate, to hold onto as a symbol of who they are.

The Pyramids merely slowly bankrupted the Egyptian state and finished off a society that bears no resemblance to the Egypt of today, culturally or otherwise. In fact, the Pyramids are a sad reminder that modern Egypt can only hearken to past glories that took place on the same piece of land.

Our client wants to show that his career plan, namely a long term view of entering public service where he will play his role as a cog in the machinery slowly learning the ropes and playing the game until he is in a position to effect real beneficial change to society, is something he has thought through, and has no delusions about. He wants to build a Wall, not a Pyramid.

He wants to show that when he says "public service" he MEANS public service. He wants to show that his point of view is not the "go-getting ueber-achiever" mentality, but one that will genuinely use the MBA opportunity to make a change to his life, and the lives of others.

Oh, and by the way, he's above-average successful in business, life and academia, but that's not the main point. The point is, he is unique and memorable, and someone you'd be proud to have on your team.

Always underplay your visible strengths, act almost like they are afterthoughts, and know that this is not where your real strength lies. Let the Admissions staff know that you are not resting on your laurels, but striving to greater heights, challenging yourself, and the assumptions you make about life. Let them know that while stars may glow and fade, you are someone with direction, purpose and individuality. And sometimes, something so normal as that, is as rare as the gemstones the other candidates purport to describe themselves as worth.