

X Marks the Spot – The X Factor *-Soon Hee Newbold*

Today we're going to talk about the X Factor: What is the X factor, how do we define it, if so, can we duplicate it, and then how can we find our personal X factor?

What makes a film a classic, what makes an actor a household name, how does a singer become a superstar, why do some inventions take off, how do some songs become a hit, why is some music timeless, and why do people fall in love with the people they do? What does X mean to you?

We use the letter X as a symbol to mark boxes on forms, places on a map, sign our name, and point out incorrect answers on a test.

In Algebra, X refers to a "variable" or sometimes an "unknown."

X can also be the desire not to be defined such as the X generation. The joke is we're called the X generation because we have no identity or we don't fit in a specific category. We were the latch key kids, we liked grunge, punk rock, we were free spirits but somehow now we're contributing members of society.

X marks the spot for buried treasure, something of high value and significance.

Maybe some of you thought of this right away, the "X Factor" reality competition show which is probably how most of us understand it in today's culture, that undefinable "something" that makes for star quality. The je ne sais quoi, the extra pixie dust or magic that pushes something into the stratosphere and makes it a hit or top seller.

At one of the publishing recording sessions, I heard the owner of the studio mention how several big named composers had different pseudonyms they wrote under and yet their works still sold a ton. Most people think that once you become established, people just buy your stuff because they know your name, which there's certainly some truth to that. He concluded, however, that obviously wasn't the case, that these writers must have the X factor and whatever name they wrote under, their stuff was still popular. Then he stated he wished he knew what that was, don't we all?

In a nutshell you need to have something to sell (literally or figuratively) whether it's a product, a piece of art, or yourself and then you need to convince people to buy it (actively marketing or finding a way that draws people in). If you can figure out what everyone needs and come up with a solution you've got it made. Steve Jobs took this even a step further and found a way to not only invent new products but convince people they wanted things they never knew they needed.

Maybe the beauty of the X factor is that we don't know what it is, that it remains mysterious and undefinable. But let's see if we can break it down into a few categories.

Let's apply the X factor to creative arts specifically: art is a form of expression and has been around since the beginning of time. It's a way we can show and share our emotions in a unique and tangible way.

To be successful, we are traditionally taught to do the following things: learn the basics, train and become an expert or be very good at your craft, have some good business sense and then a bit of luck and good opportunities certainly help.

But what pushes success into the next level? I've found there are at least four common themes:

Number One: Integrity. CS Lewis described Integrity as what one does when no one else is watching. Basically it's being honest and telling the truth, and not in the way like confessing you went out to party instead of writing a paper but the truth in the sense of being real and showing your real self. I was told that in order to become a successful writer, I had to be willing to stand naked in the middle of a busy intersection. I'm not suggesting people go out in public in their birthday suit in order to accomplish their goals, but it does remind us that you have to be vulnerable and be able to share that. Most people are unwilling to do this or can't because they're not able to be honest with themselves. For example, in acting, most actors are not leading men or women not because they aren't just as talented but because they don't have a certain look or quality. If they are unable to see this, they'll always be frustrated trying to force themselves in a category they don't fit. Be able to see yourself in an honest way and share that truth.

Number Two: Connection. You need to connect with your intended audience whether actively engaging or having something they can relate to. It's like a tree falling in the forest, if no one is around to hear it what's the point? I like to remind groups I work with that it's the performance that is the art. All I do is put notes on a page but it's their interpretation of the work and sharing it with the audience that completes the experience. Leonard Bernstein said in his composition process he always has some thought toward the audience, not that he was writing for the audience necessarily but there was certainly some thought of them when he was working. That they were inevitably going to listen to what he was creating.

Do you remember that Europe story Joey made up in order to seduce his dates from the hit show "Friends?" Joey, was quite a lady's man and made up a sentimental story about backpacking across Western Europe that would pull his dates in like a moth to a flame and then they would end up sleeping with him every time. It's of course ridiculous but the writers of the show make two very good points, a good story and the presentation of the story which leads to the connection that draws us in. Spielberg is a prime example, a master storyteller who can take virtually any topic or story and tell it in a way we want to see and will enjoy.

I had a screenwriting teacher that had a theory every hit film has what she calls a “haunting moment” and if a film has just one or even two of these, it would be a classic. A haunting moment is something that leaves an everlasting profound emotional effect on the audience, connecting in a way that stirs an emotional reaction. An example would be in Tangled when Flint takes Rapunzel on the boat to see the lights and gives her a lantern of her own. In Tombstone when Doc Holiday tells Wyatt Earp he’s his Huckleberry.

Composers write music for three reasons, for themselves, their own self enjoyment or way of expressing personal things. They write for others such as commercial music, pop, film, or lastly, sweet spot which I find to be my favorite and most applicable to what we’re talking about, a combination of the two. All of the great classic composers and currently John Williams are prime examples of this. They are able to express their personal and deep meaningful art but still make it relatable to their audience in a profound way. It’s the emotional connection that makes it timeless.

Number Three: Be Surprising. In music we like compositions and songs that are familiar, and as a listener we like to know what that next note or chord will be. But the composition becomes memorable and exciting when there is just enough that keeps us guessing.

What do we find attractive in people? Why can someone have all of the qualities we’re looking for, be good looking, be great friends but still miss that spark that makes us fall in love? Matthew Hussey, a celebrity dating coach speaks about what creates attraction and desire. One of the things he talks about is being someone that has a high value. High value is the perception that you are rare and special. One way is showing your value is by having contrasting qualities. We all want someone with positive traits like sweet, kind, giving, fun, but if you can combine some of these contrasting qualities, you are more unique and more valuable. For example, someone who can knit but also throw a football. Someone who is charitable but also into martial arts. Kind but witty, athletic and artistic, you get the picture. These types of elements add deeper layers to a person and set them apart which makes them in essence more attractive.

Actors are taught to find one little element in a scene that they can flip. Something small that’s comedic in a heavy dramatic scene or vice versa, it can make the difference between winning an audition, winning an academy award or not being remembered at all.

So find ways to be surprising.

Number Four: Sheer will and don’t be lazy: hard work beats out talent every time. it’s something that drives you and means you’re not going to give up easily or at the first obstacle. The common thread for anyone successful is hard work. I’ve seen many talented people that never amounted to anything. It’s also about following through and not settling. There are many times when I’m writing and I think...this could pass, it’s good enough but it could be better. Don’t settle for good enough, always be better especially if you know it can be. What’s the hardest mile they say in the marathon? The last mile. It’s digging deep when you want to quit and everything and everyone is

screaming at you that you've done enough. Maybe it's that last bit of supernatural desire and strength when you're summiting Everest that makes it the X factor. Why? Because not everyone can or is willing to do it. In a League of Their Own, Tom Hanks tells Geena Davis's character that Major League Baseball is supposed to be hard, if it's was easy, everyone would do it. Olympic athletes are the best example at this. They go to the extreme to be the best. There are no short cuts for them.

Don't settle, don't be lazy which bring also brings us back to integrity.

The term X-Factor was coined by famous psychologist Leo Buscaglia. X-factor is a term used to describe that special quality that makes each one of us unique. Our essence, our soul. This famous psychologist said that by focusing on our X-factor and not our faults we enhance our self-esteem

So how to find your personal X Factor?

Start with finding your passion: what are the things you're good at? What sets you apart?

Don't be afraid to experience things and don't be afraid of failure, the most successful people failed more times than they ever succeeded. Some of the best art and performances have come from people who have gone through hardship or had to create under restrictions or limited resources.

The best wine comes from a grape that had to grow under the most extreme environment. The same goes for art, I think limitations and suffering force us to be creative in order to sometimes survive. We grow when we're hungry enough otherwise there's no need. We all agree the original Star Wars trilogy is still the best right?

Don't get this confused with suffering for your art. I can't tell you how many bad plays I've been to where people are rolling around in agony or sitting in the middle of stage self loathing and naked because they think they have to suffer in order to be taken seriously. Draw from your own experiences but there's no need to be that guy.

Take the great opportunities when they come to you even if it's not on your planned path or something you think you won't need or use. You never know what may arise from that. No matter how many accomplishments and successes you have, don't settle with the feeling that you've made it. Continue to learn and grow.

Make your best work ethics your everyday habits. Implement those habits into everything you do. When I ask most students this question, they tell me they only put effort into the things they think are important. That means they're missing out on massive potential growth and opportunities they may not even know about. Remember the big picture once in a while, you

never know who is watching and what may impress people or have them pass you by because they see you at that exact moment.

In Taekwondo we will hold our punches and kicks when we train with each other sometimes so we're not hurting our partners but most of the time, we train on pads and in sparring gear so we can kick and strike the way we will in competition. If we don't, muscle memory kicks in and we either hold our kicks or have no power. Under stress, we're only as good as our weakest or maybe most average moments. I also find that our mind does not really differentiate our habits, that if we don't put any effort in until we think it's worthwhile, our body reverts back. We may think we're doing big and great things but we're actually coming up short.

Lastly, get rid of the excuses: It's easy to get distracted and let voices of doubt and insecurities get in the way of our efforts. Regardless of race, gender or other obstacles, if you have a passion for anything, you can make it happen and there are numerous examples of people that have. I tell myself it's my job to remove the excuses not only from myself but also others. This way, you're not putting any limits on yourself and self sabotaging before you even get started. And remember embrace some of the hardships because it may be that corner or Rosetta stone that opens up a whole new world of creativity. The best way to prove the world wrong you is to let your actions and accomplishments do the shouting.

You all are unique, amazing and are making a huge impact in ways you may not even know. Thank you for being great examples of the X factor.