

Wealden Business group

Book Review 13 February 2019

“The Art of Asking” by Amanda Palmer

Report by Bill Ferguson

I first came across Amanda Palmer when she was a guest on the Tim Ferris Show, a podcast that I listen to regularly. She spoke about her TED talk, which I then watched, and about her book, that we are reviewing today.

The 2013 TED talk has been viewed online by nearly 10 million people. In it she spoke about asking for help. The story of the 8 ft bride with a vulnerable heart touched the audience. Her TED talk overran, she was expecting a reprimand but instead received a grateful hug from a tearful producer who was overcome with emotion.

This is one of the most emotionally revealing books I have read. She shares her weaknesses: emotional pain, rejection, self-doubt, her fear of “the Fraud Police”- the voice in her head that screams “you’re a phony! A fake! You’re not talented.” She bares her soul and at times her body. You feel her pain when someone shouts “Get a Job”.

I hadn’t realised that she was married to Neil Gaiman; one of my favourite fiction writers for many years. At times Amanda reads like a character from a Neil Gaiman story and I struggled to relate to her world with its out-of-control dreamlike quality and her innocent trust in people. As a non-artist many of her stories and experiences were foreign to me, but I felt connected to the author. Her writing is so direct and honest that I smiled a lot and sometimes felt my eyes sting as I “got” her message.

I liked her conversation with her mother, before presenting to “Microsoft Women”. Amanda was stunned to realise that beautiful computer coding is art. Even when it is unseen.

Some of her “groks” with Anthony are poignant. Especially their discussion about his funeral plan. “Break the stick”. “Everything breaks”.

I like the story about the dog sitting on a nail and howling. He wouldn’t move because it wasn’t painful enough yet.

At times I felt quite uncomfortable with the book. I had often suspected “living statues” of being in league with pickpockets and other street criminals. Maybe I was wrong!

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From a business point of view. We learned about two unorthodox ways to generate income.

1. "Don't make people pay - let them pay". Give the music for free online and invite fans to pay if they want to. This sent shockwaves through the music industry and is still used by some musicians. Reading between the lines, I suspect this was more an act of defiance than a profitable business venture. Amanda Palmer currently uses Patreon, an online subscription service that gives patrons access to merchandise, inside information and concert tickets. It is multi-level, so the more you pay the more goodies you get.
2. The second method was crowd funding via Kickstarter. She asked for \$100,000 and received \$1.2 million. This made headlines and was the first campaign to raise over a million dollars.

We learn quite a bit more about Kickstarter near the end of the book with examples of bids that failed and others that did well. The key to success is a loyal fan base.

Amanda developed her loyal fan base over several years. She and her band “crash” at the homes of her fans. She tweets “ninja” events into being at a moment's notice. Her social media success is not due to crafty tricks and aggressive promotion. It's about communicating with her tribe through live shows and physical contact at the signing line. Whether it's on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, blogging or singing, there are no secrets, she shares everything openly and bluntly. She is at the centre of it all. She's built her tribe, personally, one by one.

And she asks the question “How do we create a world in which people don't think of art just as a product, but as a relationship?”

Some points for reflection:

Think about your social media – who do you want to hear from and who do you ignore – and why?

- Are you trying to sell to everyone at the expense of your loyal fan base.
- Are you trying to sell to everyone when you should be specialising.
- What do your fans want from you? Are you able/willing to give it?
- Are you playing by someone else's rules? Do you dare to follow your beliefs?
- Are you sitting on a nail? Don't be the dog!
- How do we ask each other for help?

- When can we ask? How often?
- Who's allowed to ask?
- What do you do when someone offers you a doughnut? Take the doughnut.

Further Reading:

Neil Gaiman: The Graveyard Book <https://youtu.be/8Jp6n1xLnvo> (read by the author)

Robert Heinlein: Stranger in a strange land (1961 book) – first use of the word “grok”