

Don't Fake Your Way Out of Naïveté

"Faking it till you make it" is at its best a confident, earnest approach to a problem, with the hope that your "old college try" will bring you closer to mastery. If (like me) you are a relatively inexperienced young person in the professional world, that's a necessity.

But "faking it till you make it" goes wrong when you try to fake your way out of your naïveté. And, yes, you are naive. (You and me both, kid). Unlike "faking it till you make it," faking your way out of naïveté is just pretense. It's pretense aimed at hiding the naïveté you find embarrassing. You may not mean to do it – you may simply be in denial of your own lack of experience in the world.

Your inability to embrace either your true wisdom or your true naïveté in your work will lead you to try to pull off some stupid things. Because you will be primarily concerned with your image perception as someone wise + experienced, you'll do complicated things to maintain that image.

Faking your way out of naïveté comes in a few different guises. You may be the cocky salesperson who pretends to know more than she really does about a solution she's selling. You may be the cocky marketing person who pretends to know more than he really does about marketing strategy. You talk a big game. You try to follow best practices. You look desperately around for "hacks" and ways to "influence" people into treating you like an expert.

Reality will strike hard. You might be able to pull off about 80% of what an experienced person would do in a given situation, but the last 20% will show that you're making it all up.

When the pretense (inevitably) unravels, you're left looking much worse than if you had been honest – either about your wisdom or your naïveté. These are really the only two honest ways to engage challenges:

Be naive. There are a lot of benefits of not being worldly-wise. You'll be bolder. You'll color outside the lines. You'll ask questions which the experienced wouldn't bother to raise. You'll see things they don't. Don't be ashamed of your naïveté.

Or be wise. You'll make fewer mistakes. You'll get more result for less effort. You'll lay the long-term ground work for success. Don't flout your wisdom or use it as a tool against the naive, or else they'll feel the pressure to play it fake.

Whatever you do, just don't try to pretend to be other than what you are (at any given time). That's when you really play the fool.