

Improv Is No Joke - Episode 49 - Thaddeus Rex

Peter: Welcome Thaddeus, I greatly appreciate you taking time out to be a guest on the podcast, sir.

Thaddeus: Thanks, Peter, great to be here.

Peter: Great to see you again. It's been awhile since the last time we crossed paths, and I do believe that was maybe a year ago at an NSA Ohio meeting.

Thaddeus: Oh you mean after the speakeasy thing.

Peter: oh yeah after that.

Thaddeus: So yeah absolutely National Speakers Association or Ohio. That's right. That was a good time. Great group over there.

Peter: Yeah, we had a good time and you drug along your friend Karl Ahlrich. I think he was episode number 5 of my podcast. So it was great to see both of you guys.

Thaddeus: That must have been some episode.

Peter: Oh it was. You know he's got a lot of great information stored up in that head of his.

Thaddeus: I know. Have you ever done the StrengthsFinder?

Peter: I have the book upstairs but I haven't done it yet. I can't pick it up. I'm not strong enough.

Thaddeus: He and I both are cursed with what they call inputter. So he and I both were the type of people who just love to read information, just for the sake of having information in our heads.

Peter: Oh my gosh you're one of those. Because he can gobble up more content and replay it on a dime.

Thaddeus: That's a skill, before 1998, was extremely valuable... after 1998, not so much.

Peter: [laughs] So why don't you give the audience a little bit of your background, because it's a very unique background for a branding expert.

Thaddeus: Yeah, absolutely. Which parts do you want? Do you want all the way back? Well I was born in a small town and the banks of the Wabash River. My mom put me in a reed basket I floated... no.

Peter: We'll speed it up about maybe a week or two from that point

Thaddeus: okay great. I did go to school. I went to Indiana University and I finished with a degree in philosophy.

Peter: Mm!

Thaddeus: As you can imagine, my parents were incredibly proud.

Peter: [laughs] okay

Thaddeus: Yep. And I was working of course as a bartender at the pub, with all the other philosophy majors.

Peter: Oh that was that was the the internship, right?

Thaddeus: Yeah right. So I decided that my chances of a career in philosophy were pretty slim. So there are not a lot of degrees you can get where going into the entertainment business actually looks like a good idea, but in my case it was a spectacular choice.

Peter: It was a career path.

Thaddeus: Yeah. It was a rocky path, but there at least was one. So I immediately became a starving artist, and I did that for several years. But I learned early on— I talked my way into this band, and I was the one making phone calls to get gigs, and I learned that everybody wanted us to come play so long as we would play for free.

Peter: No different than being a speaker out on the circuit. [laughs]

Thaddeus: Yeah, exactly. Yeah very similar gig. And so I was doing that, and I learned but if I called places that were like several thousand miles away and told him I was coming through town with my cold calls, they would hire us. So we actually set up these shows. I set up 37 shows in seven weeks and we went all the way out to the west coast and back, and me and a couple of the guys went and did these shows and it was awesome. So I just started doing that all the time, and after a couple years I wound up getting on to this PBS show, and that changed everything. So I used PBS. I've made no money on the PBS show, but I was able to – when you call people and you say you're with PBS, they return your phone calls.

Peter: Oh yeah.

Thaddeus: It's amazing. So I quit calling a book stores and nightclubs and I started calling theaters, and I built stage shows, and I actually kind of fell into this special niche where I was

using rock and roll to motivate kids to read and write. And these theaters loved the show, it was called Read Like a Rock Star, and I got to stand up and write my own music and play songs and tour the country. And I was in these you know theaters with 200, 800, 1000 people. Sponsors were bussing families in to see the show, and then administrators began asking me if I could train the teachers and I had no idea how to do that. So I did some research in motivation, and along the way we had that big recession hit.

Peter: yeah.

Thaddeus: It was good times. I was about ten years into the career. Everything was cranking. I just hired the Chicago Bears and the Chicago Bulls – I'd hired their mascot coordinators as consultants – and we'd just built a big stage show called Rockasaurus Rex. It was like a dinosaur mascot Rock Show, and we were ready to rock. I had a writing team in LA and I had a publisher in New York. We were putting together a graphic novel series, and he talked about disruption. I hired a full-time booking assistant, a publicist. Everything ready to go. We were launching it. We did the showcase in New York City in January 2009, and the economy collapsed like eight weeks before that.

Peter: Timing's everything.

Thaddeus: No one decided to go, of course, and we knew no one was going to.

Peter: Right.

Thaddeus: So we had to look for something new, and I had six months on the calendar booked. You know how it is speaking: it's very similar. You already have the calendar booked, but you're looking out seven months and you're like okay we're going to be eating steak in six months and starving in eight months, and so I started looking at all that federal stimulus money that was being spent and I actually did some research on money going to the Department of Education, and I went back to the motivation research I'd done and put together a set of qualitative data, and I hired a PhD to sign off on it. So we were able to go to schools and say that big pile of money you just got – we satisfy three of the ten requirements, and the rules were vague and hard to understand but we had PhD's signing off on it and justifying it so we just hand them the paperwork already filled out, but I knew that wasn't gonna last very long either. This is a long-winded way of telling you how I got to branding.

Peter: Oh no no it's interesting. I keep hearing this ding in the background. Is that Tinker Bell doing another set of wings?

Thaddeus: Oh that's – sorry. Every time someone deposits money in my account it just dings.

Peter: Oh wow. Good for you man. Wait wait wait wait – listen for my ding... it's not there.

Thaddeus: Ah, bummer.

Peter: That's great.

Thaddeus: Yeah, I wish that's what it was.

Peter: Cody, cut that out. Make people believe that every time it dings, he's getting cash.

Thaddeus: Absolutely. I should just keep a bell on my desk.

Peter: Ding!

Thaddeus: [laughs]

Peter: It's not a long-winded way because it's a very interesting background in, and going back to being the rock star to kids, I take that you played the guitar.

Thaddeus: I did. I play guitar. I was a singer-songwriter. You know acoustic and electric. I mixed it up. I had a band in Nashville, they were fantastic, and then we started adding dinosaurs to the band so everybody freaked out about that. And it was it was the right concept, just wrong time.

Peter: So if I may be so bold – I see that you have a guitar in your office.

Thaddeus: Oh yeah. Of course. Doesn't every office have one?

Peter: Actually, I have two.

Thaddeus: nice

Peter: I don't know how to play them, but I have two. I actually have two guitars in my office, and when I need a spurt of creativity, even though I don't know how to play, I know the air guitar won't do it so I'll just pick up a guitar and start strumming. I know a couple of chords and it just kind of help spur that creativity, but would you mind like giving us a little sample of what you you would do?

Thaddeus: Oh, absolutely. One of the keys to communicating, and this is something I talk about on the platform these days, is the power of a metaphor.

Peter: okay

Thaddeus: When you describe something as a metaphor, it's like a magic trick. It forces someone to use their imagination. [playing guitar]

*There's a dinosaur livin' inside my head  
I think I got him from a book I read  
He's the best friend that I've ever had  
That dinosaur inside my head*

Peter: Wow that's great!

Thaddeus: So now of course, being all grown-up and official, I wear a suit jacket and I try not to get holes in my jeans as much as I used to. So now I sing... I actually used to use the guitar on the platform all the time. It's a good time. I'll give a little sample. [playing guitar]

*You're sinking into the sand  
Everyone's let go of your hand  
So you take a stand  
Do you understand  
When you're the one with the plan  
Leave them chanting your brand  
Every woman and man  
Leave them chanting your brand  
Fear that helping hand  
Like a rocket man for the moon  
Feel it all expand  
Brass band of the high command  
Like a grand slam spanning across the promise land  
Leave them chanting your brand  
Leave them chanting your brand*

Peter: [applause] Freebird! It's amazing what a guitar will do in almost any situation because, as you were playing that, about the brand... I met a woman in one of my seminars in Maryland, and she was a CFO of a manufacturer of guitars.

Thaddeus: oh wow

Peter: And she would have to deliver the financial information to a group of very creative people.

Thaddeus: Sure

Peter: and she was getting the deer in the headlights look, so she picked up a guitar and learned how to play the guitar. So now when it comes time for delivering the financials, she does it to song.

Thaddeus: That's amazing.

Peter: Yeah, that really is amazing, which made me think... as you were doing that, I mean she captivated them. And any time you can deliver information like that, in a song, you've got their attention.

Thaddeus: You know what, I have to say, she might have actually won the prize in that entire company for being the most creative.

Peter: Exactly.

Thaddeus: Because there are tons of people who write songs but about love and stuff, but I've never heard of anybody delivering financials in song. So that's pretty cool.

Peter: *We're in the red, we're in the black.*

Thaddeus: Yeah I'm gonna write this down and tell my accountant to do this, and I might actually be able to pay attention next time.

Peter: [laughs] Yes, same here. So when you're on the platform, when you're on the stage, you'd bring in your guitar and you're talking about the brand because you're the brand expert.

Thaddeus: Right. Well what happened— it all started in the entertainment business, because I got this guitar and I thought well I can't make a living with philosophy so I'm gonna use my guitar. And it doesn't matter where you go in this country, anywhere you go, within two miles of that coffee shop or that bookstore that or that stage, there are hundreds of people who would come do that work for free. And so I learned early on, and the advice I got is you can't make a living playing guitar. There's like five guys in Nashville who are good enough to actually make a living just playing just playing guitar. You have to be able to be Thaddeus Rex, and that's what I learned early on. Like nobody will pay me to play guitar, but they'll pay me to be Thaddeus Rex. And of course I wasn't famous, so nobody really wanted Thaddeus Rex, so I had to create something unique; something different that they hadn't seen before, like a rock concert to promote reading. It was this niche that was creative and the interest hit my passion, because I'd always loved reading and actually was already using books to inspire my songs, and a teacher heard me sing a song inspired by Alice in Wonderland... and it was a crazy song, like not even appropriate for kids. Alice in Wonderland... that's a drug story! Right?

Peter: [laughs] yes it is

Thaddeus: But the teacher heard it and she was like, ooh, would you come to my school and promote reading? And of course all I could think was, wow, the bookstore's paying 50 bucks and I've heard schools that paid 300.

Peter: [laughs]

Thaddeus: And so I was like, yeah, of course I will, and that was the start. And then as it evolved, I really geeked out on the research. I'm kind of a social scientist, like a nut. Like I'm the kind of guy who reads a self-help book, and then reads the bibliography of the self-help book and goes and reads like the original research because I want to see like what's really going on behind the scenes. So as I figured out what made the motivation work, I started tweaking everything I was doing on stage to maximize the motivation. And then I get comments from administrators and parents saying they came back home begging for pencil and paper, what are you doing?

Peter: [laughs]

Thaddeus: and I was like "motivating them, I guess."

Peter: I'm just being me!

Thaddeus: Right, exactly, but it's just like getting employees excited. If you just tell them hey you have to get that report done they might comply, but you're not going to inspire them and they're not going to be excited about it. If you tell that person who's working with the financials and trying to deliver it to musicians and if you just came in and say you got to make sure they understand this, they have to get this, or we're just gonna have to downsize your division. You're just gonna stress the heck out of her. But if you tell her, hey, just go have fun with it. It doesn't matter. They're musicians. They're gonna forget it anyway.

Peter: [laughs]

Thaddeus: You just got to deliver it and make it as fun as you can, and then lighten the load. It makes it a little easier.

Peter: Yeah, make it as compelling as possible. Actually I've got a course called Financial Storytelling, and I've written an article and I'm doing a white paper for the AICPA on how to present data in a manner that's compelling. Because data is data. There's not much there. But I just got a quote, and I'm reading to this book called *Talk Like TED*, and second chapter. I love this quote. "Stories are just data with a soul," by Brene Brown, who did a TEDx Houston in 2010, and I watched it this afternoon and she was fabulous. But it is stories, it is songs that captures that imagination, that captures that emotion, and to be able to create a brand, a niche, something that's very unique; in order to be seen in today's digital day and age... I mean that's critical.

Thaddeus: Oh yeah. Well I think exactly what you're saying. Like if you can take data and turn it into a story... because data is just data, but it's the story that changes changes opinions, changes how people feel about something. It's the story they remember.

Peter: Right. Because stories evoke emotion.

Thaddeus: Right. I think the the refugee example... I mean there's horrible things happening in Syria and other places around the world, and it's easy... because the numbers are just – I can't get my head around thousands of people just drowned in the ocean. That doesn't connect. But then you show me that one picture the toddler who washed up on the beach in Turkey, and everybody's heart goes boom boom boom oh my gosh there's a real problem here. Because it's a person. We can we identify with people, but not with masses.

Peter: You remember the tsunami many years ago that hit Indonesia? I'd heard the word tsunami, and I couldn't put my head around it. And all these people had died, and I still couldn't... I just couldn't connect the dots, until I saw the video. I went holy crap. But yeah, story, pictures, music really helps in, one, retention and, two, getting that point across.

Thaddeus: Oh yeah. It's powerful stuff.

Peter: So what are you doing these days?

Thaddeus: So I got lucky... as that recession hit, luckily that federal stimulus money was there. We were making a living, but we knew it wasn't gonna last very long. I had joined a Rotary Club. It was my wife's hometown Rotary Club, in this little town called Portland, Indiana, that no one's ever heard of it, except you should because the people there are amazing. I had some amazing mentors take me under their wing and they began to ask you know... I thought, hey, when this recession ends I'm gonna go back to New York and build this big stage show, and they started just asking some poignant questions. Have you considered business consulting? And I was like I don't know how to be a consultant. And they go how do you know you know how to be a consultant?

Peter: I think that's everybody's initial response. When they say you should do some consulting, you're like whaaaat?

Thaddeus: Right. Well my very first client actually was an accounting firm, and it was a small firm, like 15-20 people, but the the owner saw me speak and he came up and asked if I would come speak at their summer retreat, and do sessions to help improve their brand. And I thought oh yeah that sounds good. Inside, I walk away going I don't know how to do that.

Peter: It's called entrepreneurialism.

Thaddeus: Right, and so I was actually about to call them up and turn it down, and a friend of mine who I was bouncing the idea off of said dude, let me take out to lunch. We go out, and this guy ran a factory, and he said, look, what what they see you doing is they see you out there making a living with nothing but stories. And they have products people need, but they just want a better story so people can understand it better. I was like oh, now that made sense to me, and when I actually got into the project it turned out there was a really specific problem that made a

lot of sense. It was the owner, the founder, of this accounting firm. It was his name on the door, his name his name was the brand, and it was his his base on the billboards, and it was his personality that brought everybody in, because people in the community trusted him. And he said, look, I want to retire in six or seven years and I need to somehow transition the brand so it's not just me, but it's a team, and I need to have that brand be something I can sell that somebody else can take over and I can leave. So it can't be about me anymore, and so we had to transition that. First of all way defined what are the core values of this firm, how do we subordinate the values, why are you here, what do you really stand for. And it was a small-town firm, but they reached across multiple counties so they had a pretty good reach, and identified why they chose that that particular town. And just all the advertising campaigns we shifted just to start bragging on that town and tell us why you love it. Instead of telling us why we should trust you, why don't you tell us why you trust this town so much. And that became the whole campaign. People just loved it. He wrote back about how much they loved doing the new radio ads, and then we brainstormed. We sat down with everybody from the CPAs down to the secretary and brainstormed. Okay, this new brand is all about integrity and concern, but the real issue is how much we love this community, and that we chose the community, and how does that affect the way you answer the phone? How does that affect when someone has a problem on their tax return and they call up in its April 14th and you want to go?

Peter: [laughs]

Thaddeus: And one of the different issues you might deal with... we just ran through all these scenarios, but we had the employees then build the brand. So they're building the experience and it was their ideas, as they're building out the experience, on top of these core values.

Peter: That's awesome. Because I'm hearing, in my world of improv, respect and trust, but also the ability to listen to everybody else within the organization and build it as a community, build it as an ensemble, this new brand. And it's a group of CPAs. That's a great story.

Thaddeus: Well if you think about a brand, the whole point of a really good brand is that it's a collection of stories that you want all pointing in the same direction. And I mean, really, when we interact with a business, everything they do becomes part of the story. So even a gas station, like the sodas they stock, a clerk smiling, are the bathrooms clean. Part of what they do is the stuff, like keeping the bathrooms clean, making sure the clerk is smiling, making sure there's gas in the tanks... then there's the stories: billboards, campaigns, advertising. And those two things really need to match perfectly. So if the Billboard says sparkling clean bathrooms, they have to keep the bathrooms clean.

Peter: Right, right. And in the way they treat their customers, as well as the way they treat their employees. Being Greek, I grew up in restaurants. I'm very critical and hard on restaurants that don't provide that customer service. Nine times out of ten we'll eat at my restaurant here at the house versus going out because it's a lot of disappointment, and traveling as much as I do most

of the time I get room service. But I went to this one restaurant, and I've written a couple articles about it, called Ciao Bella in Bloomington, Minnesota. And man they had me at hello.

Thaddeus: Wow

Peter: The service was way beyond belief. Because usually when I go into a restaurant, if I'm sitting behind the bar taps, I'm invisible.

Thaddeus: yeah

Peter: And somebody came up and it it was it was amazing. I got a chance to talk to management, and they said it starts at the top. It's just how we treat our people, and people is a broad concept. It's people that work for us and people that join us for dinner every evening.

Thaddeus: Yeah. I mean it really is. If you create this collection of stories that helps people see what you care about as the leader, as the owner, as the founder, as the CEO, and it does start at the top... and if there just a bunch of rules I have to comply with... I may comply with them or I may defy you, and that's what's gonna happen. And if you give me a story, something to inspire me, then I can choose to be part of it. And that's really, I think, what a good brand does: It just helps your employees and your customers understand what you're doing and why they want to be part of it.

Peter: So how does one develop that story? Because that guy had the CPA firm for a long period of time, and I think about other CPA firms or other businesses that are going through some motion, and they may have gotten a little bit detached from those stories that really define their brand. How does one define those stories?

Thaddeus: There's a couple things. I mean the first, especially in professional services, and I have a new training coming out in a few weeks that's actually focused on helping professional service firms – Realtors, financial advisors, accountants, even attorneys on occasion.

Peter: On occasion [laughs]

Thaddeus: Right, and I try to limit those occasions— no, I'm just kidding. And it's really tricky because, if you think about a professional services firm, it's really difficult to distinguish your “stuff.” So you have stuff and you have story, and like financial advisors are in the worst situation. I mean they they only have one stock market, they all have the same stock market, it's completely outside their control, there's only so many mutual funds... I mean they literally are all selling the same stuff. So how do they tell a unique story? And there's the third component of every brand, and it's one we found a lot of companies easily overlook, and especially I think for professional service firms this is one of the best ways to differentiate, is to choose that audience. Because, as you begin to attract an audience, that audience begins to co-create your brand. So imagine this podcast right now, in everything you do to make it entertaining and fun

and all the expertise you share and the guests you bring on, and imagine executives and CEOs across America talking about your podcast and what you bring to the table. Just the fact they're talking about it, what that would do for your brand. Now imagine the same you, the same entertainment, the same information, and people in trailer-park across America are talking about you and your podcast.

Peter: They are.

Thaddeus: It would change your brand.

Peter: Right.

Thaddeus: And that's fine. Duck Dynasty makes a fantastic career targeting that market. You just have to know who your audience is.

Peter: I like how you start off: you choose your audience, versus your audience choosing you. That's key.

Thaddeus: I think if you choose the audience... the moment you choose to do business with me, I feel special.

Peter: Right

Thaddeus: I did a project for a financial advising firm a couple years ago and... for financial advisors, I mean it's really tough. They're everywhere, and to be honest some companies turn out too many of them knowing that a lot won't make it just see who can make it. So there's more out there than we need, and they all have the same stuff. But I worked with this small financial advising team and helped them realize they really wanted to work with women who'd been recently widowed or divorced. Now they kind of came to us with this idea. They were excited about it and I was like that's kind of a really good idea, except it would make more sense if you were women.

Peter: [laughs]

Thaddeus: He approached me with this idea, and I was like oh I know who you need to talk to. I had referrals in my head. I've met hundreds of Financial Advisors, and never once does it pop oh they need to talk to Jimmy, or and they need to talk to Jean, but as soon as I started talking to him three people popped into my head that he needed to talk to, or someone from his team... and then my next thought was why does this team only want to work with women, especially women who've just been divorced or widowed?

Peter: [laughs]

Thaddeus: I said you just sent my imagination a whole lot of places you do not want my imagination going.

Peter: Right.

Thaddeus: You need a story.

Peter: Yeah

Thaddeus: And as the story should be true. It's better if it's a true story.

Peter: [laughs] Yeah

Thaddeus: And, in my experience, everybody has a true story. We all wind up where we are because of decisions we make, and if we go back and analyze those decisions... that's how we find your core values. And so we could take clients through a process to go through these turning points in life and to assess why those decisions happened, and as we kept going back and back in his career he did have a ton experience with this market and really had a passion for it, but it wasn't clear why... until we got all the way back to when he was 8 years old and his dad walked out on his mom and his little brother.

Peter: Ooooh.

Thaddeus: And then he's like oh yeah, and I was like do you tell people this story? He's like I don't tell anybody... but what happened is his dad walked out, his mom had to get a second job, he got a paper route to help her pay the bills. He still remembers packing his brother's lunch every morning because his mom was already gone for the day. And he started studying finance me was 12 years old because he was concerned about his own college, and also concerned about his mom. And I was like... you have to share this story, man. This this is why you care, and then suddenly I care because I understand your story. And so now, because it's the truth, every time he shares that story, every time he helps a client it still feels like he's helping his mom. And that's the honest truth, and the assets he brought in under management 12 months after that increased 40% from what he had before.

Peter: Wow!

Thaddeus: Yeah. To increase sales forty percent just like on a dime like that.

Peter: You have to go back into into your career and into your life to find that, as one of my guests Judy Carter says, that aha moment.

Thaddeus: Absolutely.

Peter: That have put you on on that path, and it took time for the person to peel that onion back to get to that core, but once you find it...

Thaddeus: Yeah, and this is all the brand strategy before you get to your logo, website, photo shoot... you know, all that stuff's really important. That's like the icing on the cake, and that's what we see.

Peter: yeah

Thaddeus: We all see the icing and that's what we get excited about, and it's true a cake with no icing is not a very good cake, but just a bowl icing with no cake inside... that's pretty lame too.

Peter: [laughs]

Thaddeus: And so you really got to figure out what's on the inside first. And you're right it's like peeling back that onion to see what's really in the center of this person and their business, and what's in the center of this business. And then we give customers something to care about.

Peter: Yeah I love using the term co-creation... People allowing themselves to be vulnerable.

Thaddeus: mm-hmm

Peter: and that quote that I read from that TED talk that I watched today... what caught me on that TED talk was it was about being vulnerable.

Thaddeus: oh yeah

Peter: And you just demonstrated it. It's weird that I watched that today and we're having this conversation right now... I'm a little creeped out, but it's okay [laughs]. But she ended up saying the more vulnerable you are, the more that you show that side, will take you further, and you'll find...

Thaddeus: I think was Oscar Wilde who said the more personal you get, the more universal you become.

Peter: Bingo. Yeah, exactly. But a lot of people fear doing that because, and she made this point, they fear it because they fear shame, and they fear other people's judgment, and you get to a point... I don't know if it comes with age or what. She's like I don't care what that other person thinks, even though my mother still says what will they say. I don't know who the hell they are. I don't even like them. But yeah, you don't care because you're staying true to yourself.

Thaddeus: Absolutely. I think that's powerful. Every film we watch, the first 10 minutes of that film is the main character and all their weaknesses, and every film starts off that way. Imagine Star Wars, one of the most successful franchises, but if Luke Skywalker had had rich parents who sent him to the best academies, made sure he had the top education, and he had relentless training to hone his reflexes and be the best fighter pilot on that end of the galaxy, and then he's the one that the Rebel Alliance you know recruited and put a team behind to keep him safe; he's the one with the with the magic hands and sent him in to destroy the Death Star... it would have been kind of like, well, I'm glad that you destroyed the Death Star, but...

Peter: Eh

Thaddeus: But that's not the story George Lucas told. He is an orphan; a farmer on a desert planet. Metaphorically, how much worse does it get?

Peter: Exactly. But storytelling is an art.

Thaddeus: Oh yeah. Well I think there's there's two sides. There's the understanding the mechanics of it, but then also bringing the heart to it.

Peter: Right you need the heart story there.

Thaddeus: Absolutely. And that's I think what you said earlier about being willing to get personal.

Peter: mm-hmm

Thaddeus: It's hard, but it it really takes your storytelling to a new level, and for me I get into the entertainment business, obviously, right out of college. And I never got famous at it but I was able to make a living and I loved it, and as a result – my youngest sister was 11 years younger than me – and when she when it came time for her to go to college she really just wanted to go to LA and become an actress. And so as much as I value college and it was one of the rare times right I thought it really was important to skip College, if she wanted to have a chance as an actress, because she looked really young, she literally could play 12 or 13 she just had a really young look.

Peter: okay

Thaddeus: and she was 18 and I said you know if she goes out now she'd very likely get work, but you wait four years there's just more competition and she'll look older, and it's just that much harder. And she did, she got work in the first three years. Started getting work in all sorts of TV shows: Grey's Anatomy, Desperate Housewives, Glee. She did McDonald's commercial. Good Luck Charlie. She's been in all sorts of stuff. A couple of movies you've probably never seen.

Peter: cool

Thaddeus: And so years later it kind of came full circle because, when I was an entertainer, I was always the funny guy and I had tons of jokes and it was entertaining and I had great songs. I thought they were great songs, and luckily some of my fans did, but I never really did drama. I might sing a song that would bring a tear to somebody's eye, and I could go into it in the song, but as a as a storyteller I always kind of steered clear of the drama. It just wasn't— I thought I'll just be funny all the time. And as I started doing keynoting and I watched the great keynoters, I notice all of them have that moment in their keynote where you almost get choked up. They bring a tear to your eye.

Peter: right

Thaddeus: and I started watching the great keynoters and I saw them doing that. At first my ego says well you can get by without it, right? But I just kept coming back to it. I thought you know I've learned that that skill of making people laugh and how to design a joke, and I'd always like to get more of them of course. Increasing that laugh count is good.

Peter: right

Thaddeus: But to get that drama, and it actually was my my baby sister. I called her up several years later and I was like how do you do that? Because she'd taken tons acting classes at that point, and as a performer there are things that make sense to you when you spend a lot of time on the platform that are hard to understand otherwise. But she said you know when you're telling a joke, you learn the timing and you force it, and you force the timing. You control everything, and you're in control. You know exactly where the jokes going. You wait for the audience to catch up with you and then you snap them, and typically something's funny because you switch someone's paradigm on a dime. We thought we were going one direction and then he's talking about something else and it's funny, and she said drama is a completely different strategy. You just can't force it. All you can do is tell the story and let yourself go, and it's that moment of letting go... I had been on stage for thousands of hours at that point. That was the scariest thing I ever did.

Peter: So tell me: what do you mean by letting go?

Thaddeus: So when you start to tell the story.. now you want to tell a story that is emotionally important to you.

Peter: Right

Thaddeus: and when you tell that story, you have to let yourself go into the emotion.

Peter: oh, okay

Thaddeus: and if you try to control it too much, you'll ruin it. You can't push it. You have to let it pull you.

Peter: Okay.

Thaddeus: does that make sense?

Peter: That makes sense.

Thaddeus: and so she was explaining this to me, and she had taken a master class with an acting coach that worked with Meryl Streep, and she said what I learned was even Meryl Streep, and the great actresses and actors that we all look up to, every time they do it, it'll be different. A joke you might nail it exactly the same 100 times in a row.

Peter: right

Thaddeus: But drama doesn't work that way. You just go with it, and she said sometimes everybody will cry and it'll be amazing, and other times you'll just kind of get it out and it'll be okay. And if it doesn't come that's okay, because you can't force it. You just have to open up and let the emotion pull you along, and I have to say it was one of the best pieces of advice I got.

Peter: I may have to second that because I've never thought about it, obviously, in that manner. Having done some stand-up, having done the improv and stuff, and I've got a few key notes out there and and I've got a couple heart stories in there to go along with the humor, but I never viewed it from that point... and I've taken a few acting classes, nothing to the level of... but I like that. That's part of the art of storytelling; part of the art of what they're doing on these TED Talks. It's drawing you in and having that reaction to it, just like a brand; just like the guy whose aha moment was when my dad left.

Thaddeus: Yeah. It's huge.

Peter: And that's really compelling. So I'll just throw this out there, and we'll just say whether you're in a not-for-profit, whether you're an accounting firm, whether you're in an organization, if you go out and do these strategic planning retreats, I think that's the perfect place to figure out what that story is

Thaddeus: oh yeah

Peter: and allow yourself to open up to this group of people, because if they do, in this case, as you said, the next year their profits went up by 40 percent.

Thaddeus: Absolutely, but remember, you don't want to go out... you want to tell the story to inner circle first and work your way out.

Peter: right

Thaddeus: so that you are ready. It has to be a story you've dealt with emotionally. If your dog just died last week you probably want to get on the platform and tell that story. If you haven't dealt with it you're just gonna... you don't want to break down sobbing onstage. Channel it.

Peter: yeah

Thaddeus: At the same time, you want to be able to let that that drama pull you along because you can't really pull it or push it, you gotta let it pull you.

Peter: Pull versus pushing it. That's cool.

Thaddeus: Yeah, and I think when you share those personal stories, especially if you build your brand around it, it makes it so compelling because we can get our accounts done anywhere. We can get financial advice anywhere. But the place that shows to where... hey I'm not a single mom, but I'm like wow he's helping those people. I want to be part of that. And so it can even build your business, and this is sometimes... as you narrow your audience, it helps us see what you stand for and what you care about, and you'll draw in people from outside that narrow focus because they care about what you care about. And you look completely different than all the other people. Actually we have this new training coming out, and we've identified... so if you think of the stuff side and the audience side, there's five factors that every customer looks for in your stuff before they make their choice, and these are really the factors that create that competitive edge, and the training we call Checkmate Your Competitors, because once you stand out as different no one can compete with that. Once you claim your space. Like nobody else in town can be the firm that helps single moms because they've claimed it, and anybody else is just a copycat. And it's fine, but everybody wants to see the original, not the copycat.

Peter: So what are those five things?

Thaddeus: Yes, so if you think about stuff – so it can be a gas station, financial advice, accountants – the easiest point is cost to go to, right? Let's be the low cost firm. We'll charge 20 percent less per hour, whatever it is, and that can be compelling. It also hurts your margins, makes it hard to grow... it's not a great place to be long term, unless you have... there's a few situations, like if you're Walmart, if you're Amazon, you can maintain that low cost and become a multi-billion dollar company. But you have to have a sustainable way to build it, and actually doing branding in Indianapolis me and the other firms in the area actually do get to maintain a low cost advantage because we know we can beat the guys in New York and San Francisco for decades. Our cost it is so much– it's cheaper for us to fly from here to New York and work with a New York client than it is for the firm that's already there to stay in business. It's just the way it

is. So we know it's sustainable, so we can keep it as part of our assets, but for most businesses it's not. If you're an accounting firm and you're competing with other firms in the region, it's very difficult to maintain a low cost factor without losing your margins, which you want to keep margins up. So typically we want people to flee cost, and if you think about flee it starts with F features, which means your stuff can do something the competitors can't. In professional services, it's hard to build any features that your competitors can't do.

Peter: I just got the Flee.

Thaddeus: Yeah, absolutely. So you have features. The second one is location. You're in a place your competitors can't be. So Peter, you and I, we start a hot dog Factory. We start selling hot dogs. So the problem is hot dogs are a really competitive market. There's some big established players there, but we put hot dog stands on the beaches up and down the Atlantic coast. We just might be the only ones there. So if you can find a location, or if we could broker a deal to be the only hot dogs in Walmart, that'd be an incredible location advantage.

Peter: yes it would be

Thaddeus: So FLEE: features, location, experience. Now if you can offer an experience your competitors can't offer, fantastic, and this is what Disney does versus Kings Island, Cedar Point. And Disney carries it all the way through their their films. The same Disney experience. The same experience you get at Disney World is the same experience you get at Disneyland is the same experience you get if you see go see a Disney movie, and I can call you up and say hey Peter I'm in town you wanna go see the new Disney movie, and beyond thinking I'm kind of weird

Peter: [laughs]

Thaddeus: You would know right away if you want to go.

Peter: right

Thaddeus: Maybe you have a niece in town and you're like yeah let's go, but if I call you up and I say want to see the new Warner Brothers movie you would have no idea what. It doesn't mean anything because the experience isn't consistent. Now I will say, in professional services, what typically happens is the experience is what everybody works so hard to create. We work so hard to create an experience of trust, integrity, rapid return, response to phone calls, high service, lots of friendliness, having a great environment for people to walk into so when they come in they they feel safe, they feel like they're your advice is trusted. And we worked really hard to build all these fantastic experiences, and the only problem is all our best competitors are doing that too.

Peter: Right

Thaddeus: And so you it's really hard on professional services. We're really proud of the experience that we've worked so hard to build, but it really is just par for the course. It's not typically a great way to distinguish yourself. The last one, and this is the one people often overlook, is esteem. When your product can build the esteem of your customers – their self-esteem – and this is what BMW sells. They don't sell cars; they sell esteem. This is why knowing your audience is so key. Prius sells the same thing to a completely different audience, and they sell that esteem, but people get to feel good about themselves when they drive a Prius. People get to feel good about themselves when they drive a BMW. So we're oftentimes looking for opportunities. Once we assess where are your greatest strengths, how can we take those strengths, those factors that you already have that are really strong, and how can we move those into the esteem column? Like this financial advisor. It improves my esteem to work with him because I know he has this cause he's supporting, and I feel good about myself when I support his business, and that's that's huge.

Peter: That is. I know a lot of those who are a lot younger than I am in the business world... they will gravitate to products and service that meet their social responsibilities versus going someplace else just because it might be of lower cost. That experience... you talk about accountants, professional service firms... I think more of that experience is in the interactions they have with the partners, the managers, and staff, and I'll take you to a point is can they can have a conversation?

Thaddeus: yep

Peter: Can they explain very complex information and put it in a manner that I can understand?

Thaddeus: absolutely

Peter: Because when you say depreciation to a non accountant they go that's the value I lose in my car when I Drive it off new car lot. No no. It's a systemic allocation of an asset over time.

Thaddeus: Well you just lost me. [laughs] I'm with you, yeah.

Peter: So I think these professional service firms: the ability to provide skills necessary to all staff, in order to have these compelling conversations with their clients, that's the experience. And I know there's some research out there to say one of the reasons why clients leave firms is because it's lacking that experience, and to some degree that empathy that's out there.

Thaddeus: and I think creating that consistent experience, which I've heard you talk about many times, where it's not just the CPA or it's not just the leadership, and it's not just the marketing. Where it's consistent. From the moment I walk in the door, even if I run into somebody who's cleaning up the bathroom in your office, that same experience is consistent. And I don't expect everybody to understand depreciation, but to have the same friendliness, the same sort of

knowledge, knowing where I need to go, making sure I'm taken care of, and if that experience is consistent I feel really good about coming back.

Peter: Yeah I don't know if you've read this book called The Experience Economy

Thaddeus: mmm

Peter: Oh you got to pick it up. The authors are Joe Pine and James Gilmore, and this book was first published in 1999. They've done an upgrade on it. You would just go nuts over this book because it breaks this book up into two pieces. It talks about experience, and you know when you mentioned Disney.... you know it's like birthday parties. Your mom would bake a cake from scratch, and then it kind of moved up to the next I can go get Duncan Hines, and then went up to the next like I could go to Baskin Robbins or Kroger's or wherever and pick up a cake, and then I went to the final experience I'm gonna go to Chuck E Cheese and listen to these rats playing and have that experience. So he talks a lot about how to build that experience, and he also talks about, in the second half the book, how the business world is a stage and, we're actors on this stage.

Thaddeus: I like that.

Peter: I think you would really enjoy that book. I've gone through it twice, and actually a friend of mine, Bob Dean, who I interviewed earlier on one of my podcasts, was certified by this group in the experience economy.

Thaddeus: oh that's cool

Peter: yeah it is really cool. It's a really cool book. It's a great read, and being a consumer of information, you might have it done before the morning.

Thaddeus: Right, yeah. I like the sound of it. I'm gonna check it out. I think having that experience is key, and then find opportunities to move your assets into that esteem column, because that's what we see over and over again. That's when companies are able to charge more than anybody else, and still not only retain the loyalty, but grow.

Peter: Exactly.

Thaddeus: I think I have some great examples my own past; in my own business. In the entertainment business, you deal with copyright and trademarks all the time.

Peter: right

Thaddeus: and there was a firm in Houston that was using... they had trademarked something that I had used before them, and they sent me a cease and desist that I could no longer do one

of my programs. And I checked all the dates and did the records, and according to everything I could find publicly available I had used it first, so I knew I should be able to use it. So I called the first attorney up and I explained the situation, and they just basically told me well I don't really want to do the case. You know it doesn't sound like a good case. I was a little ticked off, you know.

Peter: yeah

Thaddeus: and so I met this guy at a conference, and he was an East Coast attorney and I knew he'd be more expensive, but I went ahead and called him. I got referred to their trademark specialist, and so I'm explaining to her how we're gonna sue this company and she's telling me the process and what's gonna happen, what it's gonna take, and I'm all in because I'm emotional. I'm ticked off about this, and then she goes whoa wait a minute. Brian wants to talk to you, and he hops on the phone. He goes wait a minute, Thaddeus, what are you trying to do here? And I explained the situation to him, and he goes okay wait a minute. Now I just overheard what was going on, I hopped online, I looked real quick... it looks like they're making a lot of money with this mark. They have several people doing these programs. Now here's the deal: it's going to cost you thirty thousand dollars just to file, because we have to go to federal court for trademark, and at the time this other company had more money than I did, and they said they're gonna be able to guess that most likely, and once they recognize that they can easily run the cost up to eighty, one hundred thousand dollars before you get an answer from a judge. And if you do get that answer from a judge, if you have eighty thousand dollars to spend on this, judges hate to put businesses out of work, and because they're out using this mark a lot and it's supporting several employees... we don't really know what a judge will do, it's a random thing, it's kind of like playing Russian roulette, but the odds my guess is they'll give you co-usage to the rights. So you'll get to use it and they'll get to use it, and now you're gonna have to compete with somebody and you're eighty thousand dollars in the hole competing against someone who has a lot more money than you, and they're really ticked off. So I just want to let you know that I'm telling you this, suggesting maybe you don't write me this thirty thousand dollar check, what do you think? Now that experience... I can't tell you how many times I've called that guy back up, because that was helpful. He didn't tell me just what the law told me was possible, but he told me what was best for my business.

Peter: That's a great story, because when you told that story, all the money going into your account stopped dinging. I don't know if you noticed that. Yeah that's a great story, but he took the time, and he had empathy for you, and now it's turned into a great referral base.

Thaddeus: Absolutely. I think it was that that ability to look past his expertise into my situation.

Peter: yeah

Thaddeus: And that was so much... because that's what we want. When we come to a professional services firm, we want you to help our situation and understand our problems – and

yes, if it's a lawyer I want them to know the law, if it's an accounting firm I want to make sure they know how to do the books, but if you can help me with my situation and help understand where I am, that's so much more valuable than then just giving me the expertise and trying to give me the knowledge. Don't just tell me what depreciation is, but tell me how it can help me or how it can hurt me or what I should look out for. That's awesome.

Peter: The ability to put themselves in your shoes, and that goes back to my world of improv and Yes, And. I'm allowing myself to yes agree and listen, but I'm putting myself in your shoes and I guess if it was my business would I want to do it? And so you were up to \$80-90,000... there's no overall win-win for you in the situation. Keep your money and use it for something better.

Thaddeus: right

Peter: That's an outstanding story.

Thaddeus: I was blown away and appreciative.

Peter: Oh yeah very much so. You talked about the course that's coming out. Can you give us a little bit more information about that?

Thaddeus: Yeah sure. Checkmate your Competitors, and it's about using these five factors. So obviously we have to understand which of these five factors – features, location, experiences, esteem, or low cost – which of them is your sweet spot, and you'll notice really successful businesses will nail four out of the five, typically. Usually, except for low cost, they'll get the other four. We don't need all four, but we need at least one if we're going to have customers, and if you do have customers then one of these is there already. And so it's great interviewing customers, interviewing employees, understanding what it is that really stands out, what is your competitive edge, and then how can we position that. If we can shift that... say you have features that no one else does or you offer a deeper better experience than other firms, and you can shift that into the esteem column, and once you do that then I want to work with you. I want to work with your firm, when you help me feel good about myself.

Peter: I could cook up another half hour of your time, and what I'm thinking about doing is getting you back on soon to continue the conversation because there's a couple of scenarios I run through my head that I'd just like to spitball with you. It goes back to the experience economy. How do you move from a commodity to that experience, or you've got a product or service that's moved its way back down into being a commodity because of cost and price. How do you get past that and go back and turn it back into an experience, and I know that'll be a longer conversation.

Thaddeus: But I think you're exactly right. Creating that consistent experience is critical, because if you give me a great – for instance, the attorney – if he give me this great advice, but

next time I called his firm gave me terrible advice, or if they then totally misunderstood my situation and just left me... one of the things he did was help me help me get through my own emotions on this situation that was hard for me, and he empathized and shifted me rapidly. But if I call back and he failed to do that the next couple times, then it destroys it. So you have to build consistency in that experience, and then one of the things we advocate for is if you have a cause, some sort of core values, like the firm that said we want want to help women who've been recently widowed or divorced, and there was a reason for it. Or a firm that says look... an IT consulting firm we worked with recently the founders moved here to Indianapolis, from Chicago, which 20 years ago was unusual. The migration went the other way, and the question was why. And they really loved Hoosier values, and so instead of going out saying our IT consultants are down to earth, or you know easy to get along with Midwestern guys, and you can trust us, which all just sounds like that's about us, instead the whole campaign is this is why we chose Indianapolis; this is why we chose hoosiers, or wherever you are. If there's some sort of cause that you believe in, and TOMS shoes of course is the cliché example we use in the business world all the time, but when people buy a pair of TOMS shoes they know what it stands for and they know what they're supporting. And this law firm, even them. His focus was helping performing artists. He does a lot of visa work. His whole team is focused on helping stage shows, artists, performers, musicians, and actors, and that's something I want to support. So when I call up his business, hey, I know what I'm supporting. I know who I'm helping. I have another law firm that I've worked with many times who works almost exclusively with musicians, and they could make a lot more money working another market, and I use them... I don't do a lot of music business deals anymore, but I still use them and their expertise because I know what they support and I care about that, and so I get to feel good about myself when I work with them, and I think there's something really powerful in that. It takes that exploration: what is it you stand for? What do you care about most? And if your firm could change something in the world, if your firm had unlimited resources, what would you do?

Peter: It goes to Simon Sinek's it starts with Why.

Thaddeus: yeah

Peter: Because what are you passionate about? I can tell you what and how to do it, but if you can't tell somebody why you do something, and that where the great companies and the great leaders come from. I'm there with you. And you know the crazy thing is it's so easy, but it's so hard to implement... consistently.

Thaddeus: It's consistency, and we get myopic because it's so easy to get concerned about we have expenses, we have health care's going up, you know all these different things, and how do we maintain that culture, and how do we continue to prioritize what's really important to us? And if we do, the customers notice, and trust me customers are shopping all the time. Even the most loyal are always looking for something else, and when you differentiate on cost they can always find someone whose lower cost. When you differentiate on features, they can always find someone who has different expertise or can do something different or knows the new training.

But when you differentiate on esteem, and you have a cause that you believe in and your customers know it, that's really hard for someone to copy.

Peter: Yeah, but because it's personal.

Thaddeus: It's personal, exactly, and I'm personally invested in you. And I love working with vendors when I get personally invested with my vendors. It makes it more fun to do business with them.

Peter: Oh yeah. It's that networking, but it's creating that friendship, and when you create that friendship, trust, and respect. Would you do business with somebody you don't trust? Someone you don't respect? No. But through that process, you are developing that relationship.

Thaddeus: Oh yeah. I think that's what it's all about: how do you become more compelling?

Peter: Right.

Thaddeus: As an accounting firm, you have sales people out there who are networking, trying to bring more business in, and what are you giving them so they can go out and be compelling?

Peter: A story.

Thaddeus: There you go. Bingo.

Peter: Tell them how they can find you on the interwebs.

Thaddeus: Sure. We love <https://www.facebook.com/scienceofcharisma>. And we're also at [ThaddeusRex.com](http://ThaddeusRex.com). As a matter of fact, I think we have an alias up, so if you go to the scienceofcharisma.com it'll bring it right to our site.

Peter: Okay cool. Thaddeus, I can't thank you enough. I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation, and like I said we could probably go on for another hour so we will next time.

Thaddeus: I look forward to it.

Peter: We will pick it up, and thank you very much. I look forward to our next conversation.

Thaddeus: Me too. Thank you all.

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