



Five universal truths of quality

Quality. That word has so many meanings. To say something “has quality” or is “of good quality” or is “quality made” seems to be, like so many things a function of the trust you place in the person making the claim combined with individual standards we each apply to determine “what is good” and “what is bad.” Like determining “what is beauty?” we know these standards vary person-to-person, but I’m curious: are there universal truths to achieving high quality that transcend subjective opinion and relate to everyone universally regardless of background, bias or prior experience?

I believe the illusive answer lives in the meticulous process of a master craftsman; someone whose life’s work centers around achieving the highest quality, with the pursuit of perfection, of one’s craft. **Robert Pirsig** explored the idea of the craftsman in his book **[Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance](#)** and wrote “The material and the craftsman’s thoughts change together in a progression of smooth, even changes until his mind is at rest at the exact instant the material is right.”

That means the craftsman and his product become one and neither ceases changing and improving until the optimal inner potential of the product is revealed.

Years ago I started playing harmonica (referred to in this article by its common vernacular of “harp” or “blues harp”). What began as a curiosity became a hobby and has now metastasized into a full-blown obsession. Ever since I was a kid, I always loved music and the idea of taking such a rich and versatile instrument with me on my business travels was alluring. Plus, as a drummer, it became impractical to check my drums in my luggage on the 3-4 planes I flew each week. Like all type-A personalities, I learned all I could about harmonicas – the history, the manufacturers, the materials, the players, the techniques, the theory, etc. – and dove head-first into a world of delight. I’d play for 5-10 minutes in my hotel room before bed, I’d jam in the car on the way to work or just pull up a few Blues standards on YouTube and play along.



As I progressed in my ability I started buying better and better harps. The better harps cost more but I found that, in general, with every upgrade in harp, my enjoyment increased. The instrument was more air tight, clearer in tone, responded better and was easier on lips (aka embouchure). Every harmonica, like children, was different in its characteristics. Some had plastic combs and some had composite material; some had reeds made of steel and some

had brass; some makers swore that wood cover plates were the only way to achieve a warm, dark tone while others professed the benefits of chromed-steel. Yet no matter how different the harp I purchased, the better ones shared a common set of traits that can be traced back to the way in which the instrument was made; traits that are only achieved through a set of principles or philosophies imbued by the craftsman.

One day, on my quest for the perfect harp, I discovered a German harmonica maker based in England named **Antony Dannecker**. Antony’s roots trace back four generations to Stuttgart, Germany where, in 1895, his great grandfather (**Carl Dannecker**) was appointed as an engineer to the **Hohner Harmonica Company**. Antony explained that:

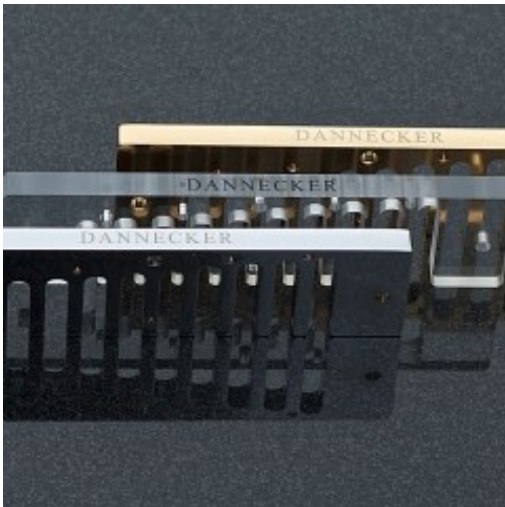
“Carl dedicated his life to the technical development and manufacture of harmonicas. Since then, four generations of Dannecker family members, including Antony’s father (Willi Dannecker) have worked within the harmonica industry (Hohner) and with professional harmonica players right up to the present day.”

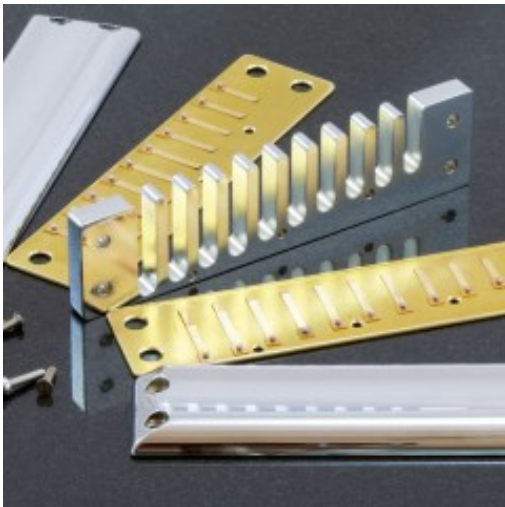
The Dannecker family has devoted their lives and legacy to the pursuit and perfection of the Harmonica. But heritage alone does not make a craftsman. The quality of the products themselves must live up to the name, and in Dannecker’s case, they do.

I bought my first Dannecker harp and was instantly blown away. I had never experienced such a magnificent instrument. It played like an extension of my vocal chords and enabled me to execute difficult bends, blows and achieve expression I had been struggling with on inferior harps. So, I ordered a few more and struck up a relationship with Antony. I’ve been playing Antony’s harps for close to five years now and their quality has stood the test of time. Every time I put one to my lips, it seems to play itself with little effort. Now, I do not claim to be a good harmonica player, but whatever skill I have as a musician, is easily revealed on one of Dannecker’s harps.

Curious about Dannecker’s process, I set out to find out how he achieves this level of perfection in his instrument and his craft. Is it the process he follows? Is it closely guarded family secrets from Carl’s days in Stuttgart? What is it that makes Dannecker’s harps so special? [John Ruskin](#) wrote “Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort.” So, I approached Antony in an attempt to understand his own personal “intelligent effort.” Through a series of conversations and emails, Antony described to me his journey and philosophies as a master craftsman. I told Antony my intent was to find universal truths in his process that could be applied to other fields. We set out on a journey together and distilled five core philosophies – five universal truths – of achieving quality in one’s product.

1. The finest materials make the finest products





A masterfully made product is a combination of the materials plus process applied by the craftsman. It's a simple formula really:

$$\text{Material} + \text{Process} = \text{Product}$$

...and the craftsman can control both variables. When it comes to materials, he can opt for higher margins with lower quality materials or he can strive for perfection of the product with the right ingredients. The same applies to the notion of the craftsman's process: he can take shortcuts to save time and increase yield or he can take the time to do it right. Each variable is a choice made consciously or unconsciously by the craftsman.

In Dannecker's case he explains that:

"Mainstream harmonica manufacturers have mass produced harmonicas for over a century. To keep the instrument as affordable as possible the use of inexpensive materials such as wood, machine pressed tin for the cover plates as well as hollow cast plastic combs were used. These materials were selected simply because they were readily available and cheap to manufacture but did nothing in terms of improving the sound of the reeds/reed plates which were always the most costly component of the harmonica."

Antony knew immediately that if he was going to inscribe his name on a harmonica, he had to use only the finest materials. Antony believes:

"If you start with inferior materials, nothing else matters. Neither craftsman skill, nor technological innovation can overcome the disadvantage of manufacturing with poor quality inputs."

Henry Ford knew these ideals well early on. As the pioneer of industrial manufacturing, Ford believed that "quality meant doing it right when no one was looking." Heck, even Papa John's knows this. They coined the phrase "Better ingredients. Better pizza." and made it their slogan.

It seems like common sense to start from the best materials to achieve the perfect product, yet so many producers out there, many claiming to be the best, begin with inferior, lesser grade components. The result often yields disappointment for the end consumer.

2. Study the masters and never stop learning





A trained craftsman will never be so arrogant to think he knows everything. True craftsmen achieve a level of quality only by studying the techniques and innovations of the masters who came before them. Sir Isaac Newton wrote “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” He knew he could not have achieved his breakthroughs had it not been for the discoveries of the likes of René Descartes, Isaac Barrow, and Galileo Galilei. Moreover, he knew that the journey of learning never stops once the product has been perfected. A craftsman must be open to new ideas and must continue learning throughout his career or risk losing out on important advances that will improve the quality of the product.

For Antony Dannecker, studying the techniques of the masters was easy and it hit close to home. His training started from a young age as he saw the pride his great grandfather, grandfather and father took in

their work at Hohner. Antony learned all about the harmonica, from perfecting the purity of the tone to the mechanics of the instrument, Antony developed a passion for learning what made a good harmonica great.

But even as Hohner continued to perfect its techniques, Antony saw opportunities to improve nearly every aspect of the instrument:

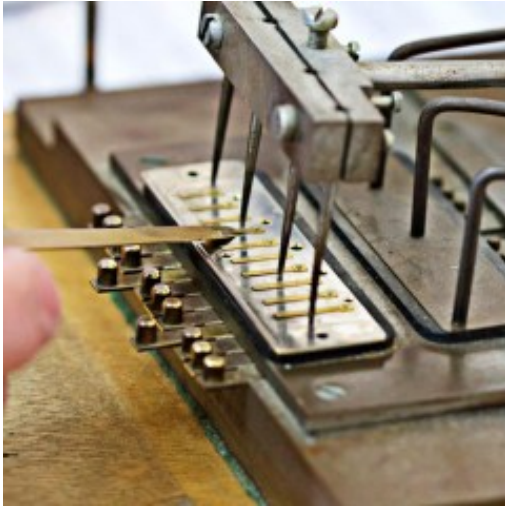
“In these early years little was understood how best to enhance and improve the dynamic sound and resonance that could be achieved from a free reed mouth blown musical instrument.

As Doctor of Music and a Fellow of the Institute of Musical Instrument Technology together with a long family history in the harmonica industry I was placed in the unique position to be present in top recording studios and was able to discuss with harmonica players as well as sound technicians the exact areas which they felt lacking in performance from their existing harmonicas.”

Learning one's craft begins by first learning the craft of others and that pursuit never ceases even when the craftsman becomes a master. To be a true master craftsman means to be a master student of your craft.

3. Trust your senses but listen to your customers; they are your “sixth sense”





Your senses guide the creation of your product and almost no product in the world is as sensory as the harmonica. In fact, a harp can stimulate every human sense: taste, touch, sound, sight and smell. Taste, you ask? That's right! Some harps use exotic combinations of metals in the reed plate, comb and cover plates that, when combined, give off a slight electrical charge. When a musician plays one of these instruments, it feels like they are licking a 9V battery. If not careful, an inattentive harmonica maker may wind up constructing a fleet of electrically charged kazooes. As the craftsman's senses develop, muscle memory sets in to guide his every move. Trust in these senses allows him to achieve a level of quality and consistency in every product he builds.

Antony shared with me that his senses as a craftsman grew over time. He worked hard to finely tune the

design, the feel, the sound and yes – even ensuring that the taste and smell never became an issue to the player. He explained that:

“During these early years I understood the need to develop a harmonica with cover plates and comb using exactly the same materials as the reed and reed plates themselves. This time however, no expense was spared in the quest to produce an instrument whose characteristics had been so desired for so long.”

Antony knew that, at its core, the harp had to sing so he trusted his expertly trained ears and developed an instrument that sounded as good as it looked...and with no shocking electrical charge.

Now, although it's vital to finely hone and rely in your five senses, it is also critical to enlist and value the input of your sixth sense: your customers. Your customers will give you the gift of feedback. This feedback, when blended with the experience of a craftsman and incorporated into future iterations of a product, will make the product even better. Feedback like this gives birth to new innovations and new products but the craftsman must be open to hearing this kind of input or it will pass him by.

In Dannecker's case, his customers are the “who's who” of the musical and celebrity world. Jimmy Kimmel, Bruce Willis and Robert Downey Jr. are just a few of the A-listers who swear by his harps. But the real compliment; the real testament to Dannecker's quality is the professional musicians who play Dannecker harps: Huey Lewis, Sting, Paul Lamb, Trevor Steger and Christelle Berthon. The highest compliment any craftsman can achieve is the patronage of his fellow craftsmen. Antony listens to his customers, develops relationships with them to understand their specific needs and makes the tweaks and adjustments they desire. They have become his sixth sense and guide him into places where his five senses alone could not venture.

It takes a humble craftsman to recognize that: although your training, experience and senses are unparalleled, your customers are the ultimate yardstick for quality and it is measured one sale at a time.

4. If you're not innovating, you're stagnating





Preservation of timeless beauty and classic design does not mean a craftsman closes his mind to innovation and improvement. A true craftsman has the sense to know when to incorporate newer technologies and manufacturing techniques and when to rely on old-world know-how. Those who do not learn this lesson often find themselves obsolete in an age of sprinting technological innovation.

Innovation and breakthroughs are the lifeblood of every craftsman. To perfect one's craft is to be in a constant state of flux; striving for continuous improvement through trial and error. Antony experienced this first-hand with the introduction of his Optimus and Centurion model harps. Sure, he could have done what many in the industry did: customize existing models to tweak the design, sound profile, and materials but Dannecker took a fresh approach. He designed and built his own harp from the ground-up. He took the

best of everything he had learned over the years and improved upon it. In two words: he innovated.

Antony recounted how he achieved this innovation with his two flagship harmonica models:

“Having formulated a blueprint for this new generation of harmonica I acquired an ex-aerospace trained chief engineer who embraced my remit that Dannecker harmonica component parts also needed to possess absolute and uncompromising precision. With the Dannecker Optimus and Centurion harmonicas, our ultimate goal has been realized: achieving harmonic purity and profound air-tightness which enables players of today to broaden the dynamic soundscape and playability of the diatonic harmonica to previously unheard of dimensions.”

Constant and unyielding innovation is the path to achieving the highest quality.

5. Pour your soul into your purpose with passion and pride







Louis Nizer wrote “A man who works with his hands is a laborer; a man who works with his hands and his brain is a craftsman; but a man who works with his hands and his brain and his heart is an artist.” We’ve already explored Dannecker’s training and his use of his finely tuned senses to produce a product of the highest quality but we have not discussed three final ingredients to achieving quality: passion, pride and purpose.

Talking to Antony, it is clear he has a passion for what he does. He knows that every harmonica he ships is a direct reflection on him as a craftsman. After all, every harmonica Dannecker produces bears his family’s name.

Antony told me that his “absolute guarantee of quality is maintained with the fact that every harmonica is hand assembled and fine-tuned by Antony himself.” If that’s not the ultimate statement of pride in your work, what is? Ask yourself: how many documents, deliverables, reports, presentations, or memos [or whatever your business work product may be] would you take that much pride in that you would forge your name into it for all to see? Antony does it on a daily basis, and with a level of consistency that even his great grandfather, Carl, would be proud of.

The last and final element: purpose. Dannecker knows his purpose and knows it well. His harps are not for everyone. After all, harps this good don’t come cheap, but that’s OK. Quality is not something that

should be trivialized or commoditized. Dannecker's harps have no equal thus he has carved out a market that is unique and founded on his passion for uncompromising quality, precision and excellence.

Dannecker has unquestioningly poured his soul into every harmonica he creates.

The universality of the five principles



The principles that Antony Dannecker and I explored through the art of producing harmonicas are, by no means, only applicable to the creation of musical instruments. These five principles are universal truths to achieving the highest quality in any field of study:

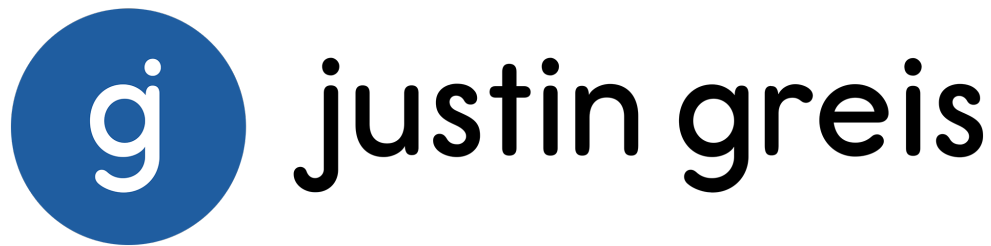
1. The finest materials make the finest products.
2. Study the masters and never stop learning.
3. Trust your senses but listen to your customers; they are your “sixth sense.”
4. If you're not innovating, you're stagnating.
5. Pour your soul into your purpose with passion and pride.

Whether your profession is business, law, technology, consulting, science, medicine or something else, remember these five lessons learned from this German harmonica maker whose great grandfather began in Stuttgart as a humble engineer and whose family name is inscribed on the finest harmonicas in the world.

Credits

My gratitude goes to Antony Dannecker and Maggie Gorman for use of their photos, quotes and input throughout the article. Find out more about Dannecker Harmonicas by visiting their website at

AntonyDannecker.com.



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