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Don't Stiff the Piano Player:
Tipping as a Function of the Environment
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Nearly four years ago, I got a Friday-night gig, at a local bar and grill, playing dinner music. It's hardly a rock concert, but it's a job. To augment my earnings, I placed a tip jar on my piano. I was warned that the tips would be meager for the patrons were "stingy". This label, of course, is mentalistic for it suggests that some inner "cheapskate god" prevents customers from tipping entertainers. Deference to that "god" would mandate forever playing my heart out for nothing. Luckily, there is an alternative interpretation: tipping depends on the environment. For example, my wife likes coffee and she tips at restaurants depending on coffee refills: no refills, no tips. Similarly, the rate and size of tips offered to a piano player should depend on environmental variables. To determine such controlling variables, I conducted an informal (group operant) functional analysis.

Some of the factors that affect tip size were beyond my control. For example, tips from elderly patrons depend on the timely arrival of their social security checks. Additionally, seasonal events, such as Lent, temporarily increase the volume of customers interested in our Friday-night fish fry. Other uncontrolled variables included noise from parties in the adjacent hall and occasional competition from nearby church-run fish fries. Manageable factors included the volume level of the music vis-à-vis table conversation, the location of the piano, and song selections.

I learned about the power of a selected tune to evoke a tip long ago from one of my first employers, a cowboy guitar player who ran his own honky-tonk. A regular would walk in, and the boss would tell us to play a certain song and then "watch what happens." Sure enough, with a flourish, the customer would tip his ten-gallon hat, buy us a drink, and toss us each a silver dollar. The customer obviously enjoyed the attention and song. Using a similar tip-producing strategy in a more sedate restaurant setting is challenging for there musical preferences are eclectic and one must learn to play new songs. Once again, mentalism obstructs with a label—"I am a honky-tonk piano player; I can't play anything else." However, there is an alternative.

Music training, formal or not, is based on repetition and immediate feedback. My initial training enabled me to use a "fake book"—a vast collection of popular, classic, and novelty tunes, transcribed for piano and guitar. The book only "sketched" each tune. I enhanced the tune for performance by practicing scales and tonal exercises daily. By adding some new tunes each week, I offered my audience a variety of

songs in quick succession. Inevitably, patrons heard at least one favorite, and approved by tipping. Others, hearing my repertoire, offered tips contingent on my playing a request.

As an experiment, I varied the tunes when mostly elderly customers filled the room. I deliberately played light rock tunes that they would not recognize and most left without tipping. The following week, during the same time, the room again was filled with mostly elderly patrons, but now I played more sedate hits from the 'forties. Presto! At least half of the patrons crossed the room and tipped before leaving.

In many businesses, location is vital. Initially, my electronic keyboard was located in the rear of the room. Consequently, unless their table was near the rear patrons inclined to tip had to backtrack to my corner before leaving by the entrance/exit in the front. However, during the holidays, an elaborate annual Christmas display temporarily displaced me, and I set up in the opposite corner, next to the entrance/exit. Now, everyone passed my tip jar before leaving. The location increased the number of tips. After Christmas, when I returned to the old corner, the amount decreased to pre-holiday levels. The amount increased again, however, after I set up near the entrance permanently. The new location not only prompted tipping, but also put me closer to more tables than the old location. Consequently, I could explore music volume and table conversation.

While eating most patrons also converse, so although live music may be pleasurable it may be a nuisance if played too loudly. After weeks of testing various volume levels, the optimum level appeared to be one where, while playing, I could hear the conversations at the tables nearest me.

At this level, by the way, I also could unobtrusively listen to conversations for song selection cues. For example, if patrons were talking about the Brewers, I played the standard "Take Me out to the Ball Game." If they were talking about rainy weather, I would play tunes like "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head." My customers are now impressed with my "uncanny" ability to play the "right song at the right time." But I know it's not supernatural; it's applied science!

After four years and still going (the longest-running engagement I ever had), I have concluded that there is no such thing as a "stingy" patron. Conducting a group-operant, functional analysis has helped me determine the variables that control how much money finds its way into my tip jar. Instead of surrendering to a hypothetical "cheapskate" god, I manipulated enough variables to nearly triple my average amount of tips, not to mention the higher number of regular customers who come in "just to hear that piano player" and enjoy a

fine seafood meal to boot. This is one piano player who is not getting stiffed.