

TRANSCRIPT OF THE J.C. JACOBSEN TEDx TALK

Ladies and gentlemen, my name is J C Jacobsen and I have been dead for 130 years. And, being dead, imagine my surprise to be invited to talk to you here today.

It may seem odd to get life advice from a dead man, but I think I have something to offer.

I was the founder of Carlsberg. You may know my beer. You may have drunk it. You may have met your wife or husband after drinking it. You can thank me for that later, or complain, depending how that relationship developed.

But I'm not here today to talk about beer; I'm here to talk about the philosophy behind the beer. It's a philosophy that can help you to break new ground in business AND everyday life:

Why You Should Answer Every Question With The Word Probably.

We live in a world that craves certainty:

black hats and white hats, leftwing and rightwing, feast and famine. Everything is absolutely one thing, or it's absolutely the other. And the biggest split is between optimists and pessimists: those who answer every question Yes and those who answer every question No.

One way to understand Why You Should Answer Every Question Probably, is by considering those alternatives.

Let's start with optimism.

Back in the days I was very much the patriarch: a serious man, rarely confused with a ray of sunshine.

I don't say that stern is always good, or that people who laugh noisily in restaurants should be sent to prison – I don't say that – but I do want to take a stance against excessive positivity.

Sales Departments were a new thing when I was in business. Salesmen were strange enthusiastic characters who said things like, "It's not a problem it's a challenge," or, "It's not a problem it's a learning opportunity." I don't know if they still talk like that but I put it to you that sometimes a problem really is a problem.

In 1867 my brewery burned down. Lives were at risk, the business was nearly destroyed, it could have all been over. That was a problem. Dying in a fire is a problem. Calling it a learning opportunity makes you sound like a mad primary school teacher.

Problems are bad, and we should recognise that and treat them with due seriousness.

There is a sort of tyranny to optimism; a sort of creepy upbeat repressiveness: if you have to say 'Yes' to everything you've really limited your options.

The answer to everything isn't yes. If you think it is, you have confused being enthusiastic with being factually correct.

And optimism can drift into cowardice. Sometimes we say 'Yes' to avoid conflict. This is wrong. We need conflict in business because so many things are uncertain. One person, however hard working, however far-sighted, can't foresee everything. Conflict is often when you learn what you've missed and relentless optimism, and answering every question with a Yes, denies us that conflict and that learning.

Losses are losses; stop being positive about everything.

So that's optimism. What about pessimism? If you shouldn't answer every question with a Yes, maybe you should answer them with a No.

Pessimism certainly feels cleverer than optimism.

We feel on a visceral level that pessimism is shrewd. We feel clever when we criticise things. We feel powerful when we say No.

But I put it to you that pessimism – answering every question with a no – is as soggy-headed as optimism. And it's less fun to be around. Like optimists, pessimists retreat into simple certainties: everything is rubbish everything will end badly. That isn't an intellectually robust philosophy.

Admittedly, pessimists are better at predicting outcomes than optimists, but if you look closely at the data it isn't because they're smarter. Pessimists often get it right for the simple reason that things fail more often than they succeed:

Also, pessimists are often right, because their pessimism causes things to fail. If you think you won't do something well- you know what – you probably won't do it well.

Pessimism predicts the future correctly by making its own dark future.

So don't be an optimist and don't be a pessimist. They are ways of creating false certainty.

I lived through a period of rapid change. 18th century Europe was an agrarian society. By the end of the 19th century it was an industrialised, urban society. Vast changes. Times of great change make people worried, and they often respond by retreating into fantastical beliefs:

Lucky charms,

Conspiracy theories,

Extreme religion and extreme politics.

The human craving for certainty spills out in all sorts of ways.

Don't believe it. Allow that things are uncertain.

Propitiating crazy gods in the hope of restoring order is a bad habit to get into.

The Aztecs made human sacrifices on the tops of their temples, allowed the blood to flow down the sides, then ate the bodies, because they thought it would keep the sun in position in the sky.

Now I don't want to get into criticism of religion, but don't eat people.

That's not how the sun works.

The world cannot be made to fit neatly like a jigsaw, and we don't need to read a lot of history books to see that societies that attempt to create absolute certainty are societies you absolutely wouldn't want to live in.

We'll never have complete information, we'll never have perfect information, but we must have the courage to act anyway. We mustn't freeze up in the face of uncertainty. We must lean into it; make a virtue out of it. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the Probably mindset.

The virtue of Probably is that it's scientific. I always had a passion for the Scientific Method, which is more or less synonymous with the idea of Probably.

The Scientific Method says you come up with a hypothesis, and then you relentlessly test it to try and prove it wrong.

We set up a laboratory in 1876 to do just that: day in day out, test our theories scientifically. Nowadays it might seem normal to link research and business, but it was new back then, and it was pure Probably.

Probably is the opposite of dogmatic belief. We accepted that our theories were only our current best guess, and that a new, better, idea might be discovered at any time.

What if you treated your own life as a series of little scientific experiments?

A Yes mindset is a static mindset. It says we've worked everything out and it's done and we're sticking. The Probably mindset – the scientific method – says we never arrive at perfection. We're always aiming for it, but it's of the nature of perfection that you can never get there. And that gap between Yes and Probably is where improvement happens.

Probably is travelling expectantly but never arriving. That's how to live. Enjoy travelling forward, getting better at things, but knowing you'll never get perfect.

One more reason you should answer every question with Probably is that it allows you to do things, just because they feel right.

You can build your hypotheses on a feeling, then see what happens. You don't always have to lock down your reasoning. You don't have to present a status report to the middle manager in your head.

I used to share my clean yeast with other brewers.

I won't bore you with the ins and outs of brewing yeast, but brewers need it and I shared mine, even with rivals.

Maybe that was a bad move. Maybe a sharper businessman would have pounced when his rivals were out of yeast and gobbled up their businesses. I don't know. I like the idea that within a field of industry we are a community.

I answer questions Probably and I reserve the right to do things because they feel like the thing to do.

In 1859 the Frederiksborg Castle – the old home of the king of Denmark – burned down. I gave a lot of money to help rebuild it.

Danmark had lost a war to Germany, part of our country was annexed, our spirits were low, the Frederiksborg Castle was a symbol of unity, it felt like a good idea to repair it. And it's a beautiful castle, and passing beautiful things to future generations strikes me as a worthwhile thing to do.

Was it a smart investment? A pure economist might say No. I say looking at just the economics of a situation can be another way to hide in certainty. If you add emotions to the balance sheet you embrace uncertainty and move towards a Probably mindset.

Give away your yeast – whatever is the yeast in your life – rebuild beautiful castles just because they're beautiful. These are Probably decisions and you won't regret them. They are the sorts of decisions that make the world a better place, today for a better tomorrow.

I died 130 years ago, and – as I said – being dead I didn't think I'd be called on to deliver any more speeches. But we can't be certain how things will turn out. All we can do is enjoy the uncertainty, set out our hypotheses with courage and hope, and walk forward into the fog.

Who knows, you too could find yourself on a stage, talking about your life, long after it's over.

And that's why you should answer every question with the word probably.