

## Classes for the Masses --- Psychic photo reading; Larry King; You Call This Learning? By Joanne Kaufman

In the past few months, Mayra Sanchez, a former marketing consultant, has gotten clear on how to lose 20 pounds in 14 days. She has discovered how to find her "unique reality and destiny," thanks to New Age guru John Bradshaw. She has learned how to talk to anybody, even a reporter, about anything.

Then, last Tuesday night, she reached the earthly version of nirvana: She got squared away on how tap into her deepest sources of power via self-styled spiritual leader Deepak Chopra. Just under 2,000 other seekers of wisdom did too.

The caterer for this smorgasbord of self-improvement is The Learning Annex, which since 1980 has been serving up courses in easily digested one-session chunks, in the process setting itself up as a target for jokes on "Sex and the City."

How to make it in comedy, how to unleash your psychic abilities, how to marry money, how to stop being nice, how to lower your golf score, how to open a restaurant -- these are but a few of the offerings in a continuing-education catalog that mixes the mundane with the marquee: Jerry Lewis on laughter and healing, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons on how to rise to the top and Donald Trump on thinking big. Larry King, Charlton Heston, Sarah Jessica Parker and Walt Frazier have also been on the Annex payroll.

Pull out a catalog housed in the boxes on nearly every street corner in New York and the four other Learning Annex cities -- Toronto, San Diego, Los Angeles and San Francisco -- and you'll see how one class can snap into another, neat as a set of Lego blocks. "How to write a 'how to' book" is a straight shot to "How to get an agent," which leads directly to "How to get your first book published" and then to "How to Make Money as a Writer," which can only mean that you want to know "how to develop a Hollywood idea." And if that concept of yours doesn't pan out, there's always "How to open and run a bed & breakfast inn."

To some, this pedagogy in pellet form may smack of the cheesiest sort of self-betterment, the Cliff Notes, if you will, of continuing ed. Or maybe it's just the market responding to a very real need: for knowledge lite.

"We're all about personal growth," says the company's owner, Bill Zanker, who came up with the idea for The Learning Annex when his father expressed a strong disinclination to continue paying for his graduate study. "He said 'go get a job,'" recalls Mr. Zanker. "Originally, I was going to get film teachers to teach classes because I was going to film school. But then my girlfriend's pottery teacher asked if she could list her course, and I realized there were a lot of classes that needed a home."

Not every class is destined to find a home at the Learning Annex, though one might think otherwise when thumbing through the catalog. (Telepathic Communication With Animals? Psychic Photo Reading?) According to Steven Schragis, the company's national director, the bookers in the five Annex cities are flooded with proposals every month. "A lot of them are 'change your life' or 'learn to have a positive attitude.' They're too general," he says.

So forget "how to find a job." It's been done. But "how to find a job if you're over 50" -- well, now you're talking. At their most successful, these **classes for the masses** play on the fears (if you don't take this course you'll be left behind), hopes (this course will change your life) and fantasies (this course will make you rich) of the 200,000 people who enroll each year -- 65% female, 65% single.

From the beginning, The Learning Annex has made a valiant attempt to ride the seventh wave of the Zeitgeist. In 1990, a good five or six years before the rest of the country was rearranging furniture in the name of positive energy, the Annex was offering a course in feng shui. "And if we find something hot we keep adding to it," says Mr. Zanker.

Thus there is now Feng Shui Advanced, Feng Shui for Prosperity and Feng Shui for Your Office. Reflecting the mood of the country post-Sept. 11, the Annex has laid in a big spread of courses emphasizing the spiritual and the home-centered: knitting, cooking, candle-making. Currently each Annex city hosts 200 courses a month. "But we don't call them classes," says Mr. Zanker. "We call them shows. This is edu-tainment."

They charge accordingly. About \$35, roughly the price of two movie tickets, drinks and popcorn, will buy admission to most classes, for those who take advantage of readily available discounts. The fees to catch the acts of self-help hotties like Tony Robbins and Wayne Dyer, who drew 2,500 to a recent seminar in San Francisco, can run as high as \$495.

While Messrs. Robbins and Dyer, Lewis and Trump get a guarantee and often play the full circuit of Learning Annex cities, most course leaders content themselves with a percentage of the gate. The fee isn't the goal. Since many are lawyers and consultants ("How to Be a \$1,000-a-Day Consultant" is one Annex offering), Mr. Schragis notes that "this is a way for them to get clients."

In 1991, perhaps heeding the Learning Annex course "Finding the Work You Love," Mr. Zanker sold the company and a year later founded the storefront massage business "The Great American BackRub." A public offering in 1996 raised millions of dollars for this odd service franchise, but the stock price plummeted, and by 1997 it became clear that massage was no longer the message. Mr. Zanker backed out of the back-rub game and only this January bought the Annex back. "It's a great brand," he says.

Mr. Zanker has many ideas, big ideas for the Learning Annex (see: "The Power of Positive Thinking in Business"). It currently does \$10 million a year in revenue, he said, "but I hope to take it to \$200-250 million" (see: "Growing Your Business at Lightning Speed"). There are plans to expand the company's publishing arm ("we're doing Jerry Lewis's book," says Mr. Zanker), to sell courses on audiotape, to develop classes online and to launch The Home Learning Network, sort of the QVC of education.

"We could not sell the history of Rome. Our students don't come to us for that," says Mr. Zanker. "They come to us for real information and for quick information. Some people look down on us for that, but it's a huge market."

So it would seem. Mr. Zanker himself might consider teaching a class on "How to Get People to Ante Up for a Class on Just About Anything."