The 48 Questions No Marketer Ever Had the Guts to Ask You

Chapter One — free preview

Kip Lee · kiplinglee.com

Chapter 1 — The Watch With the Back Off

There's an old line in this industry about the consultant who borrows your watch to tell you the time. I've heard it at every conference I've attended for forty years, usually from a guy who's proud of never paying for advice, and usually about ten minutes before he tells you about the marketing company that's been billing him three grand a month for two years for work he can't describe.

I've got a watch line of my own, and everybody who's ever worked with me is tired of hearing it. When somebody's explaining too much — a vendor winding up, a salesman narrating his week, a marketer three slides into a deck — I'll stop him cold: *look, I don't care how you make a watch. I just need to know what time it is.* Forty years of running companies taught me that impatience and I'm not apologizing for it. Most of the time it's exactly right. Give me the number, not the speech.

But there's one watch that rule nearly ruined me on, and you're wearing the same one: your own company. I spent years asking mine what time it was and taking the answer at face value — revenue's up, board's full, trucks are rolling, must be about noon. What I never did was take the back off and look at the works. Every gear in there. Which spring was driving which wheel, where the friction was, what was worn and what was fine. The works don't get insulted when you look. They don't say "well, the second hand FEELS slow because of market conditions." The back comes off and the truth is just sitting there, doing whatever it was actually doing the whole time.

Your company has a back. It comes off. Almost nobody ever takes it off, and I spent most of my career not understanding why, because taking it off is not expensive and not complicated. It took me forty years, a company that peaked at $6.98 million — not seven; this is a book about precise numbers, so I won't round mine up either — and 561 installed jobs in a year, two trips onto the Inc. 500, one heart attack, and a second act in the software business to finally understand the reason.

The reason is that every owner already believes he knows what's inside.

I should tell you where I get the counting from, because there's a second watch in this story, and it's in a drawer in my house right now.

I grew up in a house where we counted everything, and everything was a competition. My dad was ferociously competitive — good athlete, troubled youth, never touched a team sport. The surprise is that he started out artsy: as a young man he was in the same acting club as Jack Nicholson, and his stage name was going to be Kipling Christian. The acting career never happened. The name did — he hung it on me. I've spent my whole life carrying the road my father didn't take.

What he became instead was a cost engineer, on the big industrial jobs — nuclear plants, refineries — and no formal education to his name. He counted everything. Occupational hazard. His job was to stand between the construction company he worked for and the client, which meant his job, more often than anyone would want, was to deliver the bad news. The number is the number. His nickname on those jobs was Frank. Because he was.

When he passed, one of the things he left me was a quartz watch from the eighties. Cheap thing — plastic, couldn't have cost three dollars when they made it. They handed them out on a job that hit **six million man-hours without an accident.** Think about that number for a second. Six million hours, counted, one at a time, by men like my dad, because somebody decided the counting mattered enough to keep doing it every single day for years. The watch isn't worth a dollar. Nobody else wanted it when he died. I couldn't throw it away, and writing this book I finally figured out why: it's the only watch I own that never told the time. It told the *truth* — a real number, earned, verified, held in your hand. That's the whole inheritance. That's this book.

(In the late nineties he quit chasing consulting work — "something about goddamned computers" — and spent the rest of his life as a contented house husband who read three or four books a week. I miss him. He'd have liked this chapter and told me frankly what was wrong with it.)

Let me tell you what I mean about beliefs, because I'm not talking about other people. I'm talking about me.

For years I believed I knew my most profitable product line. I'd have bet the truck on it. I ran the company. I signed every check. I sat the sales meetings, I walked the jobs, I knew my business the way you know yours — from the inside, every day, with my hands on it.

My belief was sunrooms. Of course it was. I was one of the largest Four Seasons Sunrooms dealers in the country — sunrooms were the marquee, the showroom centerpiece, the twenty-thousand-dollar ticket. Windows were the little brother, the eight-thousand-dollar job we ran to keep the machine busy between the real ones.

Then a consultant I'd hired — his name was Dale, and you'll hear it again in this book — sat me down with my own jobs and lined up a comparison I've never gotten over: an $8,000 window job against a $20,000 sunroom job. The sunroom made more profit in total. The window job made a lot more profit *per crew-day.* The sunroom tied up my best people for weeks — engineering, permits, inspections, the punch list that wouldn't die. The window crew was in, out, and on to the next job before the sunroom was past its footings.

And then Dale said the thing that reorganized my whole understanding of the business: when your biggest limiting factor is time, time is your most valuable commodity. I didn't have a revenue problem. I didn't even have a margin problem. I had a *crew-day* problem. Every hour a trade spent in a truck getting windshield time instead of on a job, every day a build ran past its schedule, was my scarcest resource draining out — and not one report I looked at measured any of it. The sunroom king found out the little window job was outrunning the marquee. I'd have bet the truck the other way, and I'd have lost the truck.

That's what a belief is. When you know something from the inside, every day, with your hands on it, it doesn't feel like a belief. It feels like eyesight.

Here's the thing about eyesight, though. Nobody audits it. You'd catch a lie somebody told you in a meeting, because it would arrive from outside and you'd inspect it on the way in. A belief that's already inside never gets inspected. It got in years ago, back when it was probably even true, and it's been sitting in the front office of your mind ever since, making decisions, with a title and a parking spot and no performance review. Ever.

Now multiply that by every belief an owner runs on. Which crew is the good crew. Which lead source is worth the money. Which salesman is the star. Which jobs are the bread and butter and which are the favors. Which customer is a pain because that's just how customers are now. Every one of those walked in the door years ago, got hired on the spot, and has never once been asked to prove it still deserves the job.

Your people won't audit those beliefs either, and this is the part that took me longest to learn, so I'll say it plainly: **the people who work for you know things about your company that you don't, and they will never tell you, because correcting the boss has a price and everybody in the building knows the price but the boss.** Your production manager knows which jobs quietly wreck the schedule. Your bookkeeper knows which line is bleeding. Your best installer knows why the callbacks happen. They know it the way you know your beliefs — from the inside, with their hands on it. And they will carry it to their next employer before they'll carry it into your office, because the last guy who walked into your office with bad news about your favorite product line got a speech about how he didn't understand the big picture.

I gave that speech. More than once. I'd like those minutes back.

So the watch stays closed, and the company runs on the owner's eyesight, and here's what that costs. Not catastrophe — that's the surprise. Catastrophe would get fixed. What it costs is a steady, quiet, survivable bleed that gets priced into everything and renamed "just how this business is."

The job type that loses money on every third install: still on the sales sheet, because you believe in it.

The lead source that produces sits that never close: still funded, because it produced your best story from 2019.

The star salesman with the biggest number on the board and the deepest discounts, the slowest collections, and the most change orders in the building: still the star, because the board only shows the one number.

None of that kills you. All of it compounds. And the market never corrects it, because the market can't see inside your company either. The only thing that ever corrects it is somebody taking the back off the watch — and the tools to do that have been sitting in your own filing cabinet the whole time. It's your books. Job by job. What you paid, what you collected, how long the crew was on it, what went wrong, what it actually returned. Not the P&L your accountant hands you, which averages everything into a fog once a year. The job-level truth. Yours. Already bought and paid for. Sitting there.

Your books don't have feelings. They don't protect your prejudices, they don't fear your reaction, they don't remember 2019 fondly. They're the one employee who'll tell you the truth for free, and in forty years of this industry I have almost never met an owner who's had the conversation.

Dale — the same Dale who ran the window-versus-sunroom numbers on me — consulted for my company for only a few years, and he left me with a sentence I've been unpacking ever since: *you don't know what you don't know.* I learned more from him in that stretch than from some people I'd known for decades. When he first said it I thought it was about the market. Then I thought it was about my competition. It took me the rest of my career to understand he was talking about the watch. He was telling me the most dangerous inventory in my company was the stack of things I was certain about — and he'd just proved it, with my own books, on the product line I'd have bet the truck on.

This book is a system for taking the back off. It's called the EAS — the Economic Accountability System — and the whole thing fits in one sentence: **forty-eight questions and your own books.**

The forty-eight questions come first, and they're not the questions you've been asked before. Thirty-one of them put your beliefs on the record — yours and your bench's, owner and GM and marketing and production, in the same room, before anybody's looked at a number. What do you *think* your best line is. Who do you *think* your best closer is. Which channel would you swear by. We write the beliefs down and we don't argue with a single one of them. Then seventeen more capture something no diagnostic in this industry has ever bothered with — how you actually talk — and I'll explain why that matters more than you think when we get there.

Then we open your books, and we line the two columns up.

Where belief and reality match — and a lot of them will match, because you didn't survive forty years of this industry being wrong about everything — you now know your business *on the record* instead of on instinct, and that knowledge has real value the day you scale, sell, or step back.

Where they don't match, we've found the gap. And the gap is the diagnosis. Not my opinion. Not a consultant's framework. Your own beliefs against your own books, sorted by the size of the miss.

I'm not going to tell you a single thing in this process that I can't prove with your own numbers. That's the deal, that's the whole posture, and it's why I can make a promise on page one that every marketer who's ever pitched you could not: I have no idea what I'm going to find in your company. Neither do you. That's the point.

Give me one meeting. I'll show you the watch with the back off.

The rest of this book shows you exactly how.

That's Chapter One. The full book — all 48 questions, the belief-versus-books exam, and the system for taking the back off your own company — is coming. You're on the list; you'll hear from Kip when it lands.

*Questions, speaking, or an observation day: kiplinglee.com***