Wise Guys

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Big idea gurus are moving out of the way for the more modern "wise teacher who is in touch with the changing management scene." Godfrey Golzen reports on the names to watch and where to find them.

"Can the theories of business gurus like Drucker and Peters evolve to connect with the new millennium?" is the title of one of the articles under "business gurus" on the Internet. Now there's a question — but it's one more and more companies are asking as the price of hiring a guru goes ever higher. A world-class guru can command fees of more than $40,000 for a two-hour company session, and permission to speak means to listen to platitude gurus such as Tom Peters or Michael Porter runs at around $2,600 per person.

Is it really worth it? Just as the cynical definition of a management consultant is "someone who writes notes while you watch to tell you the time and then forgets to return it to you," a guru has been described as someone who turns bullissy into bull.

In first-class airline fliers, that may be unfair, but there are too many gurus who travel across the world giving much the same expensive spiel to different audiences.

Interviewing one famous guru three years ago, I once asked at his notes when he was called out of the room. The talk he was giving in London, I discovered, was the same as the one he had delivered in Toronto some days previously. It was full of ideas and superlative delivery, but there were some comments..."