

The Psychic Skeptic By Karen Stollznaw

Psychics / Mediums

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By Karen Stollznaw

A psychic can claim to be 'skeptical', but can a skeptic be psychic?

Is psychic ability in the eye of the beholder?

These questions arose when I stumbled across a job opportunity for psychics, advertised at careerone.com.au. Job sharing, casual work and second, even third jobs are necessary evils in today's world. Some replenish stock in supermarkets at night, others telemarket or work behind a bar. Only the very few can earn a few extra dollars as a psychic. That would require a specific skill, wouldn't it? But what kind of skill? Real psychic ability or cold/warm/hot reading skills and a glib manner?

The job advertisement was a call from an "ethical psychic network in the US, as seen on TV", seeking psychics and tarot readers ("pros only") to work from home for chat room, telephone and email readings. Absolutely Psychic is operated by ACM Entertainment, a company whose very name suggests the solemnity with which we should view the entire industry.

The company recruits "psychic associates" online, advertising in chat rooms, on mailing lists and job boards, seeking staff from as far away as New Zealand and the UK. Interested parties were urged to submit an application via an online form. Professing no psychic or indeed any paranormal abilities whatsoever, I wondered how far I could infiltrate until I would be revealed to be a skeptic posing as a psychic.

The telephone psychic industry emerged in Australia during the early 1990's with the advent of '0055 numbers'. This incited a trend generating thousands of hotlines. Simon Turnbull's Australian Psychic Association estimates that there are some 3000 services currently in existence. Psychic hotlines have evolved into a multi-million dollar industry. From its inception, the industry was completely unregulated (see Operation Termite, The Skeptic, Vol. 4, No. 4). Today, nothing has changed. Anyone can establish a telephone psychic business or indeed any psychic venture... but can anyone be a 'psychic'?

Absolutely Psychic's standards are extremely high, if they do say so themselves. "Our clients immediately notice that all readers are carefully handpicked. We are very 'picky', and we're proud of it! Unfortunately, 94.3% of most applications are turned away. Ask around, we're not kidding!" Surely I had no chance of infiltrating the ranks. Why, even if I did purport to have psychic abilities, they only accept 5.7% of applicants! As they repeatedly claimed, "We staff ONLY THE BEST PSYCHICS."

The criteria became even more stringent. "We are only interested in readers with actual reading experience. Actual reading experience is defined as professionals that have experience giving readings to clients either via a Professional Psychic Network or private practice. Professional reading experience is NOT defined as experience giving a once in a blue moon free reading to a friend or family member. Professional experience is not defined as having a deck of tarot cards laying around somewhere.

Though interests do lead to growth, please, only contact us when you have attained growth." There are a number of talented cold readers around, but with no magic skills or reading experience, professional nor amateur; I am no Ian Rowland or Derren Brown. I would be relying upon a credible demeanour, but surely a 'professional' would know the difference?

The application would be a rigorous four-stage selection process of testing. Besides psychic ability, the only other requirement was a typing speed of 30 wpm. Firstly, the online application form would sort the wheat from the chaff. Then would follow an email reading test. Then a fifteen minute online chat room reading test. Finally, success at all of the previous levels would lead to a gruelling ten minute telephone test. The assessment procedure would be a psychic survival of the fittest.

The application form issued a caution to those who had worked for the competition, who fall beneath their lofty standards. "DO NOT list PRN/Ms Cleo and/or "book-stores" that fall under this company. Yes, we know every reader on the Globe has worked for this company. And yes, we know why you are no longer there! We've heard a 100 Gazillion times! If this is your only experience, please reapply after you have acquired more experience. Our statistics show these qualifications never passed our evaluations. Again, we only staff professionals with solid professional accurate reading skills!"

Absolutely Psychic would do well to disassociate themselves from the infamous 'Miss Cleo' crowd. In a skeptical success story, money talked rather than ethics when the Miss Cleo group were sued for false advertising, fraud and other unlawful business practices (see: <http://www.courttv.com/news/feature/cleo/>).

The group advertised "Find the answers for free - free three-minute psychic readings". In reality, this 'freebie' was comprised of a non-billed period of three minutes, during which a phone attendant would note the caller's contact details. The unsuspecting caller was then transferred to a 'psychic' and instead of receiving their free reading, were immediately billed without being advised of the charges. As an afterthought, the company was also exposed for performing scripted readings (A copy of one such script is shown at: www.courttv.com/news/feature/cleo/script1.html). Other scams among their "94 violations" included billing deceased people for calls. The company slogan was "Miss Cleo – Keepin' it real!".

With no experience at all, cold reading or otherwise, I had to bluff my way through the application form. Given Absolutely Psychic's strict selection criteria, I assumed they would meticulously verify my work history. Summing up my initial "psychic awareness" I applied the tried and tested formula. As a child, my family often exclaimed at my remarkable resemblance to an elderly family member known

to have psychic powers.

This was a portent that I was to become a second generation psychic. From an early age, I could predict when the phone would ring and the identity of the caller. Soon, I saw images of future events and began receiving messages from the deceased. I started giving readings, just for fun, to family and friends who were astonished with my accuracy! They nurtured my gift and news of my abilities spread uncontrollably by word of mouth. Whilst attending university, I had worked for Silver Belle Psychic Services (a fictitious company with fabricated contact details). I now operated a private practice, Karenina's Psychic Line. While I had a small, loyal clientele, I wanted to expand my client base, especially to an international audience.

I was required to state my reading specialties from a list of options, I selected those topics about which I was best informed: 'psychic', 'spirit guides', 'mediumship/channeling', 'dream interpretation', 'angels' and 'past life regression'.

I dared not list astrology as a specialty: "For Astrology: Please note that since are [sic] supported by leading Astrology Organizations we only staff Astrologers that continue to present our image for providing excellence. Therefore, a separate evaluation is given for Astrology. To be considered for Astrology you must be able to pull up a chart for any birth place on the globe and dissect it in less than 50 seconds. This is not something many are able to do".

Absolutely Psychic specialise in astrological readings at astronomical prices, offering \$90 USD 'electional charts' to set the date, hour and minute when a client should schedule their wedding, surgery or business deal. Their web sites boasts that psychic Joan Quigley (who is not a psychic with Absolutely Psychic!) "set many times and dates" for Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

Absolutely Psychic were clearly in search of celebrity psychics. "Do you have any special certifications?" the form asked, non-specifically. 'Yes'. "Do you have any clips of Media appearances you have made?" I thought of my various media appearances as a skeptic, chuckled and ticked 'yes'. "Have you written any books, newspaper articles, columns, and magazine articles on Psychic, Astrological or Tarot phenomena?" Have I ever! 'Yes!' "Do you refer clients to Candles/Witchcraft/Santeria/Spells/Voodoo and do you advise on death/health issues or making a lover return?" 'No'. The internet abounds with tales of 'phony psychics' who delve in these practices, promising to remove curses, cast spells, offering 'psychic protection' and generally manipulating vulnerable clients for financial gain. I knew that Absolutely Psychic would want to distance themselves from litigious 'majick', given the horror stories of exploitation connected with these practices.

"How do you rate your accuracy as a psychic?" 96%! This sounded like an impressive yet modest figure, in keeping with their high expectations. Moreover, I could provide numerous testimonials attesting to my precision. As we know, subjective, anonymous testimonials aren't worth the paper they're written on.

After filling out contact information and answering numerous questions about computer requirements I encountered the following final message: "We thank you for your interest in Absolutely Psychic Network. Due to the amount of requests we receive, we cannot provide feedback/follow up information". I honestly didn't expect to ever hear from them.

Bright and early the next morning, there was a special email awaiting me. Without fanfare, the email

listed the details of step two, the email test. I had obviously passed the first round on the basis of my trumped-up application. Now I had to demonstrate my 'abilities'. Surely now they would see through my ploy! The email test instructions were as follows:

"This email reading test will first be reviewed for 3 things: psychic ability, following directions, and professionalism. If you pass we will contact you for an live one on one chat room reading test with a live person. SELECT ONLY ONE - EITHER ROBERT OR ALICIA. ROBERT- He has Blue Eyes, Brown Hair (full head of hair) 5'10, 155 pounds, 33 years old and very good looking (in case that helps.) General reading on Love & Business/Money. Birth Information not available. ALICIA - She has Brown Eyes, Red Hair (from a bottle) Very attractive (in case that helps.) Early 50's. General reading on Love & Business/Money. Birth Information not available".

I knew I could easily follow the directions and give the appearance of professionalism, but was certain that my lack of psychic ability would prevail. I selected the subject 'Alicia' as her profile somewhat resembled that of my mother. I figured I would engage in a 'warm reading', employing psychology, 'specific generalisations' and telling them what they want to hear. I thought I could make some assumptions based on the subject's gender, age and the subjective, vague 'clues' provided about her appearance. The instructions stipulated that the reading must be completed within 24 hours of acceptance into the second round of tests. "Most of our readers can easily do a 600 word email reading in 7 minutes with their eyes closed while typing." So I mustered all of my powers of generality and set to work.

Dear Alicia,

I feel as though you are preoccupied with a current relationship. It may be a new or potential relationship or an ongoing one in which you have recently found a renewed sense of happiness and purpose. In the past you have been troubled by love and always unsure about taking it to the next level. I can feel a sense of excitement for the future, one that you, and that special someone, will share together. You now know that you are loved. People are smitten with your beauty, both inner and physical. You take great care of your appearance and other people notice you.

You like to surround yourself with friends and loved ones. You like to have close female friends but also have a bit of a tomboy streak in you too! Sometimes you feel as though your friends demand too much of your time. You love them but can have trouble saying 'no' to them. It often feels as though you are the one offering all the advice and no one will listen to your problems. There is a shoulder for you to cry on and she is closer than you think.

Health is an issue of major importance right now. You are very conscious of your health. You have experienced a recent health scare that has encouraged you to focus on your own health and that of your family. Try to clear your environment of anything toxic or irritating. Someone is sick of sickness itself and they don't want the medication but it will work. You do need to be vigilant of your situation and follow doctor's orders but worrying won't help and you know you're in control. You know you need to take more time out to relax. Indulge yourself more often and make time for that holiday! You need to be kind to yourself as well as thinking about family and friends.

You can always depend on your inner resilience to make things happen for you. In the past you have been taken off your mark, but I feel a future of confidence and happiness if you take care of your health and your romance and remember to not let negative influences get in the way of your

success.

Financially, you are quite comfortable but would like a little more money to fulfil a few plans you have underway. You try to be responsible in your spending but like to splash out often and treat yourself! Hold back a bit now for that special purchase.

Right now you are looking to your future financial stability. With maturity comes security. I do see stability in your future, but if you take care to tie up some loose financial strings. If you wait for the good things in life, they will come to you. I see a large financial bounty in your life. It could be your employment, or it could be even bigger! Keep an eye on the stock market. I feel your chances might be there.

I see positive changes in your employment that will allow you to fulfil your personal goals. There are some areas that need clarification, especially with business partners or key people. Watch out for inside rivalry because someone who is less qualified, but more cut-throat than you might try to jeopardize this.

The main thing to remember is to always follow your own intuitions. Life is mysterious and not always black and white like some would lead you to believe. As long as you stay close to your feelings, your life will always be exciting! In closing, your future is bright and full of adventure. Never take second best because I feel only the best for you and your future!

Always finish on a positive note! The broad reading was intended to bombard the testers with images, ideas and promises. It needed to resemble the traditional notion of a reading and appeal to the reader. It had to be based on stereotypes that the reader would either relate to or rationalise to fit in with their own life. I applied generalisations about love, friendship, health and finances that covered many possible situations and scenarios. I had a bob each way; saying one thing then immediately saying the opposite and everything in between. The reading was a confusing mish-mash of flattery, obvious statements, clichés and non-specific advice, all delivered with a caring demeanour. Despite this, I still thought it was more comprehensive and better than any reading I had ever been given in all of my years of investigations!

I emailed the reading to the 'test co-ordinator' and within hours received the following response: "Thank you very much for submitting your email reading. You did a fine job. We would like to issue a 1-1 online chat room test reading in our chat room". I had passed the second test! A chat room test was scheduled for the following day. While I had completed the application and email reading in my own time, could a skeptic pass a real-time psychic test under pressure?

The Internet has encouraged the promotion and proliferation of psychics and psychic companies, giving birth to email and chat room readings. Absolutely Psychic fretted: "Many were stunned when this came into operation. After all, most readers need to hear a voice in order to tune." However, they quickly rationalised this, "receiving a psychic reading via typing and having the reader type back to you does not block the flow of communication." Or the flow of money...

At the appointed time, and after a psychic warm (reading) up, I signed in to <http://www.absolutelypsychic.com/testreading.html> for my chat room reading debut. The web page noted: "If we are interested in contracting you on our Network, we will contact you after all other applicants have been evaluated. We do not give feedback nor 'follow-ups'. THANKS VERY MUCH! Good Luck".

The following is the chat room reading test in its entirety; it has not been edited for its many spelling or grammatical errors.

Ann> hi

Karenina> Hello

Ann> how are you doing

Karenina> I am very well, thank you. How are you?

Ann> I will be doing your test with you

Ann> good ty

Karenina> Okay

Ann> Did you have any problems loading the chat room?

Karenina> None at all.

Ann> great great gald to hear that

Karenina> How would you like me to start?

Ann> Karenina I would like you to do your reading how you normally do and feel comfortable with.

Ann> would like to start with a general reading ,focusing more on relaitonships :)

Karenina> I like to meditate briefly...to tune into my clients.

Ann> great sure thing :)

Karenina> I'm hearing from my Angel Guide. Arthur Fitzroy, a bastard son of Henry VIII.

Ann> thats good

Karenina>I have a message from him.

Ann> thats great

Karenina> He said: I stay from the final light to rectify wrongs and help those who seek truth because of the injustice done to me. I have chosen not to enter the final light. I am... an angel and have exiled myself from love and final peace.

Ann> thats great

Karenina> I have a message. I can see possible turmoil ahead for you...

Ann> oh

Karenina> Either you are already in a loving relationship or will soon be in one, but be wary... ahead of you might be something to challenge this.

Ann> can you tell where? is this a someone that brings the problems about?

Karenina> Yes, my spirit guide, was a strong and passionate man and he can feel you through me. He senses your own passion, but sometimes you can be too giving to your partner.

Ann> yes I know it lol

Karenina> There are three things to remember.

Karenina> 1: If turmoil does come, never pass it off. I sense if you do this, you could become mired in something you don't want.

Ann> k

Karenina> 2. always share yourself with the one you love. When you cut off communications, which I feel you have been doing, you can't love as fully.

Karenina> 3. Take care of your desires and be with someone who takes care of themselves. I feel both you and your former partners have been too giving in the past. When you care for yourself, you come to care for each other more deeply.

Ann> cutting off communactions from my partner?

Karenina> Yes, because in the past you have been afraid to open up as fully as possible because of past trouble.

Karenina> Always be open when you feel frustration or unrest in your relationship. Circumstances may have made you afraid to be as open as you could.

Ann> some yes right

Ann> we usually talk about almost everything ,can you tell what we are not communaction about?

Karenina> Your innermost desires. What you need.

Ann>yes what I need

Karenina>I sense something in you which is asking to be shared with your partner. You must express this, lest it fester inside you and you'll become unhappy.

Ann> ok yes true no not want to be come unhappy

Karenina> I feel that you are wary of this and won't let this happen. :)

Ann> your right i will not

Ann> let it happend

Karenina> Feel inside your emotions and realise the lovely potential you can have. I sense you wish something a little more from your partner. Something they are unaware of and something you need.

They can give it to you

Ann> i will be careful

Ann> Karenina we need to wrap up ,We have used all our time :) up

Karenina> Thank you for your time Ann. I hope that I have been of some assistance.

Ann> thank you for sharing your time and gifts

Karenina> I feel great positivity for you.

Ann> yes TY

Ann>Positive is good.

I admit that, like a TV cooking show, I had prepared some of this reading beforehand. I came equipped with the 'angel guide' statement. It was amusing to read 'Ann's' nonchalant reaction to this absurd announcement. But 'Arthur Fitzroy' is an historically plausible character. 'Fitzroy', 'son of the king', was the surname given to illegitimate royal children.

Henry VIII did have an illegitimate son named Henry Fitzroy with his mistress Bessie Blount. Henry Fitzroy was at one stage considered for the status of heir apparent, above his two legitimate sisters (the future 'Bloody Mary' and Elizabeth I). However, Henry Fitzroy died prematurely of consumption at age 17. 'Arthur' was the name of Henry's elder brother who had died before he could accede the throne (incidentally, Arthur was briefly married to Catherine of Aragon, who would later become Henry VIII's first wife. Their son-less union would instigate much religious and secular change although this is another story altogether!).

Following this introduction, the remainder of the reading was impromptu, a concoction of conceivable and vague assertions about relationships. I found some of Ann's responses, e.g., "thats [sic] great" and "thats [sic] good" to seemingly praise and goad my bizarre statements as making for a convincing and dramatic reading. This was in contrast to her trusting, believing responses to my relationship 'advice'.

It is easy to make general 'observations' that people will 'connect with', often with self-deprecating humour:

Karenina>...sometimes you can be too giving to your partner.

Ann> yes I know it lol.

Fortune cookie-like 'warnings' are also effective and often applicable:

Karenina>...I sense something in you which is asking to be shared with your partner. You must express this, lest it fester inside you and you'll become unhappy.

Ann> ok yes true no not want to be come unhappy.

I thought I'd botched the reading at the following point where 'Ann' challenged me:

Ann> we usually talk about almost everything ,can you tell what we are not communion [sic] about?

I realised that, as a believer, she was probably more concerned about the psychic 'knowledge' I had about her partner, rather than this query being a 'trap'. So, I 'empowered' her with the response:

Karenina> Your innermost desires. What you need.

Ann>yes what I need

She seemed to accept this with her positive response and repetition of my comment. It's an addictive power trip to have someone accept your word as 'gospel'!

Again, I made certain to finish on an optimistic, positive note.

Karenina> I feel great positivity for you.

Ann> yes TY

Ann>Positive is good.

Overall, my 'reading' was a ream of nonsensical advice and warnings but 'Ann' seemed to relate to it. At Absolutely Psychic rates, this non-psychic effort would cost the punter \$29.95 USD!

I cringed at the entire experience. Surely this one wouldn't get past the finishing line! However, just because I know myself to be a skeptic, I shouldn't misinterpret this privileged knowledge for their insight. The following day came yet another email. I had passed the third test! I was invited to attempt the fearful, forth and final test. The ten minute telephone reading test. "Our telephone test will be a short 10 minute phone reading. We will not tell you on the telephone if you passed or failed. We have many applicants to test and must conserve time. We do not provide feedback. If we are interested in you we will contact you via email with our contractual agreement".

The test was scheduled for the following day. It had all been pretty easy. Until now. I started to feel psychic stage fright. How could I possibly pass this confrontational test? And with no feedback? I couldn't 'fish for details' or receive the 'positive minimal responses' (as we say in linguistics), the supportive 'mm hmms' that would indicate my accuracy. Silence would normally be interpreted as uncooperative or, in a psychic reading, inaccuracy.

This would be a warm, perhaps even a sweaty reading and I needed to consult a professional unpsychic – Ian Rowland. As we all know, our good friend wrote the definitive book on the subject, The Full Facts Book of Cold Reading (available at www.ianrowland.com). This is the Bible of Cold Reading.

I engaged in a cramming session of research until I was equipped with the concise facts of cold reading. I realised that the lack of a face-to-face encounter could actually act in my favour. All I needed was a pleasant voice, a calm, sympathetic demeanour and to make assertions that would sound meaningful. I took comfort in Rowland's advice. I could offer non-specific specific Rainbow Ruses and Fuzzy Facts all washed down with some Fine Flattery. I was as ready as I would ever be.

I awaited the appointed hour of my 'interview'. It came and went. Had I been the victim of someone's joke? Did the 'job' really exist? Did the 'psychic panel' re-assess my performance and decide to cull me from the shortlist? I emailed Absolutely Psychic hoping to reschedule the test and learnt why the initial test didn't take place. Holly, test co-ordinator and psychic, had dialled the wrong number by

mistake. Insert obvious joke here...

Holly did call on time for the second appointment and apologised for misdialling the country code. After a few pleasantries, Holly asked me to give her a general reading, and general it was. After a meaningful pause I opined that I could feel a sense of the 'circle of life' about her, a "beginning or an end", a "start or finish", a "death or a birth". Perhaps there has been a passing in her family or the family of a friend or acquaintance? Or a birth? Perhaps this message was metaphorical. Maybe she will commence or finish a project. Start or end a relationship? Or does it mark renewal and rejuvenation? I was starting to confuse myself with my circumlocution. Holly remained completely silent, no reaction at all. This was off-putting. I tried to construe this as her being engrossed in my reading, so that I could maintain my momentum.

So I continued. Knowing that Absolutely Psychic had recently branched out into international contacts I stated that I sensed that Holly had embarked on a new project. I added that this undertaking should prove to be fulfilling and lucrative. I sensed that she had been very busy of late and had less time to devote to friends and family. Feeling confident about making general, future predictions that couldn't be evaluated then and there, I cautioned Holly that this state of affairs could continue for some weeks to months, after which I 'saw' her embarking on a trip or journey of some sort. A trip related in some way to her past or future.

Getting into the swing of things, I was actually disappointed when Holly interrupted me to prematurely end the reading. We were only 5 minutes into the reading. Her closing words sounded ominous, "I've heard as much as I need to. Thanks." I was a little shocked. I had clearly bombed. I might have fooled these people with a glowing resume, a prepared email reading and a general, informal chat room reading but the real test had exposed me, perhaps not as a skeptic but certainly as a novice. The whole premise for my investigation was seemingly invalidated. It was time to put away my crystal ball.

Another email awaited me the next day. I could smell the rejection. "Thank you for taking time to apply and test out for our Network. We have purposely constructed this e-mail as we are busy with a million duties to keep business flowing".

My heart sank...until I read the next line. "We would like to offer you an Independently contracted Psychic job with APN".

I got the job! This was the most excited I could ever be about a job I didn't want!

I was provided with a website to download a contract that greeted me with: "CONGRATULATIONS! Only 1% of applicants are offered contracting!" The margin of unsuccessful applicants was ever widening. Another part of their website notes: "OUR SCREENING PROCESS IS EXTENSIVE. All readers are thoroughly tested. Take a look at our application <http://www.absolutelypsychic.com/form5.html>. This is only a small portion of our screening process. If a Psychic reader is contracted on our Network, client feedback is a very important factor for the duration of tenure. We have published our statistics in the past. Our clients can bear witness to having seen on Absolutely Psychic: July 27,2002: 74 Applicants - 43 Tested- 4 selected and September 3: 41 Applicants - 23 Tested - 2 selected".

Yet they need an automated message to inform such a small portion of applicants that they have been successful? It appears that the company has a lengthy and involved, yet not stringent

procedure, and a high turnover of 'psychics'.

As a potential employee, I became privy to insider information. For instance, how much does a telephone psychic get paid? Novice readers are paid 23 cents per minute for a four month probationary period. Subsequent to this period, readers receive a generous four cent per minute pay increase. Using the service can prove to be a costly exercise. Clients phone a 1-800 line and are charged at a rate of \$1.99 USD per minute for a phone reading (Surprisingly, this rate is relatively cheap as other comparable companies charge \$3.99 USD per minute yet still only pay their staff around 20 cents per minute).

Their website FAQ's note: "I live outside North America. Can I still use the Phone Network? YES! In fact, this is our speciality. We are the only network that has the technology to connect Non North America Clients to North America and NON North America readers without charging you extra and yet offering this service in an on demand fashion". Let's hope that their overseas clients see through this careful wording and realise this rate does not include international/long distance rates, when a Non-North American caller phones North America. A call to Absolutely Psychic could be a costly mistake indeed. (At a loose calculation, a 15 minute call through this company, including psychic fees and call charges, would amount to about \$45 AUD.)

Yet, Absolutely Psychic make much of their 'ethical' business practices. "Many Psychic Networks also mix their business with SEX. Most 900 lines operate phone sex lines. Also, many Online Psychic Networks operate in the adult entertainment business." Not Absolutely Psychic. Their bread and nutter is love, not sex. "Jump right in and ask them straight out 'love life?' 95% of readings are love readings and 5% work. One of our readers with a very good sense of humor instantly says to clients 'are we checking your love meter today?'" While Absolutely Psychic offer their new readers a list of helpful 'reading tips', such as these, they don't have a code of ethics.

New consultants serve their probationary period as telephone psychics. After passing this successfully, contractors may progress to email and chat room readings. This is a lucrative, multi-billion dollar industry in the United States. A simple 600 word reading, like my test reading, is charged at \$59.95 USD while a 1300 word reading is only \$79.95 USD! Online readings rake in the cash too, from \$29.95 USD for a 15 minute reading through to \$89.95 for an hour long reading. Like a psychic pyramid scheme, clients receive a free 15 minute reading for every two friends they 'refer' to the company. Clients can also get ripped off in the language of their choice as Absolutely Psychic offer bilingual readers, specialising in Spanish and French.

But what was my decision to be? Should I accept the job and defect to the other side? I could join the lofty ranks of John Edward, Sylvia Brown, Athena Starwoman and Doris Stokes who are (or were) more famous and wealthy than most skeptics. Surely, with my insider knowledge, I could be the best of the worst! But then, wouldn't I have the skeptics on my tail? "She was one of us!" you'd protest. But I have a shrewd response for that one. "Yes, I was a prominent skeptic, a public and active member, but through this environment of scientific testing and research I came to accept the undeniable proof that psychics do exist...and I am one!" What a selling point! Or perhaps I could convince myself with uncritical, faulty logic that I am, in fact, a psychic. I thought I was a skeptic, but passing these rigorous tests qualifies me as a psychic. I simply need to redefine my concept of 'psychic'.

Of course, I didn't accept the contractual position. I will remain poor...but ethical. Perhaps I could have accepted the offer and spent each reading disseminating critical thinking skills to my clients! I

sent the following email to Absolutely Psychic.

To whom this may concern,

In response to an advertisement through careerone.com.au I applied for a position as 'psychic' through your company. I successfully passed each stage of the Absolutely Psychic screening process, including the application submission, the email reading, the chat room reading and the telephone test. According to your website, this is an incredible feat as, depending on which link I read, only 1-5.7% of applicants are successful. Finally, I was offered a contractual position as a 'psychic' with Absolutely Psychic.

The purpose of my contact is to inform you that, despite passing your reputedly stringent series of tests, I do not profess any psychic ability and am, in fact, a prominent member of the Australian Skeptics Inc., where I undertake investigations of this nature, to test claims of the paranormal. Employing 'cold and hot reading' skills, amateur psychology and generalisations were sufficient for me to infiltrate your ranks and be offered a position with your organisation. This does not speak highly of either the legitimacy of your operation or the practice itself.

I would be very interested in any feedback you may have regarding this situation.

Yours Sincerely,

Karen Stollznaw, the 'Psychic Skeptic'.

I never received a reply.

My objective was to see if a supposedly ethical and reputable company, with allegedly high standards, would hire a person without psychic ability. And they did. They hired a skeptic as a psychic. In that I applied for the position, the company presupposed that I am psychic. Their tests did not prove psychic ability. Any thoughtful person with minimal advice-giving skills would have passed. And I do not claim to be psychic. I have no reason to believe others who claim psychic ability. Yet, by the admission of Absolutely Psychic, successfully passing their test system means that I am placed within the top 1% of psychics!

What is of concern is the overwhelmingly uncritical acceptance of 'psychic' as a valid profession and one through which people can seek legitimate advice. This is an industry with no regulations or accountability. While I undertook some research for this investigation I unearthed several articles from prominent newspapers that did not examine the phenomenon but accepted it unquestioningly and offered readers a psychic shopper's guide to 'choosing the right psychic for you!' Rather than exploring the legitimacy of the practice these articles only distinguished between a 'professional psychic' and what they perceived to be an 'unscrupulous psychic'. The only criteria for the former seemed to be a psychic who offered the best value for money, was friendly and provided an appropriately mystical ambience. The employee expectations of Absolutely Psychic were no more profound. In hiring a skeptic as a psychic, these companies don't expect more than a credible manner and a 'gift of the gab'. In accepting this, their clients don't expect any more either. As Absolutely Psychic say, "We don't need to say our Psychics are the Best, our clients do all day long!"

By Karen Stollznaw

www.bad-language.com