



Lose the Attitude

Why it pays to be nice—even in business

I loved my dad dearly, especially for his remarkable aptitude for being wrong about just about everything. He was actually right about everything, but something in his complicated psyche made him say the exact opposite.

My dad used to tell me, “You have to be tough to survive in this dog-eat-dog business world. Nice guys finish last.” Once I learned that his advice was 180 degrees from what he really meant, I knew he was telling me that it pays to be nice when you can.

What Does “Nice” Have to do With Direct Marketing?

I was thinking about this question yesterday when I came across a direct mail package I’d received in late August. The package was a “call for entries” for creative awards. There was a fake coffee stain on it and, on the top in faux handwriting, this copy appeared: “Lois, saved this from the trash—it seems you’re hotter than backstage at a bikini contest.” On the bottom, in the same handwritten type, “They’re calling you the midwife because you always deliver! A friend.”

Quelle crock! Sure, the package was personalized, but it was the opposite of nice. I guess someone thought the attitude was cool in that super hip, sardonic way.

This reminds me of what the president of car rental giant Hertz told Lee Clow, ad agency TBWA’s renowned chief creative officer, years ago when they were shooting commer-

cial: “Any competitor can duplicate our claims,” he said. “I want people to like us.” So next time you’re writing or approving copy—regardless of whether it’s for a letter, brochure, commercial, ad, e-mail—read it a few times, out loud at least once. Then think about whether you’d like the person writing to you. If not, write a different draft to better achieve the personality you want to convey.

Unless you’re selling the latest Ludacris CD, forget about being edgy and focus on being a person. Try a personal story, your own or a terrific testimonial from someone else.

With this in mind, here are a few ways to incorporate a bit of kindness in your own direct marketing efforts.

Nice is a user-friendly Web site. I’m going to New York this week, and I’ve decided that while I’m in town I want to see a musical. I went online to purchase tickets for “Mama Mia,” but the Web site offered no way to figure

out where seats are located, so I called the toll-free number. The Telecharge lady was nice and said she’d e-mail me the tickets in three days. “Why so long?” I asked. “Oh, a lot of people are buying tickets to the show.” Can you imagine? If I owned that Web site, I’d get the cast of “Ben-Hur” in there to process orders right away. How does Home Shopping Network handle “a lot of people” buying things?

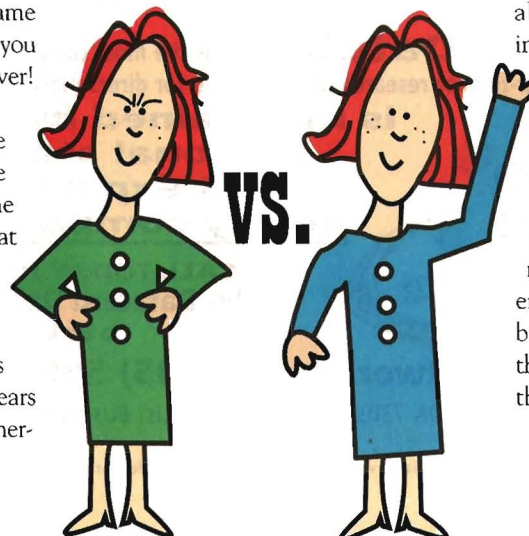
I’m flying out tomorrow morning and still haven’t received an e-mail. Next trip, I’ll find another way to get tickets.

Visit your Web site as a customer. Buy something. Ask a question. Find out what the experience really is like. If it’s frustrating or annoying, you’ve got a problem. The first rule of nice is the same as the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

This rule is more important than ever because the Internet, powerful selling tool that it is, has changed all the rules. Now the customer is in charge and can wander off to the competition with a few clicks ... and then write about the whole thing in a blog.

Nice is remembering I’m your customer. My agency recently started working with several companies that do most of their business online. Amazingly, none of them has the foggiest idea as to who their best customers are. And no clue

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when anyone last bought anything from them.

So we poked around their databases and found thousands of customers who had once made large purchases but seem to have defected. When we reactivate these folks, our clients will make some pretty nice profits.

It's also a nice idea to remind people what they bought for whom last holiday season, or Valentine's Day, Secretary's Day, etc.

Nice is sending a gift. Think about interesting, creative personal gifts for your customers this year. Whether you have 10 or 10 million, it's good to stay in touch with them, remember birthdays and send a small gift with the customer's purchase.

Special gifts are rare, and they can make you and your company memorable to your customer. Years ago, our creative director, Mike McCormick, bought one of the first Ford Explorers,

and a few months later UPS dropped off a huge package for him. Inside the package was a thank-you letter from Ford and two director's chairs folded in a duffel bag. Mike was so impressed that he talked about those chairs and the power of a "surprise and delight" gift in at least 12 speeches. I wonder how many people were influenced to buy an Explorer from all that buzz? I know Mike bought another Explorer.

Words of Wisdom My Dad Actually Meant to Say

1. Try to sound like you are a real human being in all your written communications. If people like you in the mail, they'll buy from you. I call it Friendship Branding in my book "Customers for Keeps."

2. Consider how your Web site can be easier for your customers to use. Every time I go to a site and have trouble ordering, I leave. And that happens a lot. So, try it yourself.

3. Remember your customer is key

to your business. In a recent column, I wrote about a dry cleaner that offered 20 percent off the cost of dry cleaning for new customers only! I brought in lots of clothes, but there was no discount for me. I drove by that dry cleaner the other day and noticed it had closed.

4. Treat customers like best friends. Send them gifts, thank-you notes, birthday cards, and remember their special events.

5. Do a good deed, help someone out, write a nice note to a colleague. It does your heart good and makes someone happy.

Happy, positive people are more creative. ■

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