



THE BLEND

WHISTLE A HAPPY TUNE

Whenever I Feel Afraid

The Chinese are reputed to have had a favourite curse, 'May you live in interesting times', which is likely to have been culled by European visitors from the much less sinister 'Better to be a dog at peace than a man in chaos'. Whatever its origins, we could be forgiven for envying the hound that lies happily at our feet, for these are certainly interesting times.

In times of uncertainty, it's easy to feel cursed. As misfortune rains down upon our heads, it seems even the heavens conspire against us. Naturally, we view a newcomer with suspicion when previous arrivals brought only bad news. We regard the world balefully from the corner where we've taken cover, or emerge snarling at what might prove to be the latest threat. Which just sometimes happens to come in the guise of a customer.

Now that's not very attractive, is it?

In interesting times, there's a real danger that we lash out at the customer, the one figure we should be welcoming at our door with open arms. But instead, we find it difficult to shake off our discontent, our sense that the world is against us, and take it out on those very customers who might offer the silver lining to the great cloud of trouble that sits above our business.

Of course, it stands to reason that we can't send packing those who might sustain us through the hard times. None of this is deliberate. But sometimes we can't help ourselves. Our misery's not inclined to

love any company that hasn't come to share our sense of grievance. In fact, if we dared to admit it, our misery resents the untroubled appearance of the smiling guest, and is sorely tempted to offer them a sharp elbow in the ribs.

I Hold My Head Erect

So what can we do to pack up our troubles and smile instead at the stranger who lightens our door?

First, we have a decision to make. I remember asking a professional speaker for some advice on how best to prepare to make a presentation. Sometimes you'll hear suggestions that the most effective way to overcome stage-fright or the fear of public speaking is to imagine that you're somewhere else or that your audience is in their underwear or otherwise at a disadvantage. But this speaker had a much more practical suggestion for me. He said I should decide that I was going to like my audience and that they in turn were going to like me.

I'll admit it seemed to me to be a little simplistic but I tried it. And you know what? It worked. This simple decision to like the people I was about to address transformed them in my eyes and, in turn, changed the way I felt about making my presentation.

This same approach works in any business and in any selling scenario. When we're feeling put upon or under the weather, we can make the simple decision that we're going to like our customer. I've

heard somewhere that love is not a feeling, it's a decision, and I've found that liking your customer and wishing them well works in the same way. When we take that decision, it changes completely how we see them and how we feel about doing business with them.

Make Believe You're Brave

Of course, the decision to like your customer in this way is just the beginning. Once we choose this course of action, many of the things that can poison our exchanges with our customers get flushed away too.

The first to go is that sense of resentment that our customer simply doesn't 'get it'. When our customers seem underwhelmed by our offer, it's all too easy to feel that the fault is theirs. As customers, all of us have stood at a counter at one time or another, looking to buy something and feeling that the seller takes us for an idiot. A simple request can be made to seem as if we are asking for the earth. The seller barely conceals their irritation and frustration and we leave feeling stupid and unreasonable for asking in the first place.

As business-owners, our decision to like our customers means that we're far more likely to accept their requests with understanding and patience. This is hugely important. A customer is likely to forgive and forget any shortcoming when they feel liked and respected, but will never forget the deep hurt of our contempt. We may not set out to resent our customer, but it's all



About The Blend

Whistle A Happy Tune is one of a series of articles in which Gerard takes a look at how to cook up a great brand, samples some of the ingredients you'll need to make one of your own and weighs up the impact of branding on different parts of the business mix.

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BY GERARD TANNAM

too easy when we're hurting ourselves not to strike out at them in this way.

Also quick to go is the sense that we are somehow adversaries of our customer in the buying and selling exchange. When we are inclined to hide away or retreat from our customer's advances, it's very easy to see them as the enemy, as someone to be challenged, outwitted and negotiated with. Of course, we don't do this out in the open. But we are inclined to keep our cards very close to our chest, trading information and details only when we feel it is to our advantage. Examples of this include offering a confusing range of rates and charges, some of which are only offered to those 'in the know' or those who somehow get the upper hand on us, or pointing out a particular benefit only when specifically asked.

When we see our customer as our partner and the endgame as an exchange that profits us both, we no longer need to be cagey about the cards we hold. Instead, we can put everything on the table and work out together how we will do business. Think how powerful it is when we alert our customer to some unseen advantage that makes their buy an even better deal for them.

And think how much more likely they are to return when they see you as an ally, working with them to help them to get the best result.

The Happiness In The Tune

But it doesn't end there; our simple decision to like our customer has even

more far-reaching effects. It helps us move beyond making a perfunctory offer of service to our customers.

Many of us don't even realise how unthinking we've become in our exchanges with our customers. We make well-meaning but empty promises, often couched in the platitudes of the corporate mission-statement: 'Our goal is to exceed your expectations' or 'Our aim is to please'. Meanwhile, our customers are unclear how that relates to their own experience and unconvinced that we understand them in any real way. Picture for a moment how you feel when someone tells you that their goal is to exceed your expectations or something similar. Does that type of language leave you feeling truly appreciated or alive with anticipation? It's much more likely to strike you as insincere or dull, the trite remark of someone simply going through the motions.

When we decide to like those who buy from us, we are much more inclined to look them in the eye and find out how they feel and what it is they really want. As a result, our genuine desire to please prompts a much more heartfelt exchange with our customer. We talk more in practical terms of making them welcome, of being only a short step or phone call away, of wanting to hear from them about what's working and what's not. In lowering our guard, we drop the corporate-speak and fall easily into the natural language of an everyday exchange between two people.

The Trick Will Take You Far

Of course, there are those of us who will believe that putting a brave face on it when our world is in turmoil is somehow insincere. But this is to misunderstand the essential nature of business. Our customers usually do not buy from us out of a sense of duty or sympathy for our plight. Even the more generous amongst them are unlikely to invest in a lost cause. Commercial exchanges in the main are driven by a sense of pragmatic optimism and it is up to us to paint the picture of the positive outcome that results from our transaction.

As business-owners, we must be business-leaders, and never more so than in what we have described here as interesting times. Our customers look to us to take a lead and we are only deluding ourselves if we believe that they will choose to buy from a resentful or snarling seller.

Whistling a happy tune is a trick of sorts, but it is the same trick that enabled us to set up in business in the first place, the trick that sets us apart as entrepreneurs and has us act in the belief that we are the masters of our own fortune, the ones who make things happen.

As business-makers, we cannot afford to be fearful and to hide away. Even when we shiver in our shoes, we must choose to hold our head erect and whistle the happy tune that will attract people to us and make us their natural choice.