

Out of the Cave:

Returning the Personal Touch to Business

Ever since the first cavemen bartered clamshells and spears, business has been about people interacting. In simpler times, commerce was conducted according to the look in someone's eye or the feel of his handshake. Today we have computers, fax machines, modems, e-mail and cell phones—all powerful tools that have increased our productivity. Those devices have shrunk our world, but, in some ways, they've also distanced us from each other by reducing personal interaction. In the name of efficiency, profitability and progress, we've found ways to place orders, sell products and exchange information without ever coming into contact with another human being.

We're losing touch with the personal aspects of business, and that's unfortunate. Reaching out and interacting with the people who work with you is one of the most effective, but overlooked, business tools.

Those of us who work in sales know that a personal touch can be good for business. That idea was illustrated recently by an article I read in *Machinery Market* about a report called *Corporate Carelessness*, published by the British Royal Mail. According to the report, 52% of the manufacturing and engineering companies surveyed said they had not renewed a supplier's contract because of poor service. Only about 5% of companies said that price was the main reason for firing a supplier, while 25% blamed unhelpful staff.

Another study performed by the Small Business Administration found that 68% of customers seek new suppliers because they perceive that the sales staff of the existing supplier doesn't care about them.

I'm reminded of a television commercial from several years ago in which the president of a big company learned that one of his best and oldest customers was taking his business elsewhere. The president called a meeting and handed out plane tickets to all his salespeople so that they could fly around the country and reacquaint themselves with all of their customers. The president himself went to visit the old friend who had given up on them.

Maybe it's unrealistic in today's business world for us to achieve the kind of personal service portrayed in commercials. Most of us don't have the time or money to give all our customers that much attention.

But that doesn't mean we should forget about them, either. Our busy lives lead us to focus on projects and deadlines rather than the people who need those projects or who help us meet those deadlines.

Our work lives are filled with stacks of documents, one just like another. Invoices, purchase orders, contracts, blueprints—they're a blur. The stacks on our desks today aren't much different from the ones that were there last year. Also, we're so used to receiving anonymous, computer-generated junk mail that when we receive a message from an actual person, our routine is interrupted. That interruption gives power to the message.

I'm a big believer in personal correspondence, and not just because it helps with sales. Not everything that's beneficial to your business is measurable in terms of immediate impact on the bottom line. Since starting this magazine, we've made a conscious and concerted effort to stay in touch with the people who have helped us put it together, from our technical editors to the people we interview to the authors who write for us. For example, after an issue goes out, we try to send copies to each author along with a personal note—thanking them for their contribution, forwarding any feedback we've received, encouraging them to let us know if they have ideas for future articles. These people aren't our paying customers, but they're essential to what we do. Without them, *Gear Technology* would be just another magazine. I believe that by maintaining personal relationships, we assure the continued success of this endeavor and the ability of our magazine to help you with your pursuits.

All of the personal attention that I'm advocating can be very time-consuming. I'm not suggesting that you abandon important projects for the sake of catching up with a colleague. Nor am I in favor of ignoring the things that make us more efficient, effective and profitable. But losing sight of the personal aspects of business may, in the long run, be harmful.

The cavemen communicated with handshakes and discerning looks because they had no other choice. Today we have many ways to communicate, and the number increases every day. But even with those choices, we can't let ourselves forget that effective communication will always be personal.



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