



Protective Service

Maintaining Client Comfort Helps Profits

By: **Steve Brainerd**, Founder & President of Durham Group, Inc.

“Where’s my discount, Jack?” asked Eva. It was the first time I laughed in 24 of the most emotionally painful hours I have ever spent- the sudden loss of my father-in-law and close friend, Joe Gondek, on Oct. 1, 1986.

Jack was the town funeral director, and he and Joe had been close buddies and fellow community servants for more than 35 years. Joe was always doing good deeds for others, but when he helped Jack, frugal Joe would say “When I die, I want a discount.” Now, we had come to collect from Joe.

In all the shock, grief and loss we were suffering, Jack was our comfort zone. With Jack, there was nothing short of 100 percent complete and total trust. He even talked us out of buying a more expensive casket. How did Jack build such a bond? What can we do to nurture these kinds of quality relationships? These are questions we should be asking ourselves regularly.

At this point, you might be saying, “Wait a minute Steve. That was the good old days. Things have changed. You are right; with e-mail, voicemail, answering machines, ATMs, pay-at-the-pump and urban sprawl, there is less human interaction.

I can’t prove it, but my strong hunch is this: With Jack, the critical factor in building strong relationships was the cumulative effect of day-to-day caring and interaction, rather than the use of technology.

Sure, Internet, social media and media consolidation are neat tools. And like most tools, the key to their value is the skill of the craftsman behind them. How about people skills that help secure ties that bind? What does it cost us when we compromise that human touch?

Last summer I went to get my brakes checked at a shop where I had been a loyal customer for five years. The appointment was made a week ahead of time. I made special arrangements to leave the car there. When I came to pick it up in the late afternoon, it wasn’t ready.

I asked the service clerk why, and he replied, “sorry, we didn’t get to it. We’ll need to reschedule.” No apology. No explanation. And no more business for me. I felt they didn’t have respect for my time.

Had the relationship been stronger I might have quibbled. Instead, I was willing to leave that comfort zone and seek a new one with the competition. I believe there is a moral here.

We need to build ourselves into a strong comfort zone and safe harbor for our clients. The question is how. In a world that is using more technology and less human interaction, how do we stay close?

The list of ideas could fill many pages. Notes of appreciation, recognition, remembering birthdays, smiles, remembering names, belonging to service clubs, listening, being more empathetic—all of these can help.

It boils down to a lot of common sense not commonly done, doesn’t it? It takes effort and building new habits, Jack the funeral director had the right habits.

There’s a good analogy to remember here: Customers are like teeth. Ignore them, and they will go away.

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