

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES

PERSPECTIVES ON SUPERIOR SERVICE AND WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIPS



NA MI

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Specializing in helping organizations:

- Manage customer expectations
- Deliver superior service
- Improve communications
- Build trusting, supportive relationships

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- *Managing Expectations*
- *Establishing Service Level Agreements*
- *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*

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How to Sell

Successful selling requires more than just touting tantalizing benefits. Whether you're selling products or services — or you're trying to persuade others to “buy” your ideas, proposals or recommendations — how you sell is as important as what you sell. In particular, you'll be more likely to make the sale if you consider the perspective of your intended buyer. For example:

- Some people are leery about buying because they've been burned by solutions that proved to be more complicated, befuddling, expensive, time-consuming, or troublesome than it was worth. Make the effort to learn about this past history, and frame your information accordingly.

SALES SAVVY

• Some people are threatened by anything new or different. Hitting such people over the head with the benefits they will gain yields nothing but people with sore heads. Take their fears into account, and point out not just how your solution differs from current approaches, but also all the ways in which it's similar.

• People will reject what you're selling if the proclaimed benefits are irrelevant to them. A salesman contacted me about a whoop-de-do business product that, he claimed, would improve my effectiveness, enhance my efficiency, and save me money. Except that for my business, it wouldn't do any of these things. If he had bothered to ask a few questions, he could have made a more pertinent presentation.

• A sales effort that ignores the context will go nowhere. Perhaps the person you're selling to went on a spending spree last quarter and has been promised a downward career path if this pattern continues. Or maybe the company requires so many levels of approval even to purchase a paperclip that it's just not worth the effort. Ask what would need to change in order for the sale to proceed.

• Miscommunicate with the buyer in some fundamental way, and it won't matter what you're trying to sell. For example, you can lose a sale by talking technical with a non-technical person (or non-technical with a technical person), or by aggressively pursuing the sale without first seeking some level of human connection.

• Sometimes, the obstacle isn't the buyer, but the buyer's superiors, who first need to see the merits of the case. In other words, your buyer may need to make a sale before you can make one yourself. So the key to your success is to find out what you can do to help the person prepare a persuasive case to these higher-ups.

• Some people simply need time. Overnight is not the time frame in which they make decisions. The bigger the decision, in terms of bucks, impact or risk, the longer the sale will take. For some people, *every* decision is a big one. The key is patient persistence — and persistent patience.

COMMUNICATIONS

Getting People's Attention

If your written material invariably and predictably gets people's undivided attention, skip this article. Otherwise, read on.

Let's say you face one of these situations: You want your management to read your proposal and preferably sooner rather than (the more usual) much, much later. Or you want your customers to read and heed your guidelines. Or you wish those dudes upstairs would follow the instructions and explanations you meticulously prepared for them.

When people face an information overload, and their in box is buckling under #1 priorities, and they need a speed reading course just to get through their email, conventional methods of gaining their attention won't work. You have to *have* their attention before you can *hold* their attention. That means you have to be creative.

Tantalizing titles

One way to be creative is with titles. Authors know that the right title can make a difference between a book buyer and a passerby. Titles I especially like include *Why We Buy* by Paco Underhill and *How We Know What Isn't So* by Thomas Gilovich. Notice the titles that intrigue you, and think about how you can apply the same idea to your material. Aim for titles that will grab your readers' interest, whet their appetite, and pique their curiosity. What about a proposal entitled *How to Benefit from Customer Complaints* or guidelines entitled *Three Surprising Simple Steps for Spectacularly Savvy Service*?

The same idea applies to email messages. If you want your messages to stand out, make the subject line enticing. "An idea with particular pizzazz" is more likely to catch the recipient's attention than merely "Ideas." Create subject lines that are both meaningful and clever, and you'll find that more recipients will notice your messages — and actually read them.

Good looks

A second way to grab readers' interest is to give your material a captivating look. Fair warning, though: A catchy look is not necessarily a readable look. For example, many print ads for high-tech products fall short because the complexity of the images masks the intended message.

The problem with business material, though, is just the reverse: important material with exciting ideas or critical information and a look that's positively yawn-

producing. Spruce up the look of your documents. Why limit clip art and word art to presentations when you can just as easily use them in your documents? Make your material look lively, and people will feel lively reading it.

Now opening . . .

A third way to gain readers' attention is with opening lines. One of my favorite opening lines is this one: "On a cold blowy February day a woman is boarding the ten A.M. flight to London, followed by an invisible dog." That's the opening line of Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs*, the 1984 Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction. I don't have the patience for books in which I have to wade through 100 pages before the plot begins to thicken. I don't even want to wade through page 2. I want to be hooked by the end of the first sentence, and Lurie's book did that for me.

Consider how you might use similar opening-line attention-getters in your reports, proposals, instructions, memos and newsletters. For example:

- If you think 1,500 calls per month to the Help Desk is a lot, wait till you read what customers have been able to accomplish as a result of our help.
- This is a set of guidelines about security procedures for people who hate to read guidelines about security procedures.

Documents as snooze-inducers

Of course, all these techniques are worth little if what follows could cure insomnia. So steer away from the pompous professional prose that's so rampant in business material. It's a misconception that business writing must be formal. A conversational, down-to-earth style will win you more readers — and more *eager* readers — than stodgy, passive-voice writing. Be yourself and dare to write as if it's *you* doing the writing. Remember: Mind-numbingly idiosyncratic multisyllabic circumlocutions will impress people on for as long as it takes them to crumple your document and toss it. Obfuscate at your own risk.

If you have something important to say, grab people's attention right from the start. Then give them a reason to want to read it and a style that'll make it enjoyable to read. They may even read it all the way to the end. Just as you have. ☺ 

MANAGING CHANGE

That's Right — I Mean Left!

Have you ever driven on the other side of the road? I don't mean like here in Boston, where they do it for sport. I mean in a country where they drive on the opposite side of the road from what you're used to. It's an eye-opening experience when something as familiar as driving suddenly becomes so unfamiliar.

That was my experience on a trip to Scotland with my husband, Mr. Honk-If-You-Want-To-See-Aggressive-Driving. With confidence aforethought, Mr. Honk-If pulled right out into rush-hour traffic, as if he'd been doing alternative-side-of-the-road driving all his life.

For the first part of the day's outing, I opted to serve in a support capacity, which consisted of screeching, "Keep left! Keep left!" This I interspersed with high-decibel shrieking when I thought a car coming toward us was going to smack into us. I shrieked a lot that day.

Then it was my turn to drive. "Just keep left," I told myself a few million times. At first, it was like doing something old and familiar but at the same time strangely new and different. I had to quickly unlearn old habits (or at least temporarily file them away) and substitute new ones.

Driving on the other side of the road proved to be easier than I expected. But not so driving on the other side of the car. When Boston drivers drive on the other side of the road, they stay on the same side of the car while doing it. But in most countries where you drive on the other side of the road (left, in this case), you also switch to the other side of the car (right, right?)

After some initial shrieking — having excelled at it as the passenger, I kept it up as the driver — driving became more intuitive. However, in focusing so intently on the left

side of the road, we each veered too far left a few times, thereby grazing an assortment of immovable objects. We spent a goodly portion of the day in traffic circles going round and round, trying to figure out how to exit gracefully (which is to say, unsmashingly). But to our surprise, we found that the toughest driving was not in traffic, where you can simply follow the car in front of you, but when there was no one else around to imitate. Shriek! Screech!

The most striking part of the experience was how tiring it was. We were doing something that was as familiar as could be, and yet so unfamiliar as to require

intense concentration until new habits began to form. The experience reminded me how mentally and emotionally demanding it can be to adjust to change.

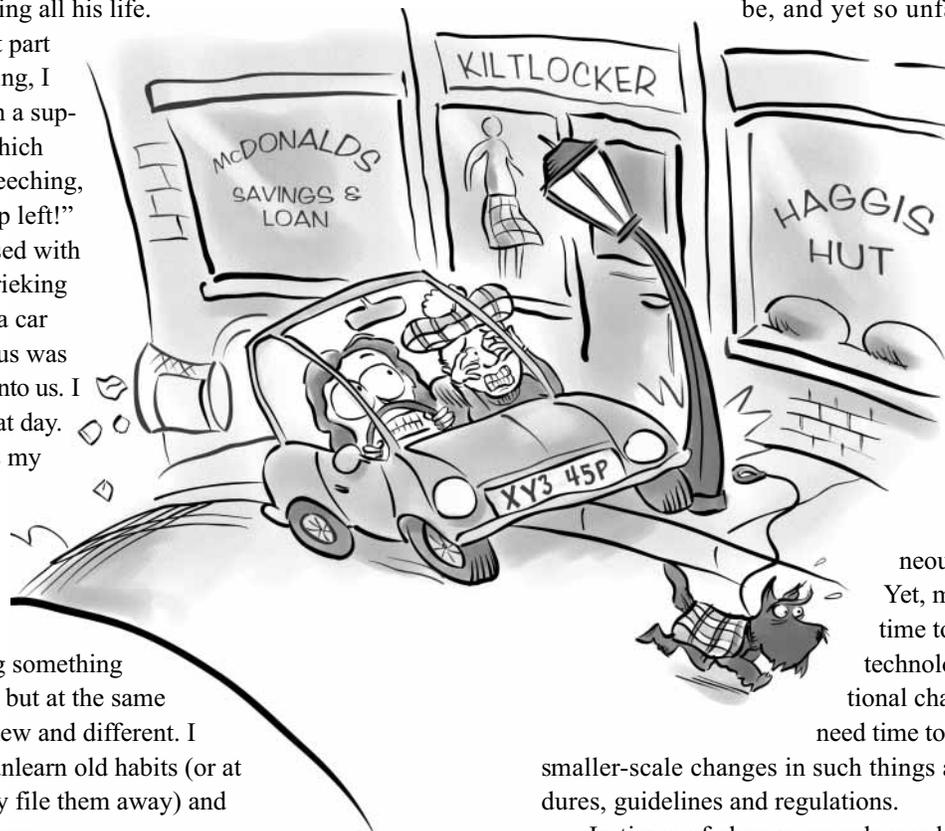
In the workplace, managers often expect people to instantaneously adopt change.

Yet, most people require time to adjust to large-scale technological and organizational change. They may also need time to adjust to seemingly

smaller-scale changes in such things as standards, procedures, guidelines and regulations.

In times of change, people need information to help them understand what's different and how they'll benefit, balanced by empathy to help them feel less alone and appreciate how they'll be affected. People need time to part with what was familiar and comfortable and to form new habits. And just as with traffic circles, they may go round and round before the new ways become intuitive.

Astute managers understand this adjustment process, allow for it, and help their employees through it. And they recognize the sounds of change, and respond accordingly. Shriek! Screech!



MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

That Does It: I (Partially) Quit!

Are you overworked? Is your to-do list overflowing? Have you ever found that just when you couldn't possibly handle one more thing, along came your manager with two or three more things?

Have you ever considered saying no? Or "Not today" or "Not with my current workload" or "Not unless you take away some of my other work"? Gulp!

The very thought of standing up to management is foreign to many people. And let's face it, at certain times and in certain companies, doing that could result in your promptly being escorted to the nearest exit. At the same time, if you keep taking what your higher-ups pile on and smiling heroically as your piles get even bigger, what's to clue them in that you've got more than you can handle? Before you get pushed too far, consider the way one manager, Sue, handled this type of situation.

Three for the salary of one

Sue was supposed to be a technical support manager, and she was. But she'd also been put in charge of operations, and had other responsibilities as well, including the development and implementation of a disaster recovery program.

In terms of accountabilities, Sue actually had three different jobs — but of course was being paid for only one. She kept telling her manager she needed either less work or more help. He appreciated her plight and had been trying to get more staff on board but had been unsuccessful in persuading his own management. He kept urging her to hang on just a little longer; help would be forthcoming soon.

Sue knew her boss was rooting for her, but in the meantime she was drowning in work. Finally, she concluded that she could no longer hold out for the indeterminate "soon." With her manager's approval, she made an appointment to see her boss's boss, the vice president. At the appointed time, she went to his office and he was — where? She didn't know, but he wasn't there. He had some other fire to fight and would be back later.

Resigned to the situation

Sue didn't need to wait any longer for the last straw — that was it. She calmly went back to her office and wrote a letter of resignation. But read this and read it carefully. She wrote a letter of resignation from just one of her three jobs. In her letter, she stated that she simply couldn't handle the load any more. She'd been hired as a technical support manager, and they'd have to relieve her of one of the other two responsibilities. Her letter contained no suggestion of "Do this or else." Nor did she give a deadline or hint that if her workload were not reduced, she'd quit.

Sue had little hope that her letter would change anything. Yet, in short order, she was relieved of her responsibilities for operations. Within a month, the job was turned over to another woman, someone they claimed they'd been preparing for this position, but who would not have been given it this soon but for Sue's letter. By acting on her own behalf, she was down to a mere two jobs for the salary of one.

Managing upward

Sometimes you have to stand up to your manager, and when the time comes to say, "I've had it," that's what you need to do. After all, if you don't manage your manager's expectations, you'll be reinforcing the expectation that you can do it all.

Books and articles galore offer advice on managing projects and staff. But whatever your role, don't overlook the importance of managing your manager. Don't assume it can't be done. Just remember to do it with diplomacy, tact, and a healthy dose of common sense. Otherwise, the disaster recovery you'll be in charge of will be your own. 

My books, *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them* and *Managing Expectations: Working With People Who Want More, Better, Faster, Sooner, NOW!* offer strategies and recommendations for managing expectations. For information, see <http://www.nkarten.com/book2.html>.

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