

THE CASE FOR KINDNESS

By Claire Sykes

Someone puts you on hold and forgets you exist. Or, a customer comes in with a return and one of your sales people grunts in disapproval, within earshot of the person. Maybe that customer, though, is raising his voice in anger. Then again, it could be *you* behaving so harshly, talking to someone in a huff just because you're in a hurry.

Who doesn't sometimes get rude or unreasonable, cranky or cross? In fact, rudeness is on the rise in our society, says 60 percent of the 2,103 people randomly surveyed in 2002 by Public Agenda, for The Pew Charitable Trusts. Certainly, we all have our days, but where does a growl get anyone? It may make you feel better, but only temporarily, and meanwhile, it only makes others feel bad. Instead, try a little tenderness. You're happier when you're kind instead of caustic and nice instead of nasty. You're also healthier. Whether at your home furnishings store or at home, being kind improves your physical and mental wellbeing, attracts benevolence from others and helps grease the wheels for getting where you want to go.

Linda Kaplan Thaler, CEO of The Kaplan Thaler Group, a New York advertising agency, says she built her billion-dollar company "not with fear and intimidation, but smiles and compliments." In the book that she and the firm's president, Robin Koval wrote, called *The Power of Nice: How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness* (Doubleday, 2006), they insist, "Every time you smile at a messenger, laugh at a

coworker's joke, thank an assistant, or treat a stranger with graciousness and respect, you throw off positive energy. That energy makes an impression on the other person that, in turn, is passed along to and imprinted on the myriad others he or she meets . . . And ultimately, those favorable impressions find their way back to you . . . You never know. When you're kind towards someone, you're spreading seeds that will grow and flower, but you don't know when, how or where."

Imagine this: Your friendly small talk with the postal carrier brightens his day. So he chats it up with the guy at the espresso cart who now doesn't feel so angry toward his boss. As a result, he tells the woman waiting in line that he really likes her curly hair, and this makes her smile—all the way into your home furnishings store. What a start for a successful sale!

But come on. You can't always be in a good mood. When you're not, chances are you're trying hard to get something or go somewhere. When you couldn't, you got frustrated, then bad manners got the better of you. You can blame it on lousy traffic or someone else's tardiness, but biology and evolution also play a part.

Gregory Fricchione, MD, director of the Benson Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine in Boston, explains: "The brain is outfitted to pursue and protect our basic needs of food, sex, shelter and control over our lives," whether that's trying to make it to a meeting on time or asking for a raise. "When your needs are thwarted, there's a tendency to become irritable and frustrated, which can lead to being unkind."

Fortunately, we're wired also for empathy. "As a species, we've evolved to require social support, as a survival strategy. And we also have the capacity to provide it," he continues. "Studies recently have shown that the human brain has what are called

‘mirror neurons.’ Your genes determine the quality and quantity of these neurons, and your upbringing plays a role in how they mature. But basically, when you observe someone in stress or trouble, the same area of both your brains are firing neurons. This allows you to feel what the other person is feeling, emotionally, and potentially respond with kindness and altruistic behavior.”

When you're courteous and kind to others, you can expect to get a lot of it back, even if only *you* know how nice you are—like when you plug a stranger’s parking meter just for the heck of it; or when you spend a little extra time trying to find just the right upholstery fabric for a customer, even if it means staying at the store a half hour later than you’d ideally like. But doesn’t doing these things lift your spirits? You bet. Says Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., professor of psychology at University of California, Riverside, “People who commit kind acts feel generous, optimistic and cooperative, and they look at others more charitably.”

When you're compassionate, your brain releases endorphins and other neuropeptides. “There may even be a ‘giver’s high,’” says Fricchione. “Your brain’s reward and motivation circuitry is stimulated. This not only makes you want to continue being loving and altruistic, but also it controls the way you respond to stress. Since stress is at the root of many health problems, being kind can potentially make you less vulnerable to diseases, serious and minor.”

Be kind, and you can put yourself in friendly contact with those you encounter, from the stranger sitting next to you on the bus to the customer who just said yes to buying that brand, new living room suite. “People want to interact with those who are nice to them,” says Ann Marie Sabath, president of At Ease, Inc., a business etiquette

consulting firm based in Cincinnati, Ohio, and author of *One Minute Manners* (Broadway Books, 2007).

Says Dan Butler, vice president of Retail Operations with the National Retail Federation, in Washington, DC, “Sometimes it’s the small courtesies you extend that go the furthest in building customer loyalty. All retailers, big and small, create their businesses one transaction at a time, and how you treat your customers during them always determines whether or not they will come back to your store.”

When it comes to running your retail home furnishings business, “treat your customers like old friends,” says Norman Wright, president of the Better Business Bureau of Northwest Florida, in Pensacola, Florida, USA. “Be nice to your employees, too, because they’ll in turn treat your customers that way.”

Says Butler, “Great sales people in retail know that you build a great client list by treating people the way you would like to be treated when *you* shop.” While the Golden Rule works in most cases, know when it’s not the way to go. Sometimes it’s more appropriate to “do unto others as *they* would want *you* to do unto *them*,” as Sabbath puts it. “And whenever you think of something positive about someone, share it with the person. It’s unkind not to!”

Contrary to the popular notion that “nice guys finish last,” it’s open-heartedness that helps you get ahead, at your home furnishings store and in life, in general. It’s not that difficult when you follow the Six Bs of kindness:

* **Be generous.** Do more than your share. For instance, when a customer wants to buy drapes in a color other than the ones you sell, go out of your way a little and do the research necessary to try to find them.

* **Be expressive.** Smile readily at people. For those who shop your store and buy things from it, send thank-you letters. Give words of encouragement and praise to your employees. And show your appreciation to vendors by paying your bills on time.

* **Be responsive.** Anticipate and answer to the needs of your customers, vendors and employees. When a shopper comes into your store, immediately greet them with a smile and a handshake. Promptly answer emails, letters, text messages and phone calls.

* **Be inclusive.** Inspire a business philosophy that builds community at your home furnishings store. Invite the new guy to lunch with you, ask your favorite vendor to join you in a game of golf, and draw in the shy bookkeeper with friendly conversation.

* **Be curious.** Show interest in others, instead of talking about yourself too much. During breaks and lunches, ask staff about their families and personal interests. Find out about some of your customers' hobbies, so you can converse with them about them.

* **Be considerate.** Don't keep people waiting: Arrive to meetings on time, or even earlier than scheduled. When you're having a conversation with someone, let the person finish their thought, without interruption, before you chime in.

Finally, says Sabath, "Be nice just for the sake of it—because you care—not to schmooze and try to get something from it. Kindness has to come from the core of you."

The best kindness is the type that's sincere. Being nice is not the nicest thing you can do for yourself if you suffer from "the disease to please." Says Vicki Rackner, MD, president of Medical Bridges, a patient advocacy company on Mercer Island, Washington, "You take kindness too far if you put others' needs ahead of your own, at your expense; or you're nice just to avoid conflict, rejection or disappointment."

Being nice should replete you, not deplete you. So begin with yourself. Continues Rackner, “Treat yourself with kindness, grace and consideration. That way you’ll have those things to give to others.”

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