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CHUCK TALK: Use the Tough Customer to Make Yourself Better

They are demanding but push a business to new levels

BY CHUCK MACHE

I'm sure you have war stories of dealing with people who just never seem satisfied.

Sticklers for every detail, they show no expression of gratitude or satisfaction for your nearly flawless delivery. They throw wild changes at you with unrealistic expectations.

Think about your best customers or clients for a moment. Somewhere in that group you are going to find individuals who are difficult, demanding, inconsistent in their communication, impatient and control freaks by nature.

They play their cards close to their vest and their loyalty seems to be an ongoing question mark. They keep you on your toes and challenge your time, patience, and even self-esteem. They can be the cause of those three in the morning thoughts that rob you of your sleep.

They're savvy because they do their homework. They're shrewd because their track record shows it and they're tough because that's the only way they know.

But they pay on time, every time, and you find a way to meet their needs. Your business relationship continues and they remain one of your best clients. And let's face it, at the end of the day it is all worth it. Right?

There is tremendous value beyond the obvious financial gain from doing business with "Mr. Tough Customer." In fact, you owe him a great big thank you. This may seem absurd to you and I can hear it now. "I bust my you-know-what for this guy and he's never happy, always demanding more out of me. Pushing, pushing and more pushing. Now you want me to thank him?"

That's exactly right and here is why. It is the tough, challenging, often unfair, unreasonable and certainly trying clients who make us bring our A game every time we deal with them. They are the ones that keep us sharp. They are the ones that force us to be innovative. They are the ones that make us think outside the box and solve problems that nobody else challenges us with. They are the ones who make us better at what we do. They force us to rise up. Why? Because if we don't, they'll go somewhere else.

Look at it this way and consider all of your other best clients, the ones that don't fit into the "tough customer" mold. Their needs are being met and you are performing to a level of client satisfaction that makes for a solid relationship. A certain win-win exists between the two of you. You hit deadlines, deliver on quality, say what you do, and do what you say. They're happy and you're happy.

What could be better in this relationship? Nothing! All is good, and typically when all is good, we "leave good enough alone." We're cozy with what is going on and not challenged or pushed to make things better.

To draw a broad comparison, I see people in the gym who have been working out for years and are in incredible shape. Occasionally, one of them will retain the services of a personal trainer.

Now if they're already in great shape, why are they getting a trainer? What more could they gain? They're ripped with muscle, injury free, in great cardio condition and now they're getting a trainer? The reason is that it takes a very rare human being that will push themselves beyond their own expectations – those of their existing environment.

Mr. Tough Customer keeps pushing us to get better and, if you are the very best or aspire to be, then you'll keep getting better.

Consider these steps next time you deal with Mr. Tough Customer:

- Treat your communication with him like a mini-sale. Reach closure on exactly what it will take to satisfy him. And while we all know nothing will truly satisfy him, you'll have some ammunition to use at the appropriate time if need be. Mr. Tough Customer will respect your clarity.
- Get ahead of him and make sure there are no surprises. Treat your relationship like a chess game. Mr. Tough Customer is predictable and you should be able to anticipate his next move. Be proactive and insure that all gray areas left open to your interpretation are clarified and become his commitment to the process.
- Congratulate yourself for being able to handle one of the most difficult things in business – a tough, demanding relationship. He's your client and that must make you pretty good. Mr. Tough Customer doesn't hang out with the weak.

Perhaps most importantly, don't forget to thank Mr. Tough Customer. Without him, all would be status quo in the world. He's the one making you take your game to the next level. And isn't that what we all want to do?

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