



How to Cheer Up Customers

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat e-update on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

This Christmas, I had intended to limit my buying to ordering gift cards over the Internet from Target and Starbucks. My plan was my way of avoiding going into stores, where I inevitably end up spending more than I had intended. Then I received an invitation to spend the holidays with my extended family, which includes three nieces under age 5. How could I show up without bundles of gifts?

I set out on a last-minute shopping spree about 5 p.m. last Thursday. Three hours later, I decided that I, unlike the federal government, had no need to spend billions. I was ready to head home. I walked to my car while pressing the electronic thingamajig to open the driver-side door. But nothing happened. I pressed again. And nothing happened again. After my third try, I realized that the opener was dead. Oops.

So I called AAA, which gave me a smile thinking about a recovering alcoholic I once knew who thought going to AA – as in Alcoholics Anonymous – meant riding endlessly in a car until you sobered up. But that's another story. The AAA representative said help would arrive in about 45 minutes. It didn't, but only because I belatedly realized I had given the wrong address for the shopping center. Look, I was flustered. I called with the correction. And waited.

Fast forward to 10 p.m. Most of the stores were now closed and I was shivering in the cold as I slumped next to my car. Finally, a truck emblazoned with the AAA logo pulled up. And out bounced a married couple named Laurie and Brandon O'Neal. They own O'Neal's Auto Transport in West Chester, about 30 miles northwest of Philadelphia. Personally, I would not have wanted to meet a person in my grumpy condition.

But, within two minutes, the O'Neals had charmed me back into a good mood by joking about my license plate, which says Mz Write; telling me the fast way to get AAA service, which is to say you're pregnant; and introducing me to their newly rescued dog Evie, who was sitting in the front seat of their truck.

In effect, they exemplified the classic customer service techniques that most business people know --- but rarely practice on a consistent basis. A refresher course for you and me:

Show enthusiasm. When I say the O'Neals bounced out of their truck, I'm not kidding. Everything about their smiles and body language showed enthusiasm for their auto repair business.

Find common ground. A love of dogs created an immediate connection for me and the O'Neals. Once I saw Evie staring soulfully from their truck, I figured these were my kind of humans.

Show emotion. Throughout the years, I have been put off by many business people acting overly stiff and formal. Laurie openly shared her grief over the death of another dog named Jada that



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eventually led to the adoption of Evie. Get this: after falling in love with their new dog via a photograph on the Internet, they left their home at 3 a.m. to drive to Connecticut to pick her up.

Share tips. When the O'Neals told me, the next time I called AAA, to say I was pregnant, I laughed aloud. Boy would my husband Joe be surprised!

Work fast. Despite all the conversation, the O'Neals had me back in my car in less than five minutes. If you're ever locked out of anything, give them a call.

Go the extra mile. Once I was sitting behind the wheel, the couple made sure my car would start before driving away. You would have thought I was their cherished relative.

Express your gratitude. I was so charmed by the O'Neals that I gave them a bonus guaranteed to make any dog lover happy: a chewy bone that I had just bought at Kmart. Merry Christmas, Evie. They acted as if I had handed them a blank check. But please do not share my largesse with my Mikey, a combo Portuguese water dog-Bichon frise mix adopted three years ago. Mikey still believes in Santa, and would be horrified to learn that another dog got his gift. Note to Mr. Claus: You do intend to buy a replacement chewy bone before Dec. 25, right?

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