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Company
Plus

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How to Help Grieving Shop Owners

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.*

The other night, I wandered by mistake into a stranger's funeral. The location was not a conventional church, temple, or mosque. The service I bumbled into was at a Blue Tulip gift shop, a regional version of a Hallmark Crown Store. The entire operation recently filed for bankruptcy; it's currently shutting down a dozen shops in the Northeast section of the United States.

Now, the event I haplessly showed up at officially was called a going-out-of-business sale. But don't let the euphemism fool you. Behind every retail closing are grieving owners and, in many cases, stressed out employees. In my view, business failure often churns up despondency similar to that suffered at real funerals.

Trust me on this, folks. I've been there. My husband Joe and I lost our shirts, our pants, our socks, our shoes, our coats, our hats, our underwear, and every single penny a decade ago in a failed printing franchise. We have never fully recovered financially or emotionally. We simply choose to march on.

Flooded with memories of our disaster, I wanted to find supportive, sympathetic, sincere words to say to the people numbly working their final shifts at Blue Tulip. But nothing sprang into my mind or onto my lips. So, instead of babbling incoherently, I strolled around the shop looking for something to buy with the cold, hard cash I guessed the owners sorely needed.

What caught my eye was a beautifully packaged set of pink cards heralding the birth of a new baby girl. Considering I am past child-bearing years, I had no use whatsoever for the announcements. But I bought them anyway. What can I say? I'm a sucker for human beings going through tough times. Holding hands and sticking together in crises is one of my core values.

In this dastardly economy, I suspect dozens of other stores – which held on by a thread through Christmas -- will be folding in the next few months across the country. Just last week, for instance, Circuit City announced that it's liquidating its locations and, in the process, laying off 30,000 people. So, if you happen to stumble into a business funeral in progress as I did at Blue Tulip, here are a few things you might want to do to show compassion and buoy, if only momentarily, the owners' and employees' spirits:

Pay full price. Call me an inept negotiator, but I think it's indefensible to try to strong-arm failing businesses into cutting prices even lower than already discounted. For heaven's sake, the shopkeepers feel bad enough without your pulling that kind of lousy stunt. Haven't you ever heard the unspoken rule about not kicking a person who's already down?

Offer moving help. If you barely know the store personnel, there's no need to end up at a chiropractor's office from spending a full day trying to carry boxes that weigh more than you do. But I bet many almost-defunct retailers would appreciate your spending 15 minutes or so doing a quick task such as unbolting shelving or taping up cartons.



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Lend equipment. You may happen to have a hand truck that would cut down on the number of trips a going-out-of-business griever has to make carrying boxes from the store to a truck. Why not offer it for a half day?

Share job-searching leads. Very few people losing a business have the financial means to go off to the Caribbean and lick their wounds for a few years. Once the retail site is locked, they need to turn their attention post haste to getting other jobs. If you know of openings related to their fields, by all means say so.

Invite people to networking events. In the mid 1990's, both Joe and I were utterly ground down emotionally by the time we had run out of funds to continue operations. Still in my 40's, I would have happily moved into an assisted living facility. I was that discouraged. I remember with much gratitude someone picking me up and driving me to a chamber of commerce meeting on a day that I was so depressed I could barely get out of bed.

Tell positive stories. Having survived and thrived through a lot of personal and professional disasters, I tend to believe the adage about what does not kill you makes you stronger. Sometimes it helps a grieving business person to hear anecdotes from individuals who have come out of, albeit kicking and screaming, the other end of a dark tunnel.

Send a hand-written note. Gifts shops , drug stores, even grocery chains are awash in greeting cards specifically offering sympathy and encouragement to the down-and-nearly-out. Send one, and then follow up with a phone call. Don't worry about having the perfect thing to say; shell-shocked entrepreneurs and their employees usually need you simply to listen to the grisly details about their shocking reversal of fortune.

Dr. Kathleen Begley owns and operates Write Company Plus communications training. She has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody. If you feel you've become too busy to ever read this free, opt-in e-update, please tell us to remove you from our mailing list. We'll cheerfully delete you.