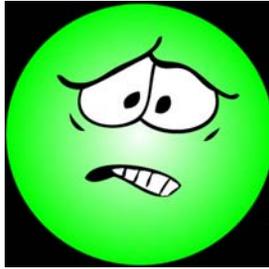


Feed Their Needs¹

Arnie Dahlke
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We simply don't trust companies anymore. We trust people. And in big companies, it's hard to even find a person to trust as we scream "operator" into our telephones only to get transferred to another menu whose options have changed.

— Peter Bergman, *Harvard Business Review*, March 23, 2009



These are scary times for all of us. Stressed by worries about job security and their financial futures, many people fear the worst. They long to feel comfortable again, to enjoy a satisfaction-filled life. Surveys show that they are seeking to fill this need by turning to affordable products that will make them feel good, like inexpensive chocolates, a cheaper shirt, or a colorful cosmetic.

They are also gravitating to others who understand their need for reassurance and support. This is not surprising given that over fifty years ago, social psychologist Stanley Schacter demonstrated that people affiliate with other people when they feel anxious. Anxious people seek out other people who understand and can empathize with how they feel.

These are facts with important implications for businesses today. As a business owner, what can you do to feed the need of anxious people to feel comfortable again?

NBC Nightly News features many inspiring examples:

- ◆ A comedy café in Wisconsin has instituted a "Night of Laughter" for customers—free admission to those recently unemployed or are current members of the military. The owner wanted to do something to help people facing difficult times, He wanted to people to come out and so he could make them smile and forget their troubles, if only for an evening.
- ◆ A local family-run business in Maine is making things a little easier for their customers. Given the state of the economy, the business owner canceled all heating oil contracts with his customers who were locked in a high rate, so they may benefit from lower fuel prices. He actually lost close to \$40,000 by these actions, but he cares about how his customers feel and is doing his part to make life easier for them.
- ◆ A hairdresser is coming in on her day off to give free haircuts to people who can't afford her services. Her haircuts usually cost \$70, but she gives her time free. Her grateful

¹ From: <http://arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm>—Please take a moment to look at Arnie's site: www.arniedahlke.com

customers have spread the word to other people in the community, who now come in for free haircuts. In fact, some of her clients have been so touched by her services that they have gone to local food banks to give money in the hairdresser's name.

- ◆ A real estate developer/landlord in Florida is offering discounted or even free rent to businesses that will provide local jobs in an economy hard hit by foreclosures and job loss.
- ◆ The owners of a small hay business are charging very little or nothing of all for people who need to feed their stock or provide a warm bed of hay for their dogs to lie on.

These businesses are feeding the comfort needs of their customers who are striving to stay afloat during this economic downturn—they are helping their customers feel good about themselves. Not only are they finding ways to offer products and services to customers for less money, they also are developing caring relationships with their customers.

As a businessperson, now is the time, more than ever, to do whatever you can to help your customers feel comfortable.

- ◆ Look for ways to offer your products in a manner that will be helpful to them and make them feel good.
- ◆ Develop new products or modify existing products in ways that will be perceived by them as feel-good treats.
- ◆ Go the extra mile to treat them with special respect and an understanding of what they are going through.
- ◆ Develop caring and empathetic relationships with them.
- ◆ Create special programs to highlight your caring recognition of their needs.
- ◆ Give them more than they expect.
- ◆ Give them what they want at a lower competitive price—or at least give them the very special kind of service that makes the higher cost OK.

For a while, these actions will mean operating with a much lower profit margin. But, in the long run, your sensitivity to the needs of your customers will result in a very loyal and larger customer base.

If your business can help your customers feel comfortable and relaxed with the service and products you provide, those customers will most likely keep doing business with you, even through these tough times.

As time-worn as this expression may be, this is a time to “think outside the box!” During this economic downturn, sew the seeds for a brighter future—it will pay off for you, your customers, and your community!

