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## Build Relationships With Your Clients

by  
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"It's not personal, it's just business." This attitude might work if you're Tony Soprano. For just about everyone else, however, getting personal is a way to take your business to the next level.

If your dry cleaner greets you by name and knows you don't take starch in your shirts, would you go elsewhere just to save a quarter?



Some businesses seem increasingly indifferent to customer needs. They employ voice recognition software, complex phone menus, or service reps who speak in impenetrable accents and say that their name is Billy or Jane.

In fact, things have gotten so bad with the maze of telephone trees, one individual has even developed a website full of tricks to help you get through the jungle and speak with a real person: <http://www.gethuman.com/>.

Without customers, you won't have a business. Getting personal means recognizing each customer's unique needs and responding to them. In any service business, by getting to know your customer, you'll develop loyalty which will lead to repeat business and referrals.

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Where should you begin? Whenever practical, have a real person answer your telephone. Avoid asking customers to enter their phone numbers into an automated system. Such systems create an impression that the customers are merely numbers themselves, rather than people. A valued customer should be welcomed by a pleasant-voiced receptionist who can easily retrieve account information before forwarding the call.

Develop a sincere interest in your customers. Start thinking and referring to them as clients, elevating your status to that of a professional who's providing a service. Ask leading questions. Most people love to talk about themselves. Your business relationship can be a starting point. If you're in financial planning, you need to inquire about a client's marital status and children, including their ages. If you're a parent, and your client's kids are older, ask for a simple bit of advice. For example, when did she first allow her daughter to wear makeup? It will make your client feel important, and establish you as a caring parent. When you ask whether your clients' cars are leased or financed, the natural follow up is about the type of auto, which will provide insight about your client's personality. For Volvo drivers, you can anticipate recommending a portfolio based on security. If your client drives a roadster, express enthusiasm for ragtops and start considering investments with greater risk and higher potential return.

If appropriate, you can ask your clients to fill out customer profiles. Be sure to preface each question in terms of meeting your client's needs, such as, "Your ideal home would have easy access to which recreational activities?" If the response is "golf", and you're a real estate broker, not only would this help you to sell a home on a fairway, it would also give you an opportunity to compare handicaps. It's easy to get a spouse's name, which will be helpful when you call her home for a follow-up and the better half answers. Be sure to verify the name of the party who picks up the phone before you offer praise.

Anybody who runs credit checks will learn a client's birthday. For many adults, birthdays can be lonely. By sending a birthday card sincerely wishing health and prosperity, you'll separate yourself from your competitors. Another way to get a client's birth date is to bring up astrological signs. You'll have to learn the twelve signs and their major positive traits, or keep a cheat sheet on your desk. You can always say, "I'm not at the point where I can recognize what astrological sign somebody is, but I do get curious. What date were you born?" "October 15." "Libra, that explains why your investments are so balanced." When you get a chance, record the date with a reminder to mail a card.

Many businesses send generic holiday cards, but a conversation at year's end will tell you whether your clients celebrate Christmas, Chanukah, or Eid, the Muslim feast after Ramadan. Sending specific holiday cards to clients shows that you are on the same wavelength. Mail cards early so they'll arrive before the deluge.

Do you ever visit your clients' offices? Since you'll usually have to wait, turn off your cell phone and look around. When you're ushered into their inner sanctum, study it. Don't assume that the office belongs to your client. Ask. Then compliment. Show appreciation for the décor. Praise the family photos. Relate to the sports memorabilia. In today's mobile society, don't conclude that a resident of New York is automatically a Yankees fan. The best time to find out is at the start of the season, by asking if your client is ready for baseball. If he is, expect a torrent of commentary on the prospects for his favorite team, which just might be the Boston Red Sox. Take notes and send a couple of tickets when your client's beloved team is in town.

Franklin D. Roosevelt owed much of his remarkable political success to the work of James Farley, the campaign manager behind his victories. Farley had an unparalleled knack for remembering names and faces. When meeting somebody, the first step in remembering a name is to repeat it. If it's unusual, request a spelling. Ask if you've pronounced it right. Don't ask, "What is your nationality?" Most will rightly respond, "American." Instead ask about its derivation. What does it mean? Try to associate the name with a person's physical characteristic or background. Upon visiting the office of most politicians, you'll see a wall of photographs depicting meetings with celebrities. If you're a real estate agent, why not decorate a wall with photos of home buyers? It will give you credibility when new prospects visit. Or take photos of clients to display on your website. File each in your database, so faces will be easier to remember.

Be sure to record all the details you learn about your business associates. Most database management software now has fields for the names of spouses, kids, and assistants. Remember that administrative assistants are your clients' gate keepers. If you notice an accent, make a note of it. When you next call, you can identify the assistant by name. Finally, get personal with your own story. On your website or in your business literature, share your own passions or tell a rags-to-riches tale so that your clients can identify with you.

Why should you get personal? Most individuals like those who are like themselves; and ultimately, people prefer to do business with their friends.

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