

It's More Important to Be Kind Than Clever

by Bill Taylor

□ One of the more heart-warming stories to zoom around the Internet lately involves a young man, his dying grandmother, and a bowl of clam chowder from Panera Bread. It's a little story that offers big lessons about service, brands, and the human side of business — a story that underscores why efficiency should never come at the expense of humanity.

□ The story, as told in AdWeek, goes like this: Brandon Cook, from Wilton, New Hampshire, was visiting his grandmother in the hospital. Terribly ill with cancer, she complained to her grandson that she desperately wanted a bowl of soup, and that the hospital's soup was inedible (she used saltier language). If only she could get a bowl of her favorite clam chowder from Panera Bread! Trouble was, Panera only sells clam chowder on Friday. So Brandon called the nearby Panera and talked to store manager Suzanne Fortier. Not only did Sue make clam chowder specially for Brandon's grandmother, she included a box of cookies as a gift from the staff.

□ It was a small act of kindness that would not normally make headlines. Except that Brandon told the story on his Facebook page, and Brandon's mother, Gail Cook, retold the story on Panera's fan page. The rest, as they say, is social-media history. Gail's post generated 500,000 (and counting) "likes" and more than 22,000 comments on Panera's Facebook page. Panera, meanwhile, got something that no amount of traditional advertising can buy — a genuine sense of affiliation and appreciation from customers around the world.

□ Marketing types have latched on to this story as an example of the power of social media and "virtual word-of-mouth" to boost a company's reputation. But I see the reaction to Sue Fortier's gesture as an example of something else — the hunger among customers, employees, and all of us to engage with companies on more than just dollars-and-cents terms. In a world that is being reshaped by the relentless advance of technology, what stands out are acts of compassion and connection that remind us what it means to be human.

□ As I read the story of Brandon and his grandmother, I thought back to a lecture delivered two years ago by Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon.com, to the graduating seniors of my alma mater, Princeton University. Bezos is nothing if not a master of technology — he has built his company, and his fortune, on the rise of the Internet and his own intellect. But he spoke that day not about computing power or brainpower, but about his grandmother — and what he learned when he made her cry.

□ Even as a 10-year-old boy, it turns out, Bezos had a steel-trap mind and a passion for crunching numbers. During a summer road trip with his grandparents, young Jeff got fed

up with his grandmother's smoking in the car — and decided to do something about it. From the backseat, he calculated how many cigarettes per day his grandmother smoked, how many puffs she took per cigarette, the health risk of each puff, and announced to her with great fanfare, "You've taken nine years off your life!"

□ Bezos's calculations may have been accurate — but the reaction was not what he expected. His grandmother burst into tears. His grandfather pulled the car off to the side of the road and asked young Jeff to step out. And then his grandfather taught a lesson that this now-billionaire decided to share with the Class of 2010: "My grandfather looked at me, and after a bit of silence, he gently and calmly said, 'Jeff, one day you'll understand that it's harder to be kind than clever.'"

□ That's a lesson I wish more businesspeople understood — a lesson that is reinforced by the reaction to this simple act of kindness at Panera Bread. Indeed, I experienced something similar not so long ago, and found it striking enough to devote an HBR blog post to the experience. In my post, I told the story of my father, his search for a new car, a health emergency that took place in the middle of that search — and a couple of extraordinary (and truly human) gestures by an auto dealer that put him at ease and won his loyalty.

□ "What is it about business that makes it so hard to be kind?" I asked at the time. "And what kind of businesspeople have we become when small acts of kindness feel so rare?"

□ That's what's really striking about the Panera Bread story — not that Suzanne Fortier went out of her way to do something nice for a sick grandmother, but that her simple gesture attracted such global attention and acclaim.

□ So by all means, encourage your people to embrace technology, get great at business analytics, and otherwise ramp up the efficiency of everything they do. But just make sure all their efficiency doesn't come at the expense of their humanity. Small gestures can send big signals about who we are, what we care about, and why people should want to affiliate with us. It's harder (and more important) to be kind than clever.

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