

THE GATE

How Little Things Make Big First Impressions

Some home entry gates are enticing, welcoming, warming. We imagine once opened, a charming path leads to the grand homestead. Other gates are old and dilapidated where we imagine upon entry that the path beyond is riddled with potholes, obstacles and wilting weeds guiding our way to a rundown shack.

First impressions – the gate of your business. No matter how much we dislike the fact, our customers make up their minds almost immediately (seven seconds is what some researchers have discovered) and it's those little things that make the big difference.

In today's highly competitive business environment, it's not good enough just to be the cheapest (and nor do you want to be if you want a decent bottom line.) Each individual organisation requires a point of differentiation – how they can stand out amongst the competition. And strangely enough, one of the most effective starting points is perfecting the basics. It may surprise you but it's in the perfecting of these foundational elements that will attract new customers and where existing ones will return. In today's business world of dismal customer service and poor presentation it doesn't take much to stand out from the crowd – and that's before you get to core business differentiation.

Here are some of the basics that many businesses neglect of which we will cover in this article.

- Culture of Personable Professionalism
- Staff Presentation
- Response times
- Order and Cleanliness
- Keeping promises
- Energetic Communication

1. Culture of Personable Professionalism

Underlying all first impressions is the company culture and like it or not, the culture that exists in your business is a direct reflection of its leadership. I have walked into accountants offices where the culture (upon first impression) is one of fear. Everyone has their head down, billing their six minute increments for eight hours a day seeking to keep their job. Yet I can walk into another one that is friendly, relaxed and yet highly profitable. I recently dined in one of Brisbane's top restaurants. The food was wonderful but the service I would label as Detached Professionalism. Yet another down the road had the mix of professional and personable right. I have been a patron there for years. The culture in the above businesses reflect their leaders.

Customers want you to be professional but also to be friendly and interested in them as a person. Talking about their dog, their work, their family, speaks volumes. And if you as a leader are not demonstrating this and business is all about productivity and profitability then you will miss this point of differentiation.

Being personable starts at an internal level within the company. It is about you and your people connecting at a personal level *while* you are doing your work. It might also mean establishing a regular social activity or a weekly meeting where you eat and drink together to foster community. If employees are connecting personally and are happy in their work it stands to reason it will flow out to your customers.

People return to companies where they feel they are valued as a person not just valued for the money they spend. Your culture won't change overnight but, establish a vision for it, make plans for changes and introduce one thing at a time.

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2. Staff Presentation

Presentation here is about how we 'present' to the customer in language, appearance, interest etc. Unironed shirts, unkempt hair, a waitress asking "what do you's want?"; a receptionist using the 'f' word when customers are in reception, a salesperson disinterested in me...no doubt you have experienced similar. This is a big one for first impressions. Ensure that what your customer experiences in the first interaction with your company is one that invites the person through the gate.

3. Promptness

I consulted to an accounting firm some time back and one of the things we discovered was that the partners were not calling clients back in a timely manner. We then tracked the complaints they were receiving and they were many. We instituted a 24 hour call back system and over time they adjusted to the new standard set in place. We then brought these and other 'speed' efficiencies to the company without sacrificing quality. Apart from some significant bottom line results, one of the significant improvement signs was when a client of mine (who I referred to them) said "I love how quick they respond. I know it will be within 24 hours but often it is the same day."

People love promptness. Even if you message and say I will call you tomorrow at 10am, prompt communication is one of the basics that many neglect and will set you apart instantly.

4. Order and Cleanliness

I once consulted to a retail business who's store was an abysmal mess with some of the aisles unable to be accessed because of the crap all over the floor. Once, when I brought coffee into their office I could find no place on the desk to sit the cup. When mentioning this company in the local area the discussions always started by the person saying what a mess it was.

If a tradesman comes to my home in a filthy vehicle, looks like he slept in his clothes or leaves a mess upon his departure, I automatically judge the company to be unprofessional and think twice about using them again.

When you walk through the doors of your office what do you see? Order or chaos? Are things tidied with a friendly atmosphere welcoming people through the gate or does it look like no one cares?

Customers will quickly form first impressions around order and cleanliness.

5. Keeping promises

"I'll have the quote to you tomorrow."

"Will give you a call this afternoon."

"Our technicians will be there at 4pm."

It's a strange thing but people actually believe what we say we will do. Then, when we don't follow through it dents trust. Break enough promises and you will fully shatter trust.

6. Energetic Communication

Many companies initial contact with a potential customer at the gate is via the phone. The energy and corresponding voice tone communicates either a friendly welcome to come inside or a "go to the next gate." Ever called someone and they sounded like they just got out of bed? A receptionist answers your call and you feel like you've just intruded on their day? Encountered a dreary voicemail message?

Work on yourself and your employees to raise personal energy when communicating – whether in person or via the phone.

Summary

Will we always get the basics right? No. Humans are involved. But we can make a commitment to perfect the basics through an incremental and improvement change process. Establishing written standards, exemplary leadership, social activities with employees, key performance indicators, customer surveys and reward systems all play a part in creating a company that is purely different based on treating people with respect which in the end all boils down to common sense.

Create a gateway to your business where customers love to return. As they say, you'll never have a second chance to make a first impression.