



# Manners Matter

*The Commonsense Approach  
to Business Etiquette*

BY JOEL D CANFIELD

# Manners Matter.

Not just socially—we all know manners matter socially. Manners matter in business. Good social skills are, in fact, critical to the success of any business. Let's talk about the why and the how, but first, let's dispel a common myth: being polite doesn't make you a doormat. We've all seen the Hollywood stereotype: the meek and mild librarian/accountant gets walked on by everyone, running others' errands, never getting any respect until one day they explode in a rage, baseball bats and fists and profanity flying. And finally, finally, they get the respect they deserve and find true happiness in life.

Let's stop pretending Hollywood represents real life.

First, let's establish some definitions. By “manners” I mean (as culled from multiple dictionary definitions) “habitual conduct or deportment showing or characterized by correct social usage and marked by an appearance of consideration, tact, deference, or courtesy.”

Here's the problem Hollywood has: our “mannerly” star has focused entirely on the “deference” portion of that definition, as if manners only (or always) referred to giving others what they want. Showing deference to others is often part of good manners, but if that was it, manners would have no place in

business. Business requires a reasonable amount of self-interest (more on that later).

Another aspect of the doormat myth, from a specifically business perspective, is that while consideration, tact, deference, and courtesy might all describe excellent customer service, the “habitual” part bothers some. You know them: they just know you have to keep an eye on every customer or they’ll steal from you; have to hedge on the guarantees or folks will cheat you; and never ever take the customer’s word for anything because they’re just waiting for a chance to lie to you.

To those folks, manners are only for the cooperative, easy-to-deal-with customers. If the customer falls out of character, this little entrepreneur isn’t going to take any guff from a troublemaker.

But that’s not what “habitual” means, and it’s not how manners will transform your business.

## LET'S ESTABLISH SOME GROUND RULES

For the sake of this discussion, we'll assume that your product or service is as good as can be expected. You and your staff are fairly competent. You're not facing some existing fatal flaw. The best habit of tact and courtesy won't save a bad business.

But being determined to show consideration, tact, deference, and courtesy in every single human contact, direct or indirect, will change your business for the better. It's not just about what we traditionally consider customer service either. If the only time your best manners surface is when you're taking a customer's cash, it's fairly obvious where your real interests lie.

Back up a bit.

Lately everyone (including me) is talking about relationship marketing. That implies an ongoing exchange. Both of those words ("ongoing" and "exchange") are important, and are affected by your manners.

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## THE FOUR BASIC CONSUMER NEEDS AND HOW THEY GROW

In order to avoid an actively negative experience, your customers and prospects expect two things—accuracy and availability; or what I like to call “*getting it right*” and “*getting it out there.*” Consideration for your customer means you’ll extend the courtesy of ensuring that what they get is what they ordered, that it was priced correctly, delivered in good condition, all that stuff. You’ll be open hours that make sense to your customers, not just to you. Your employees will look for opportunities to help, and not hide in the stockroom to avoid answering questions. (Note: the two “gets” only avoid dissatisfaction; they do not create a positive experience. No one calls a friend to tell them excitedly, “I hired a pool cleaner the other day, and he actually cleaned my pool!”)

Your manners set the tone of your business from start to finish in every department, not just on the front line, facing the customer. In order to create an ongoing positive exchange, your customers would like to participate, and even have you advise them—what I call “*give ‘em a voice*” and “*give ‘em advice.*” This participation aspect of your business may just be the most critical juncture when it comes to how your manners set the tone. The very best marketing is when your customers talk among themselves and to others. Genuine word of mouth—that which wasn’t artificially generated—is priceless. And in classic ‘birds of a feather’ fashion, the people who talk about your business will most likely reflect your manner of dealing with them.

If it’s been your habit to give troublesome customers a piece of your mind, fully expect your customers to share a piece of their mind in the most public fashion possible. You will be featured in their “10 things I hate blog,” no doubt about it. And in a reflection of the web’s organic method of rewarding passion, their diatribe against your perceived lack of consideration, tact, deference, or courtesy is very likely to show up ahead of your company website in online searches. Ouch.

If, on the other hand, your habit is to seek first to understand why a disgruntled customer (or employee, vendor, or partner for that matter) is thinking the way they do, that willingness to understand

will generally be reflected by the folks who choose to do business with you. When they write about you, talk about you, *think* about you, it will be in terms and imagery which are conducive to an ongoing exchange.

The final consumer need—advice—is the one we’re most familiar with. You know that if you’re trying to convince your suspects (those you think *should* be your customers) or prospects to become customers, you’d better be on your best behaviour. What’s not always obvious is that it’s good manners and good business to be more proactive than waiting for a warm body to walk into the shop or pick up the phone.

Did you just learn about a new benefit your service can provide? A postcard or letter to those who’ve already used it is the polite, the mannerly thing to do, and it can work wonders. Yes, these are folks who’ve already given you their money. This whole “ongoing relationship” thing is not about money (did I forget to mention that?) These are people who we hope are already fans. Give them something to talk about to their friends and relatives and neighbors.

And then, don’t try to sell them anything. Give them the information with no strings attached, make them feel good all over again about using your services, and then don’t pester. Ever. If these folks have given you the privilege of an ongoing dialog, don’t ever abuse it. **Bad manners can kill a dialog in an instant, and with an email or paper dialog, you may not even realize it, or be able to discover why it happened.**

Get it right. Get it out there. Give ‘em a voice. Give ‘em advice. If you have genuine consideration for your customers, they’ll be in the forefront of your mind at every step. And they’ll know it.

## HE STARTED IT!

This is where manners becoming "habitual conduct" is hardest—and most critical.

Obviously, it's easy to be nice to folks when they're behaving. Anyone can do that, and nearly everyone does. Being like everyone else is *not* a way to make your business stand out.

Treating the problematic customer with good manners makes good business sense, for all the same reasons that treating the pleasant customer with good manners does. In fact, on different days, your good customer might just *be* the problem customer.

Let's take an informal look under the hood of the human mind for a moment.

## I'M UNIQUE, JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE

Are you a good driver? Most people would say they are. Are you, say, in the top 10% of the drivers on the road? Most people would say they are. We can't all be in the top 10%, but somehow we all put ourselves there. We are each thoroughly convinced of our absolute uniqueness. It's obvious to us that no one else could possibly be just like us. We want our singularity to be recognized. In fact, we often demand it.

Remember the last time you had a coupon that expired yesterday? Or the service special that was only good for one, but you needed two? What did you do?

Many perfectly normal, sane people ask to be treated as exceptions. If you haven't done it yourself, you've seen it; the person ahead of you in the line with eleven items in the ten-items-or-less lane, paying with a check when the sign says "Cash Only." And you're thinking the whole time, "Why should they sneak an extra item through? If you don't have cash, don't go through the "Cash Only" line!"

And there's the rub. You know, deep inside, that they're not special. They're like everyone else. They should play by the rules, take their turn, and not cause a fuss. Yes, we're special. They're not.

Certain challenges arise in a world full of people who think "I'm special, you're average." The most skillful social types have learned that you can't treat people as if you believe this. They have, in fact, learned that the most successful behaviour is to turn it around, and treat others as if they were just as unique and special as they think they are.

## ARGUMENTS CANNOT BE WON

No rational person enters a disagreement knowing they're wrong. Some folks discover it along the way and have a hard time backing down, but to begin, we each think it's the other chap who's got the wrong end of the stick. Remember, that person you're trying to persuade knows in their heart of hearts that they're brand new special and unique. They figure you're pretty average. The question is, do you want to win an argument, or do you want to persuade? (Tip: the only way to win an argument is to avoid it in the first place.)

As soon as you realize someone disagrees with you—whether customer, employee, vendor or partner—stop talking and start listening. Find out why they think they're right, because they do—they most sincerely believe they've got the picture. Thing is, maybe they do. But your only hope of finding out, and persuading them otherwise if they're wrong, is to begin by understanding their perspective.

Earlier, I hope we dispensed with the unpleasant belief that customers are just lining up to lie, cheat, and steal. Rather, like you and I, they're looking for a good product or service at a fair price. If they're unhappy, consider the very real possibility that some part of that expectation wasn't met. Imagine, if you can find out what it was and fix it, it's like getting a free business consultation. Customers who complain are trying to tell you what's broken. Ignoring them, or worse, chasing them away, is like hearing a strange noise from the engine and turning up the radio.

But what about that *one* customer, the real troublemaker? You warned them not to do this or that, and they did it anyway. Now it's broken or lost or gummed up and they think it's your fault. Honest. They really believe you didn't provide a good product or service at a fair price. They want it made right, even if they're saying so a bit too loudly, or not in the most pleasant terms.

You really only have two choices: either make it right, or politely fire them as your customer. Let's talk about the latter first.

If they're truly the irascible type we're talking about, convincing them they're wrong and still keeping them as a customer is not one of your options. You're beyond a friendly debate ending in mutual understanding. You're putting out a fire. It doesn't matter who started it; it matters that you keep the smell of smoke out of your business.

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Although I believe it's not as common as some small business operators think, it does occasionally reach the point that you'll be harming your business to keep this customer. If you decide that an ongoing relationship will do more harm than good to both of you, then calmly, politely let them know that you've done all you can. Apologize that you haven't been able to make them happy. Express a genuine hope that someone else who offers the same product or service will be able to do what you can't. And that's all. While it's tempting to send them packing with a flea in their ear, any additional ammunition you give them for their back fence gossip or weblog is foolish.

## DON'T BURN BRIDGES

But consider another possibility. How many times have you said something in the heat of anger and realized later that you were just plain dead wrong? If it wasn't this week, it probably wasn't much longer than that. Unless you're of the very calmest temperament, we all get heated up once in a while.

Consider how your victim's reaction affects your desire to either apologize or acknowledge your culpability. The one who fired it right back at you isn't at the top of the list; the one who seemed more concerned about what was troubling you than about their feelings will probably be on the receiving end of some world-class groveling.

You might fire that customer, but if you do it right, they just might hire themselves back, and be better citizens next time.

But what if you don't want to fire them? You just reduced your choices by 50%, from two to one: make it right. Make it right in their eyes, not yours. It can be expensive, if you're talking about money. (We're not, remember?) We're talking about the value of an ongoing exchange with the people who make your business possible. Yes, it can be galling to do a job over when you know you did it right; to replace or repair something you know the customer damaged through their own ignorance.

Remember, manners are "habitual conduct or deportment showing or characterized by correct social usage and marked by an appearance of consideration, tact, deference, or courtesy." Any exception to a habit can be fatal to that habit. If you're looking at the lifelong benefit of keeping this person as a customer, and of their telling others how accommodating you were when the chips were down, making them happy becomes a small price to pay.

It isn't easy, and you shouldn't practice on your toughest customers, but start developing the habit now.

## YOUR DEFAULT SETTING

In closing, here's one concept that might help. Look down any alley near where you live. Look out in your yard or garden. If you plant flowers, you get flowers. If you plant weeds, of course you get weeds. If you plant nothing, you get... weeds.

In the absence of positive effort, the default for dirt is to grow weeds, not to sit idle.

The same is true in our relationships. If you look for what's special, unique, and positive about each customer, you'll find it. If you look for the bad in people, you'll find that. But in the absence of a positive effort to see the good, you'll see their negative traits. The only way to really see what makes this employee or customer special and unique is to actively look for it.

It takes time. It takes effort. It takes really wanting it, really believing that it's there—and it is. In all but the rarest cases, anyone who comes to you for professional help has something about them that will enhance your professional life. Find it, acknowledge it, learn from it.

**Manners matter.** 📌

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Joel D Canfield](#) is a web application developer turned business consultant. He is writing a book, *The Commonsense Entrepreneur* designed as a self-analysis checklist to help small business operators ferret out and fill the knowledge gaps which often result from being self-taught. In addition, he is a digital coach, helping people of all kinds to get the most from technology without becoming a slave to it. As if that weren't enough, he is also, in no discernable order: a husband, father of seven, musician and songwriter, and a genuinely polite person. Oh, and he wants to live in the west of Ireland someday. Visit him online at <http://CommonSenseEntrepreneur.com> or reach him in the U.S. by calling (877) 771-7746.

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