

How being extra helpful can be good for business

By Eve Menezes Cunningham

Recently, I was stranded with a broken down bike. I called the local cab company and explained the situation but they couldn't get a large enough vehicle out to me for another hour or so. Hearing the resignation in my voice, the operator suddenly suggested I try their competitor and saved me a long wait in the cold.

Now more than ever, businesses - large and small - need to stand out from the competition. Going the extra mile is a simple yet often overlooked way of doing this. We remember the times companies have done this because it's out of the ordinary.

"An Innocent smoothie exploded over my jacket. On the tube. And it was white. I emailed them to complain and they offered to send me vouchers," says Anne. Their actions helped her forget her irritation. She told lots of people how nice they'd been and still buys their smoothies.

If you've disappointed someone, offering them something that is too similar may make it worse. By thinking about another way to treat them, you might not only stop that customer or client walking away but you can turn a mistake into positive PR.

Rachel didn't have change for a £10 note at the end of a cab ride with a firm she'd never used before. She says, "I offered to go and get some change from a nearby shop, but the driver said it was his fault not having change and I could owe it to them."

Sometimes, it's easier to be generous when you don't feel defensive about having made a mistake. But this is an even more memorable way to set yourself apart.

"iTunes were so, so helpful when my laptop was pinched," says Camilla. "They arranged for me to have free downloads of everything I'd already paid for. I didn't expect it and was really pleased. I've mentioned it to loads of people and wouldn't hesitate to buy from them again over any other music download service."

Are there things you could offer in similar situations that wouldn't leave you out of pocket but impact positively on your clients/customers?

Day to day buying decisions are often made based on those little touches. "I find Sainsbury's staff are invariably very helpful," says Laura. "If you forget something, they will go and fetch it for you. If you don't know where something is, they will take you to the relevant aisle. Waitrose staff are also excellent. Morrisons' are warm, friendly and helpful. It's a recession - they all need to go that extra mile. After all, it's what we do



with our clients all the time isn't it?"

Olivia says, "I bought a make it yourself cookbook and then broke it (due to extreme stupidity on my part). When I called customer services, I was sure they'd tell me it was all my own fault but they were lovely. A new one arrived in the post a few days later."

When someone's been let down, even just doing a good job is enough to set us apart. Other times, it's not about the job you're doing but the

Offer to help when you're doing so from a place of fullness - you want to but know you don't have to



unexpected support you can provide.

“At my last job we had a man from Computer Angels in to sort out some issues with our network,” says Suzi. “While he was there, the kettle somehow caught fire. Whilst my colleagues watched, alarmed, the guy took control of the situation and put out the fire. They were all full of praise for him by the time I returned to the office.”

Hopefully, nothing so dramatic will crop up for you. But there are often times when a client needs a different type of service to the one you were prepared to provide. By pointing someone in the right direction or recommending someone you trust, you can save them a lot of time and earn yourself some easy brownie points.

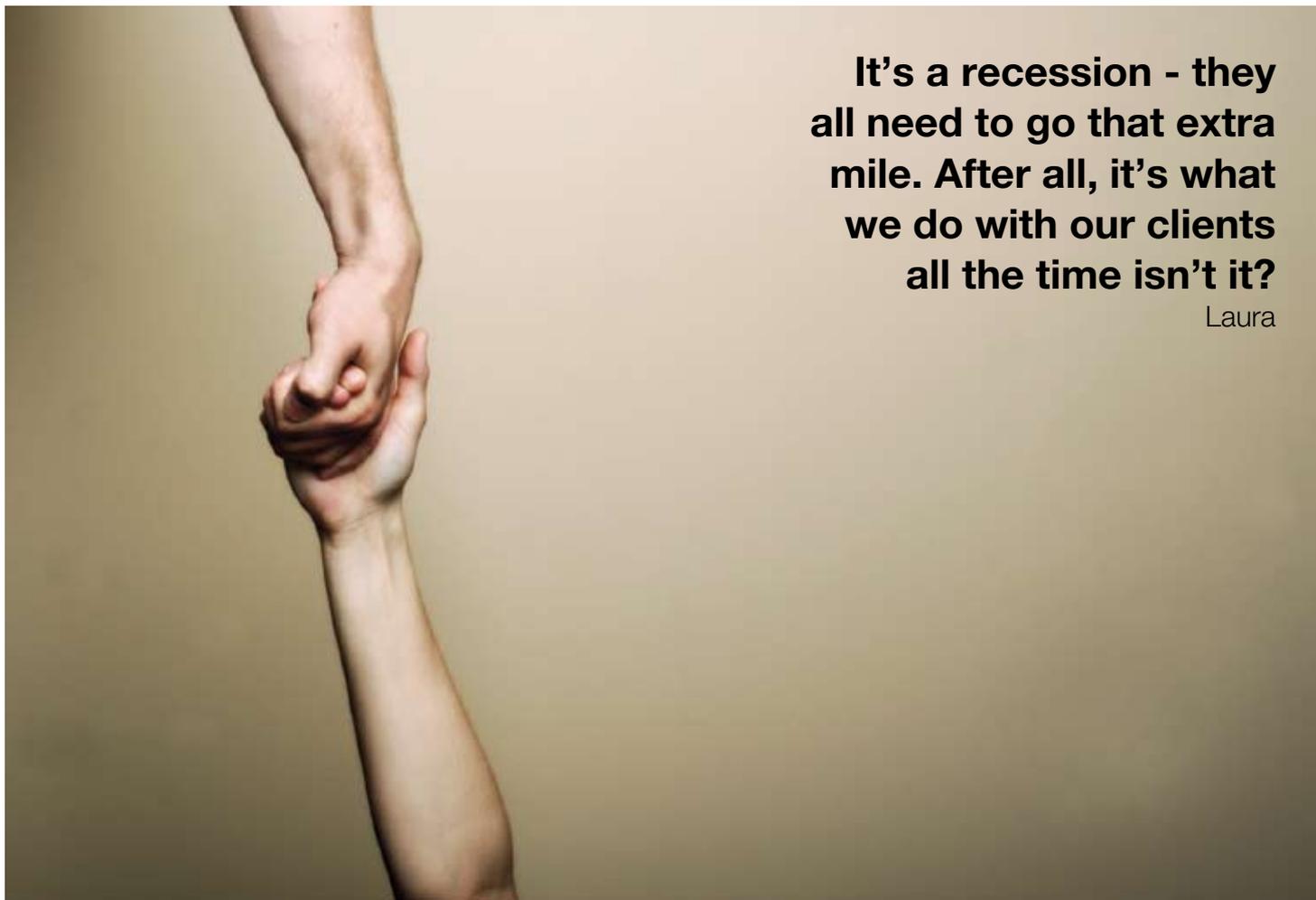
Recently, one of my editors asked me loads of questions about a feature she was thinking about. Wanting to be helpful (even though I was already juggling several deadlines), I made a few calls, did some mini-interviews and sent her the information. I then had a sudden flash

of regret that I wasn't a staff writer – I'd done it all for nothing. But then, a couple of days later, she phoned commissioning me to write the piece.

Yes, putting in that extra effort is always a bit risky. Sometimes, you can bend over backwards to help a current or potential client only to discover that they never had any intention of paying you. But generally, everyone feels good when we approach business with a sense of goodwill.

Freelance journalist and copywriter, Anne Wollenberg says, “A potential new client asked me to do something at very short notice. I didn't have the expertise for it, which would have been OK if it hadn't been a short-notice request. But rather than say ‘No’, I said, ‘Give me half an hour and I'll find you someone else who can do it’.

“I rang round people I knew would be able to do it, found someone, made sure they were free and happy to take on the assignment and called the editor with their details. The editor was delighted I'd helped him out of a hole and is now a regular client. All because I stuck my neck out and



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Laura

made a few phone calls.”

Lesley turned a low paying client into a bigger client and friend. “She hired me to re-write some of her web content. I ended up fixing her computer, helping her choose a laptop, and moving her web site to a new host. I’m planning on flying out early next year to meet her in real life for the first time.”

It’s always important to have the choice. It can be great for business when you choose to go above and beyond but if you feel manipulated into doing extra work, it can leave a nasty aftertaste.

“I was on call 24/7,” says Lesley about her old job. “While I was happy to be called up for serious things, I got one 2am call from someone whose mouse had stopped working.”

Like most bad situations, the changes were gradual. When she started working there, Lesley says, “The culture was very positive. I put in a lot of effort in the junior role because I enjoyed the job.”

To her delight, this led to her being promoted. “I’m very passionate about that kind of technology, so I didn’t even see it as a job. I felt like I was being paid to do something I’d willingly do for free.”

Unfortunately, things went from great to ridiculous in just a few months. Lesley says, “I’d be given only part of the information I needed to do the job and I constantly felt undermined by the head office. On the one hand they refused to give me access to their policies / naming conventions / standards and on the other they complained if I didn’t follow them.”

On one occasion, when told about a big project with only 24 hours to go (when they’d known about it for two weeks), Lesley says, “I stupidly

crunched all day (no breaks, no lunch). I did overtime that night to make sure everything was set up and working. I even had to assemble the furniture and carry the monitors over to the desks myself.

“I worked an entire weekend without sleep and then had one of the managers yell at me for wanting to go home and rest once I’d briefed everyone on what happened. I gave my employer a lot of slack because they were just starting out. Things can be chaotic but they expected crunch-level work all the time and refused to give me any concessions in return.”

Some signs that might warn you to steer clear are:

- You get the sense that they don’t value your time or expertise
- Your gut instinct screams “Are they kidding?”
- Your heart sinks when you hear from them
- You don’t feel they pay you enough/promptly

Doing more will leave you feeling resentful (even if you manage to not say something, it will come out somehow)

But it’s good to be helpful when

- The solution to a client or customer’s problem seems simple to you and you want to share it
- They’re a pleasure to work with

Giving extra won’t leave you feeling depleted in any way - you’re giving from a place of fullness ●

For more advice, please visit www.applecoaching.com and www.evemenesesunningham.co.uk