Your shop doesn't have a shopkeeper

Can you imagine having a brick-and-mortar business and leaving it open but unattended? Day in and day out customers walking in and evaluating your merchandise. Some buy and others don't. Can you even fathom the viability of such business model?

Of course no one would open a business, stack it up with merchandise, advertise it and market it and then just leave the doors open and go about doing something else. Is there any way this could work? In a rare occasion such as automatic car wash, YES it could. But it is not a very viable model for most SMBs. But why do virtually all of us do it day in and day out anyway?

Yes most of us do. Don't believe me? Well – think about your website. What happens when a visitor comes to your website, i.e. your virtual "shop"? You guessed it – they are left to their own devices. Don't get me wrong; much like any evolutionary path we all have tried streamlining and experimenting with ways to get those visitor to take actions that include a wide range of measures like A/B testing. But the real question is: Is that it? Is this all we can do?

So now what?

Let's take a step back and think about B.G. (Before Google). Your shop was open and sales people were ready to assist customers by providing product knowledge and help them decide in their selection process. Suddenly along came the Internet and the B.G. ended. We suddenly forget what has been working for a very long time just because this is a "virtual world".
People get busy with needing and wanting a website, then needed it to be optimized for the engines, bought PPC, started email marketing, and so on. All great things that most businesses should do. Then came the attempt to capitalize and maximize every single visitor resulting in tracking and re-targeting, opt-in emails, big data analysis and so on. Along the way not many stopped to think: do we have to reinvent the wheel? Did all the working concepts in business suddenly disappear? What happened to the SOP's that we knew worked?

Back to the basics?

Don't get me wrong, I am all for those actions. Each and every one of the many processes have their place and are successful if implemented properly and evaluated on a continuous basis. Those however belong in the lead generation portion of a plan. When it comes to

actually converting a website visitor interactions via providing sound advice while a visitor is on your site, should be considered mission critical. All the traffic to your website won't be of much use if they don't take your desired action.

Human Intelligence

The second part of such plan can and should include rigorous data collection and data evaluation. Most savvy business people have been using data for a long time but when it comes to web visitors most of that data is concentrated on actions taken i.e. clicks, funnels, behavior, etc. That data and the respective analysis of it has its place. It can be very useful in helping make many decisions including design parameters, content marketing, etc. But the missing element is what you can't get out of that data set: the human factors. Did that visitor buy from me because of a given event that can't be understood from click data? Was that particular visitor comparison shopping and the price alone deterred him/her to go to your competitor without realizing that overall cost of your product is actually lower in the long run? And so on.
Granted some issues certainly can be addressed via testing but none of those possible solutions can replace live human interactions. Now imagine if you could access and analyze human intelligence!!! What would the value of such data set be to your business? What will you actually know in 90 days? Or 180 days?

This is not theoretical in nature. It is just a simple evolution toward a more inclusive IOT. You are already able to interact with your smart house, smart phone, smart watch, and many other daily tools.

Isn't it time for your website to become a "smart website?"

Customer Service Revisited

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Customer is the king or so we have been told. But is it really true? It depends on who you ask.

Much like everything else in business customer service and its respective impact on commercial entities are a juggling act. Let's have a look at the different perspectives.

Employees

I once heard a CS manager say "Who ever said that the customer is the king never had a job that involved customer service". Though I don't agree with the sentiment it dawned on me that those who we rely on to provide customer facing services may perceive their obligation differently than it is intended.

Let's face it. If your CS rep feels that customers are trampling all over them, how will they find the will to perform with conviction day in and day out? The other side of the same situation may be equally important. Does the CS rep need to perform with conviction?

Owner /Stakeholders

We all heard it before: customer is the king and customer is always right. Though I agree with the sentiment it may be a bit too far reaching and abstract. Yes, we are in business to service our clients to best of our ability. We all heard this one "Every customer is the most important visitor on our premises…" but is it really true? Is the customer really the most important visitor?

Of course if taken literally the answer is yes. No business can survive without customers but does it serve our interest to crown customers as "King"? What if that "King /Queen" creates unforeseen costs in terms of morale? How about if that customer costs the business more than just time?

Customers

"If I don't get the service and support that I like I will take my business somewhere else". Sounds familiar? It not only sounds familiar to me, but I must have said it a few hundred times myself. Naturally there is nothing wrong with that. A well run business is obliged to compete for customers and their respective patronage.

But what is the limit? What differentiates a "reasonable request" vs. "ad hoc annoyers"? Does a $50 purchase entitle a customer to $100 worth of customer service?

Generally speaking, one could easily shrug off the above by assuming faults or short comings in business model or operations management. Equally, one could just assume that the right HR processes in hiring can avoid all of the potential. But that would be a bit to simplistic and inherently risky.

Cost vs. Benefits

It is important to understand the pitfalls of "free styling" or "shooting from the hip" when it comes to customer service. In today's age a single bad customer service review can live on for years publicly and sway new or even existing customer to avoid a business. Imagine the negative impact of multiple such bad reviews across different platforms and social media and I am sure you see how expensive it can get.

So now what? Who is right? Who is wrong?

As a consultant my natural reaction and answer would be "It depends". Yes, I realize it is cliché and an open ended response that would minimize potential criticism.

In reality however there is an actual answer and solution to it. The answer is balance the cost vs the benefit in the long term by using a proven methodology /concept such as Net Promoter (And No. I am not selling anything AND I am not affiliated with anyone that does)

The Net Promoter and the likes have been around for a while in one way or other. However small businesses have not seen it championed in a way that would put it on their radar. From personal experiences I have not met too many small business owners that were familiar with such methodology.

The final answer: all three prospective i.e. CS personnel, business owners and customers have valid points of view that needs to be taken into account. In order to achieve a sustainable balance one has to turn to an established methodology that allows for a closed loop survey and communication in order to optimize customer service.

The bottom line : Use a methodology !!!!

People Problems

People Problems

Not long ago I was speaking to a good friend of mine Don Dalrymple about micro businesses and some of the inherent and common problems that are not acknowledged. Suffice to say that there are too many to list here but the one that seems to be among the chief issues appears to be "people problems".

Forget about the #PeopleProblems hashtags on social media. Yes, some of those are funny and timely but there is a more urgent nature to that topic.

Let's approach this a bit more rationally. Let's define "micro business". I see a "Micro Business or MB" as a business that has grown to a $1M – $10M revenue. It has a small team of employees or sub-contractors that attend to delivering services and products. It has systems and procedures combined with some elementary quality assurance procedures that enables it to deliver goods and services at a "OK level".

So what is the problem you ask? The answer is simple: growth and scaling. MB is likely to be agile and adaptive, fast moving and inherently more nimble than its counterparts. Yet those advantages are usually overshadowed by lack of the ability to grow the bottom line via scaling. There are many factors that contribute to lack of scaling ability however the most obvious reason is people and the respective problems with people: i.e. People Problems. People problems are usually and inherently a natural part of managing people.

Large and enterprise businesses have been dealing with it for many years.That is where you see concepts such as Human Resource Management, Human Capital Management, Knowledge Management, wellness programs, etc. Those are ways large businesses have been trying to deal with people and the inherent people problems.

So what about MB? How does a micro business deal with the same issues without the same resources? Well, it doesn't or if it does it is on a limited scale with debatable results. Are there exceptions? Yes of course there are exceptions. As in anything in business there are those that can and are doing it all successfully. That is where you see those MB's grow and scale. Yet that is not the norm – it is the exception.

In traditional MB when they hit those revenue bench marks a few things tend to happen: they struggle either internally or externally with adding new clients and maintain the same quality, taking short cuts to circumvent quality assurance measures in order to keep up with the work load, make rush judgements in hiring, overworking team members, losing track of customer satisfaction, tuning out or minimizing internal debates, etc. The list is too long to mention here however you get the gist of it. They stop being a coherent team

and grow into disorganization and chaos (again there are certainly exceptions).

I think of the above as "People Problems" and how they relate to a MB. A MB has products and services, it has systems and procedures as well as a track record of being able to successfully service clients; however, it can't grow past a certain revenue. So how do you address that? There is no right or wrong answer but rather just preferences.

Some businesses opt to address people problems by hiring contractors so the burden falls on another business entity. Others opt to invest into training and mentorship, yet others bring in short term consultants adhoc to address particular issues. All of those can and will have results however not addressing the fundamental and the underlying cause: inherent human nature. Of course there isn't a magic bullet to handle it all either. It needs to be understood that most of those people issues are not "one offs" nor "temporary". Those are persistent because those issues are human.

Here is where I suggest that a Chief Operating Officer is ideal. The issue with having a **COO** is usually a question of the attitude of the business owner and available resources:

Business Owner: this is the biggest issue. Most small business owners don't feel as they need someone to attend to their daily operations. I have heard it many times, "It is my business; no one can run it like I can", "It is insulting that you would suggest that you can run my business … I built it from ground up".

You get the gist of it. It is a combination of the need to be "in charge" and the pain to have to admit that people management does not come naturally. It doesn't matter if you are managing dozen or a few hundred people the principals stay the same. Team members have to be managed, inspired, motivated and yes …… encouraged. The need to be "in charge" is equally flawed. It is inherent that the business owner is in charge. The need to be "the boss" and /or "problem solver" only interferes with the actual running of the business. The average working day can be effectively used to generate business and attend to maintaining clients however there is very little time for the business owner to attend to daily operational matters. Hence doing so interferes with both and results in meager outcome on both fronts.

Resources: MB has inherently limited resources that need to be strategically deployed to the greatest benefit of the organization. Having a full blown COO is usually not an option. Its cost and work load both would not be justifiable. So what is the alternative? A **eCOO** (e Chief Operating Officer) Or Remote COO which would both address the workload and resource expenditure.

No, the above is not an infomercial for my services. There are many qualified COO**s** that offer such services. I am not that special nor do I suggest that I would do a better job than anyone else. I ,however, believe that this need has not been articulated nor acknowledged.

Small business owners have been made to believe that an entrepreneur /small business owner has to have a bookkeeper, an accountant, a lawyer yet never an operations person or eCOO that attends to his/her daily operational and people issues.

If nothing else this piece should serve as thought provoking fodder for all trying to grow a business.