

Smoke, Mirrors, and Getting Business: How to deserve your Customer's Trust  
By Marissa Levin  
CEO, Information Experts

One of my favorite activities on the Ocean City, MD boardwalk when we make our annual summer beach pilgrimage is visiting the collection of mirrors that distorts your image. It is something I have enjoyed for as long as I can remember... staring into the mirror and being greeted with a reflection that casts me in a most unusual and sometimes disturbing light. I love getting really close to the mirror and then quickly backing away, all the while continuously changing what looks back at me. Of course the fun of it all centers around the fact that I merely have to walk away to make my negative self disappear... as if she never existed.

Have you ever stopped to think about the impression you are leaving with your customer? The impression that can't just come and go as you please like the one created in a fun-house mirror?

"It is irrelevant how good your product or service is if you can't connect with your customer – if your customer can't grasp the authenticity of who you are, what you stand for, and why they should trust you."

***Smoke, mirrors, or something different***

How easy is it for your customer to see you for who you are? Are you smoke & mirrors, or are you real? Is the person that shakes their hand and presents a business card the true you, or is she a façade that morphs into a person that you think the customer wants to see? The ability to answer this question rests upon how well you know yourself.

***Getting to the essentials: do your research***

When you walk into your customer's office, are you going in with the confidence of someone that feels comfortable in their own skin, believes in what she does, and can confidently connect with the customer? To get to the essential YES for this important question, you need to do your research. You need to be prepared. You need to work to gain your customer's trust. You need to bring your authentic self to the table – the person that has the customer's best interests at heart, knows the customer's pain points, and truly has a solution to their problems.

***Today's buying environment is largely influenced by fear.***

Why do I say this? Because in my career that spans more than 15 years, I have never seen a buying environment that involves so many decision-makers. Ten years ago, when companies were cash cows and budgets had no limits, decision-makers had no qualms about making unilateral decisions in a vacuum. Today's customers are taking deliberate steps to mitigate their risk. They don't want to be the lone man standing when a customer fails to deliver. One buying decision could involve half a dozen people, from IT, to accounting, to HR, to operations, to legal, to marketing.

***So what can you, the solutions provider, do to calm the fear?***

The bottom line is that you not only have to sell your product or service, you also have to sell yourself – your true self. You have to embed yourself in the customer organization at multiple levels. And this means having a strong handle on who you are, how you will connect with multiple players, and why each player should trust you with their business.

***Today's sale is very complicated.***

Sales are not only connected to growth; they are connected to survival. Return on investment is

not a 12-month or 24-month time frame; it's a 30-day or 60-day time frame. Implementations have to happen in a matter of weeks, rather than months.

“Customers don't want to hear about features & benefits. They want to hear about the time, money, and risk it will cost them to move from concept to contract to completion.”

They want to know if you are substantive or just a mirage of someone presenting a solution.

***Are you ready?***

So when you prepare to meet with a customer are you prepared to bring your full & truthful self to the table? Are you giving 100 percent of who you are? Are you invested in their success? Are you treating your customer as if they are your most important customer?

Because they are your most important customer. And if you don't think they are, then you have no right to disillusion them and be at their table.

Bringing your full self to the table doesn't mean that you have all of the answers.

***What it means is that you are showing exactly who you are.***

It's likely that you don't have all of the answers. Better to speak up and tell a customer that you need to do more research or consult with colleagues to provide accurate information than to pretend to be something you are not. As a business owner, I've learned to tell the difference between vendors that are blindly taking shots at anything that moves just to land a sale, and vendors that are genuinely interested in helping me.

***The mirror and you***

How well do you know the person that looks back at you when you look in the mirror? And is it someone that you would trust? Would you do business with the person you see? Be personally invested. Be truthful. Be substantive. Be authentic. Don't be a mirage. Because unlike the fun-house mirror, the impression you leave with your customer won't disappear when you walk away.