
Is Cultism Good for Business?

by Tim Stackpool

Currently in the United States, it is difficult to walk around the major tourist centres, and not be intercepted by musicians armed with a portable CD player and headphones, wanting you to listen to their new 'album'. For \$20, you can score the latest independent sound around - apparently - until you are intercepted by the next singer/songwriter/spruiker/rapper also touting today's new groove.

In a way, it is an inspiration to see. Young people who have developed a tal-

ent using modern computer gadgetry have turned out a commodity in the privacy of their shared condo, and they are unafraid to hawk it on the streets for an income. It's like the next step in busking, with a free autograph.

A darker side of this is unravelling in Las Vegas. There is a cult, led by a man referred to as 'Coach', who manages a local band, made up of his disciples. They too, sell their album on the



street. His vendors are given a quota of \$200 worth of CD's to sell each day at \$20 per CD. If they meet the quota, the vendor keeps \$20. Coach retains the rest to support the cause. The ultimate goal for the cult is to win a Grammy Award, which after hearing the band's CD, seems to be a ridiculously long way off.

Amazingly, Coach's followers all appear to be bright, intelligent, attractive and well balanced. Is there a business lesson to be learnt from cultism? The adage "win their hearts and you win their business" comes to mind. Admittedly the vast and diverse population of the US makes it a little easier to find those souls who might be vulnerable to cultism, but it proves that a personal relationship can move mountains when it comes to influencing a 'market'.

There is a danger that if your goods or services are not up to scratch, such a business strategy can ruin both your professional and personal reputation. But a customer is more likely to conduct business following a personal referral, rather than

responding to an advertisement.

For example, a Motor Mechanic recommended by your friends at the pub or mothers' group is bound to receive plenty of business. So too is a Builder, Plumber or Investment Planner. How many times have you tried to become a client of the most recommended GP, Dentist, Obstetrician or Orthopaedic Surgeon, only to find that they are fully booked and not taking any new patients at the moment?

Word of mouth marketing is priceless, but closing the sale by winning hearts takes more skill. You must have absolute faith in your product or service. Live by it, breathe it and be enthusiastic about it. Appearing committed and being willing to follow though is also essential. Everyone has a story about a business where you wonder whether they really want you as a customer. There are plenty of conglomerates that appear this way, but for small private businesses and sole traders, such an attitude is deadly.

Treat every customer as your first customer. Every transaction must be satisfying. Conduct 'open' business,

where the customer knows that nothing is being held back, or hidden. A business that operates on hidden or unnecessary service costs is not a business, it's a scam.

A dissatisfied customer has ammunition to use against you at every conversation they have with friends, colleagues and strangers for the next 90 days. The human tendency for exaggeration, along with the viral effect of conversation can subsequently increase your competitor's turnover without them spending a cent on advertising or promotion. Think about it. A bad experience felt by your customer can increase your competition's success.

Alternatively, a happy customer has an amazing story to tell about a business that really operates efficiently and honestly. The story of a company that cares about the business they do and how they meet the expectations of the customer, and how anything less is unacceptable. This time, the tendency for exaggeration works with favourable results.

A successful transaction and a happy customer is a powerful thing. Always deliver. Always compensate if expecta-

tions are not met. Be capable. Under promise and over deliver.

Unlike with the cult leader, there's no brainwashing involved in operating a successful business this way, but the effect it will have on your customers will win their hearts and land you their business for life.

Tim Stackpool is a freelance Australian correspondent for radio and TV stations around the world. He has recently returned from the National Association of Broadcasters Conference in Las Vegas. Readers can receive a free professional voice recording from Tim for their answering machine by logging onto www.timstackpool.com