

THE
UNDERAPPRECIATED
ART OF SAYING
“THANK YOU”

This is one of a series of occasional papers by The Dilenschneider Group to bring clients and friends a different perspective. We hope you find it of interest.

THE *UNDERAPPRECIATED* ART OF SAYING “THANK YOU”

Life is moving at a breakneck pace, and each of us is forced by our e-mails, our iPads and our need to stay even in a perilous world to maintain or exceed this pace.

In this rush, many of us have forgotten to say “thank you” for even the simplest courtesies that we receive, from a bagger in our grocery store, to a waiter in a restaurant, to an operator giving us a phone number—even for an invitation or an event we are privileged to attend.

Many use e-mail or some other kind of electronic communication. But doesn't being thanked with a click somehow devalue the personal art of saying “thank you,” though we know e-mails have the advantage of speed and immediate response? It is almost the disconcerting equivalent of picking up the phone and hearing a robo call, a computerized voice on the other end to which there is no satisfying human response.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

In today's fast-paced world, we urgently need connectedness, even the brief bond of two strangers meeting in civil discourse.

Any of us who receives a sincere "thank you" knows and appreciates what it means. Businesspeople who deal with their Asian counterparts know the importance of the bow, the expression of gratitude and the protocol of the introduction, no matter how cut-throat the deal that follows. Anyone interacting with the French knows how courteous they are, having learned the importance of graciousness from birth. In Italy it is still customary to say "grazie mille" when a generous moment occurs.

AND IT TAKES SO LITTLE EFFORT.

A gruff, supremely weathered Massachusetts fisherman, dependent on the ocean for his daily catch, never failed to send up a short but fervent "thank you" at the end of a successful haul. "Don't know if anyone hears but I feel better sayin' it," he explained.

By the time we are two or three years old, most of us have learned that people like it when we say "thank you." Conscientious parents gently remind their children, "And what do we say when someone does something nice for us?"

By kindergarten, we have learned that a proper "thank you" somehow makes the day go more smoothly.

It is disturbing to see a child who does not say "thank you." It is even more distressing to do a small kindness for another and not get an acknowledgement of that action or any sign that it had an impact and was appreciated.

And yet, in our non-stop, sometimes frantic lives we may easily forget the importance of gratitude, the value of that often brief but vital connection we make with strangers when we take a moment to smile and say “thank you.” Civilized men and women benefit from *saying* it as much as the one extending the kindness appreciates *hearing* it.

With wages virtually stagnant for millions of workers, appreciation, especially for a job well done or for a burst of extra initiative, is the next-best motivator employers have.

From a purely psychological perspective, it may be even more important to thank those we see and work with every day than limiting our courtesy to strangers.

We are the most interdependent people in world history; being grateful for what others do for us is common sense. Yet every survey of the workplace in America finds that employees consistently say they wish they were more appreciated. It is disheartening to realize how seldom one hears a heartfelt “thank you” in the American workplace.

Hearing “thank you” is special because it is a way of making an employee or a co-worker feel valued. Employers and employees may come to think that because paychecks are involved, gratitude is not part of the relationship. But hearing “thank you” from the boss or a colleague is even more special praise than from a client or customer.

Being thanked makes the heart sing. It means even more when both parties know each other, when there is mutual respect, just as a reprimand from someone we know well stings more.

And yet some who never fail to thank a stranger for holding open a door or picking up a dropped object consistently fail to express gratitude to their nearest and dearest. The happiest relationships are built not just on trust and love but on politeness, mutual courtesy and gratitude. (That 1970s bromide about love meaning never having to say you're sorry has been long debunked.)

The hardest heart may be melted by a simple but sincere "thank you." Vast emotional distances may be overcome in a moment by a "thank you" that conveys "I value you and what you do."

For the truly pragmatic, doctors say the person who freely dispenses thank yous is healthier, happier and has more energy than someone who is uncomfortable expressing gratitude. How many cases of road rage could be prevented with simple politeness – letting another driver in line and receiving a grateful wave in return? How many after-work homecomings would be more peaceful?

In the dreadful aftermath of Hurricane Irene, time and time again, first responders remarked how much the overwhelming gratitude of the victims meant to them. We need more of that give-and-take on ordinary days in ordinary ways.

Just as the days when businesses could shortchange customer service are gone, customers have found ways as well to thank – or castigate – a company online through social media. In effect, we have modernized the old-fashioned era when every business owner knew every customer on a personal basis – an era when "thank you" was common currency. Nothing can or ever will replace personal contact, but how satisfying must it be for people in business to get a message complimenting good work?

Here are a few suggestions from the experts about the *newly appreciated* art of saying “thank you”:

SMILE AND MAKE EYE CONTACT.

Nothing says insincerity more than a mumbled thank you from someone who doesn’t even bother to look you in the eye.

DON’T OVERDO IT.

Gushing makes nearly everyone uncomfortable. Acknowledge specifically what someone did for you but don’t go into your life story. Be grateful, be pleasant, and be brief.

ABOVE ALL ELSE, BE SINCERE.

In a Middle Atlantic state motor vehicle office, there is a sign in the employee section that orders, “Thank the customer.” As might be expected, the thank yous hardly ring true. But one employee in that office always stands up at the conclusion of business, looks the customer in the eye, shakes hands and says, “We appreciate your coming in today.” Customers walk out with a smile, not a grimace.

FOR A GIFT, A MEAL OR ANY OTHER EXTRAORDINARY ACT OF KINDNESS, WRITE A THANK-YOU NOTE.

In our e-mail driven culture, a written note is special. It should be prompt, it should be personal, and it should specifically mention the act that inspired the “thank you” and what it meant to you. It should never, ever be perfunctory.

DO IT YOURSELF.

Do not delegate sending a note of thanks to someone else. It only means something special if it comes from you. Many CEOs have a box of personalized cards at the ready so they can let others know of their gratitude promptly. On the other hand, resist an abominable new development: Fill-in-the-blank thank-you cards.

AFTERWORD

We hope that it is helpful to you to receive these restatements of basic principles that have served our political and business leaders well throughout history. In these distressing, turbulent times, they may prove to be more important than ever for personal fulfillment and professional excellence.

We at The Dilenschneider Group are honored to continue to have the trust and confidence of some of the world's best-known and most admired companies, organizations and individuals at home and abroad. As we enter our third decade, we have found that the vast majority of today's executive officers are more concerned than ever about finding effective leadership strategies.

It is our belief that today's well-motivated executive who has built his or her team wisely does not hesitate to show appreciation to colleagues, subordinates, friends, relatives and business associates. Today's successful leaders know that saying "thank you" is not a sign of weakness or insecurity but an expression of personal confidence.

As always, we are eager to hear from you about the strategies you have found most helpful, as well as ideas that could be passed on to others who are struggling with the same dilemmas.

We remain confident that the future of this Country is strong and that by sharing expertise business leaders can work together to meet the challenges of an ever-changing global economy.

Robert L. Dilenschneider
Chairman and Founder

“The *Underappreciated* Art of Saying Thank You” is the latest in a series of “Little Red Books” published periodically for our clients and friends. We hope our readers find them relevant and of value. Previous titles have included:

- “The Age of Apology”
- “Managing Uncertainty”
- “C.I.V.I.L.I.T.Y.”
- “The Lost Art of Listening”
- “Two Decades (1991-2011):
The Words and the Deeds”

If you would like additional copies of this or previously issued booklets, please contact Joan Avagliano at jma@dgi-nyc.com.

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