

36 years at this, and it's still personal (true confession time?)

It's hard, as a business owner, to stay upbeat and focus on the positive sometimes. There are so many things that go right but what you hear about, what you spend a lot of time doing during the day, and sometimes losing sleep over at night, are those things that go wrong. Today is one of those days.

I spent untold hours trying to put together a reasonable email advertising a sale we're having, trying to make it somewhat interesting, knowing of course that I'm pretty severely graphically-challenged so I can spend hours at it and it's still not going to look pretty. To say that is a drain on me is an understatement; I can type all day long and be reasonably coherent and pleased with the results, but it's rare that, when I finally hit the "send" key and it goes out to 5,238 people, I'm not thinking I could have done better, that many will regard it as yet another piece of spam in the inbox (despite the fact that they are our customers or signed up on-line for our emails).

So that put me in an already-susceptible (to what?) state of mind when I got a fast (maybe 10 minutes after it went out) response from a customer I've known for a whole lot of years, someone I'd even consider a friend if I saw him in a social setting (as if I ever get out except on a bike...). One of those people you kind of grow up together with, hearing stories about their kids and telling them about your own.

Please remove me from your email list...ASAP.

That was it. The entire text (apart from his "signature" at the bottom). Oh, and "Sent via BlackBerry by AT&T"

It not for the "...". I might have just passed it by, thinking it was some sort of auto-response. Maybe auto-responders do that these days. Make the message look more menacing. Like, "Remove me, or else!" Except that auto-responders probably don't think somebody's actually looking at the message that they're sending. In fact, most people on our e-list probably don't think that there's a real live person looking at the returns, wondering why people would sign up and then leave us (good way of making me feel totally inadequate about marketing a business!). Well, OK, a good number of people mistakenly think we're the mail-order firm by the same name in the UK, and we actually get quite a few phone calls and emails from customers wondering where their order is.

I sent a reply, asking what's going on, is there something I don't know about, does he want to call or email and vent to me about something I did or didn't do. And in the meantime, I'm checking and rechecking new email every few minutes, wondering if he's going to respond, and wondering if a lack of response is an indication that maybe it was, in fact, an automated thingee (but I really don't think so).

That's today.

Then a couple weeks ago (rather klunkily moving forward into the past here), a good customer of ours, someone who has bought many bikes from us over the years, someone who I've always tried to make sure was well taken care of (because I maintain a sense of ownership of the bikes we've sold, pretty much forever, and this guy does keep his old bikes around!), brought one of his bikes in for work. A challenging repair, because many of the parts haven't been available for ages, and it's questionable how much money you throw at a bike like that, so I try to come up with reasonable, cost-effective solutions. So instead of replacing a shift lever for \$240 that's beginning to cause trouble, I have it flushed with this magical stuff we use (PowerLube) and bring it back to life. Good as new? No. It's a little bit finicky and requires more force to get it to engage in the large front sprocket than when everything was working right.

So he brings it back to have it "fixed" because it's not working. Well it was working in the stand, it had been test-ridden (which he didn't think was true but definitely the case) and I didn't have an issue getting it to work right. But *I* know that shifter because I grew up with the darned things, and *I* know that, if you loosen up the cable tension more than Shimano tells you to, it will work better. Something no mechanic who's been around bikes less than 15 years will likely know. Something many mechanics who have, still don't know. But I do, and I spent a few minutes of quality time with his bike and, as far as I know, have it working far better than it has in years.

Great, right? Wrong. Later that same day, I get an incredibly-negative Yelp review, talking about how bad it is that he has to bring his bike back in a second time (which has apparently happened once before as well) and how my mechanics need to test-ride bikes before they go out the door (which, at least in this case, I know they did) and how it's time for him to try someplace else.

Yeah, that hurt. You don't know how much that hurt. Mostly because I had no clue. No clue whatsoever. I thought I'd worked a minor miracle on his Trek 2100 from the way-back days with RSX cranks that you can't get chainrings for but we somehow did and shift levers that were brought back to life. I was dumbfounded. Depressed even. Didn't sleep well that night. I looked over his entire history with us, all the repairs we'd done, everything, looking for clues. I wrote him an email back, and tonight, left a message on his phone. Haven't heard anything from him. [Addendum: Heard back from him today (Thursday)! I'm hopeful that we'll earn his trust back and be able to keep taking care of his bikes. Very good news.]

Yes, it's personal. We haven't built up a facade that we can hide behind; we're not WorldWide MegaCorp, believing that we're OK because statistically we can't keep 3.25 percent of the customers happy no matter what we do, and statistically we're better off focusing on the 20% that account for 80% of our business. Maybe that's the attraction to getting really big. Maybe you can de-personalize things better because there's no way for you to connect with everybody.

But I don't want to be like that. I'm about bikes and people and more specifically people on bikes. It is personal. I just have to remind myself that, on a day like today, there were a number of customers who were very happy we were here for them, very happy that we take the time to personalize our service towards them and not treat them as a number, and, in most cases, recognize that we are personal, that you can talk to us, that I've got a public email address (mikej@chainreaction.com) and all I want is for people to be happy on bikes and for us to have done the best we possibly could for them, and if we screw up, I want the opportunity to both know about it and take care of it.

Yes, it's personal. Very personal. I don't want it to be any other way. --Mike--