

Trust Makes a Comeback in Business

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Why, especially in the online business space, good, old-fashioned "customer trust" is more important than ever.

When I was a kid my dad owned a men's clothing store. On occasional holidays I'd help out and watched as more than a few customers would tell my dad what they needed in general (four ties, three shirts) and he'd pull specific color combinations off the shelves and bag it up for them. When I expressed surprise that these customers let someone else choose their clothing, my dad always answered, "They trust me."

Trust. It almost seems like a quaint, old-fashioned business notion. But trust is making a comeback, thanks in large part to blogger extraordinaire Chris Brogan. Brogan and co-author Julien Smith explore the importance of trust in their *New York Times* bestseller *Trust Agents: Using the Web to Build Influence, Improve Reputation, and Earn Trust*. In the 21st century world of business, which is increasingly taking place online, Brogan and Smith maintain that the web has become "more humanized" and that, in order to successfully build your business, you need to become what they term a "trust agent."

Earlier this week I talked to Brogan about how small business owners can become trust agents. Brogan defines trust agents as people who are successful "non-sales-oriented, non-high-pressure marketers". They are the self-educated "digital natives" (people who are most familiar with the digital space) who are the "power users of the new tools of the Web". They know how to connect with customers and leave a good impression. This all leads to building healthy and honest business relationships.

Trust agents share six defining characteristics:

- They don't do things the same old way; instead they take the riskier path of standing out.
- They belong to a community.
- They use all the leverage they can muster.
- They build networks centered around themselves, "developing access" to the right people.
- They support and empower others and develop understanding.
- They realize they can't do it alone, so they "develop mass".

In fact, being a trust agent works as well in the offline world as it does online. Brogan says almost any business owner, from hoteliers to soap-makers to restaurateurs, can harness the tools of the Web to establish trust with their customers and clients. One key way to conquer the world of business, he says, is to become a "gatejumper". Gatejumpers "see the friction in the marketplace" and look for opportunities to replace what is standard and accepted in the market with "what could be". As examples, he cites how

Apple revolutionized the mobile phone with its iPhone, and how Zappos.com took advantage of a "distribution disparity" to start selling shoes online. (Zappos was recently bought by Amazon for nearly \$900 million.)

How do you get to be a gatejumper? First, identify the established gatekeepers in your industry and decide which rules you can break. Don't make the mistake of thinking that *all* rules are unnecessary; as Brogan points out, "Some rules are in place for a reason".

Brogan suggests you start by "lurking". Instead of plunging into social media and the online conversation headfirst, start by listening to what's being said -- about you, your company, your industry -- and then jump in when you see the business value in the conversation. You can begin by answering a customer comment or complaint yourself, or by reaching out to a blogger.

I've talked a lot in this column about the importance of customer service. To take good care of your customers, to build lasting and trusting relationships with them, Brogan advises you follow the "three A's": **A**cknowledge (what went wrong), **A**pologize, and **A**ct. Sounds simple, but building trust should not be a complicated process. As Brogan says, it's about being sincere, authentic, and real. Does this sound familiar? Yes, in his book he notes the importance of the "Golden Rule", especially in these times when so many marketers have forgotten how to deal with people. As Brogan reminds us, "The more we treat people the way they want to be treated, the better they react."

In many situations, entrepreneurs are both the hunter and the hunted. We need to become trust agents to grow our businesses, but at the same time we must stay alert to those who are targeting us. The same tools that help us reach out to customers can also be used against us. Brogan warns against the "pretenders to the throne". He says to get competitive prices before deciding to do business with anyone and look for what he refers to as "social proof". Find out who knows them and what they have done. Check their LinkedIn profile, read their Twitter stream. And understand that potential customers will be using the same methods to check you out.

As for what's next, Brogan says that he expects to see location-based apps finally breaking through and a rise in what he calls "velvet-rope social communities", where those with similar interests can congregate and interact online.

I'm not in the habit of recommending books, but I can't think of an entrepreneur who wouldn't benefit from reading *Trust Agents*. Brogan told me that reading Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective*

People changed his life and quadrupled his income. For some of you, reading *Trust Agents* just might do the same.

Brogan says that, ultimately, his book is about how you can use disruption to make your business work better. I think it's more than that. Brogan's favorite quote is by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." Being a trust agent is about what it *really* means to be an entrepreneur, about achieving the American Dream, and how the web provides the opportunity for all of us to do so.