

## Expert Tips & Tactics

### Secret Stuff

I bet the title got your attention! Sorry to crush your hopes, but it's not what you think.

I was giving a presentation to the members of my Toastmaster's Club yesterday from the "Talks by Management" manual. The talk required that I prepare and deliver a briefing to a group of people who would represent some constituency from my career. For my talk I asked my audience to role-play a new cohort of martial arts instructors.

My talk stressed the two things that most business owners already know regardless of what they do: 1. Your main business functions are to recruit and retain quality clients. 2. The retaining job that employees do is accomplished by motivating, educating and inspiring our clients (I owe Rob Colasanti big time for that line...he used that line several years ago at a martial arts seminar and it stuck to me like glue!)

In preparing the talk I wanted to come up with something that my audience could grasp even though they were not really martial artists. That's when I hit on my "secret" weapon...S.E.C.R.E.T...equals: Synergy, Energy, Commitment, Relationship, Evaluation, Technique.

Before I de-construct my secret message, for you, however, we need some common ground: The first common denominator of what we do is that we are not simply acquiring clients; we are all, in some way changing the lives of those people with whom we interact. Secondly, there are similarities between any truly committed leaders, regardless of their field of endeavor. All truly dedicated leaders and performers change the lives of those around them. Dedicated teachers from pre-K through College do it. Inspired business owners do it. Gifted artists, musicians, actors and writers do it. Research scientists and engineers do it. They all create positive change in the world around them.

Great leaders and great teachers already know either intuitively or directly from learned experience that the secret to inspirational performance is that there is no real secret. There is a Zen-like quality here...It doesn't matter if your employees study themselves into understanding or whether they intuitively know how to do it. The only thing that really counts is that your employees "*be*" and not just "*do*". You cannot fake it. You cannot pretend to be inspirational. Having said that, let's get started.

**S is for synergy.** I believe that when we are truly effective in business, we create synergy around us. Synergy is an indispensable tool because it creates tremendous trickle down effects that potentially impact everyone your business touches. Synergy can begin with the very first contact that your client makes. Since my base is martial arts I see synergy every time two people work together and create an effortless Judo throw. It is a thing of beauty. In moments of martial beauty, my students sometimes become aware of the fact that collectively they have the opportunity to learn, do and be more than they could ever achieve individually.

We could argue that the entire history of learning and discovery is an act of multi-generational synergy; otherwise we would all be re-inventing the wheel, both figuratively and literally. We all stand on the shoulders of previous generations and if we are wise, we draw upon their experiences to learn and grow as individuals and as a society.

**E is for energy.** I tell my instructors and students that one of the reasons we bow in the martial arts is to remind ourselves to “let it go.” When I bow at the edge of the deck, I am making a commitment to what I am about to do and a conscious effort to leave the day’s baggage at the edge of the mat. I bring my attention to the matter at hand as an exercise in mindfulness. As business owners, it is incumbent upon us to create environments that are high-energy and if we drag baggage into the business with us, it is difficult to create a high-energy environment in which to engage our clients. Whatever energy we take to the business, is therefore the energy with which we will infect our clients. They will pick up on our body language, amplify it and play it back.

Sometimes, when I feel stressed, I go to the kid’s class in my martial arts school and “absorb” their energy. I allow myself to be infected by their boundless enthusiasm for life. In a very short time I can feel their energy fill my heart as I concentrate on seeing the world of discovery through their eyes. E is for energy; you either give away high energy or suck positive energy right out of your classes.

**C is for commitment.** Life-long martial artists are all about commitment. Having been in the martial arts for more than forty years, I know the value of commitment, but that’s not what this particular “C” is about. The commitment to which I allude here stems from integrity. I commit myself to giving my clients the very best in terms of product and service. Anything less would be saying that I do not value my clients. When a client chooses my business I am making a tacit commitment that I will provide the very best of my abilities.

We commit to our clients to work with them through the good and the difficult times. We commit to continual learning for ourselves and we commit to the journey for as long as our clients are with us. It is not a trivial undertaking.

We live in a world where businesses all too frequently see clients as a dollar figure and not as people with desires and needs. Businesses play lip service to “quality” and “customer service” and as our businesses grow, it is easy to fall into the same trap.

If this makes you squirm, I offer no apology; we create what we wish. This is the path of commitment.

**R is for relationship.** Every interaction with a client is a marketing event. We are selling meaning, benefit and value or we are inviting our clients to spend their resources of time, money and energy elsewhere. At the beginning of this article we said that the job of the employees is client retention. We can only do this effectively if we build a personal relationship with each client, encounter-by-encounter.

Hopefully, our clients respect us for our products, skills and our character and as such. In each encounter an employee has the opportunity to deepen his or her understanding of each client through direct interaction and personal caring. Over time, this develops into a strong bond of relationship that grows from synergy and commitment. The bottom line is simple: If your clients are staying, you are building relationships with them, if they are not, then you are failing to do so.

**E is for evaluation.** As business owners, we are called to evaluate quality. We are expected to evaluate ourselves and to ensure that we are continually learning.

Many years ago, when I was an assistant martial arts instructor, I was talking with my chief instructor and he created an interesting conundrum that haunted me for several years. He said that he had been taught by a sixth degree black belt and didn't know as much as his master instructor and that since he was a third degree and I was learning from him, then I would never know as much as he did. The conclusion that he drew was that over time the martial arts were getting watered down. There was, however, a logical fallacy in the argument,

If I trained in an insulated environment my instructor would have been correct. To the degree that we stop learning and stop seeking out new experiences, he was exactly correct. If we ever think that we have learned enough or learned it all, we are doomed to kill the very thing we love. The call of evaluation is that we honestly evaluate ourselves. All the time.

**T is for technique.** I like the quote “In the technique the doctrine is revealed.” Continued training reveals secrets that we did not see at earlier levels of study. Our technique is the final arbiter of what we do. There is no substitute for technique. Technique is an uncompromising mistress who reveals her secrets slowly over time. The only path lies through the terrain of study.

The quality of our techniques reveals a lot about our instructional doctrine and our business philosophies. The quality of what we do, screams volumes about who we are and what we value. If we consistently evaluate our own technique and assiduously sharpen the saw of practical ability, we will be telling our own clients how much we value their investment of resources with us.

So, to wrap things up, there really is no secret. Every aspect of running a business about which we have spoken can be learned.

There’s nothing magical here. All we need is an uncompromising desire to give the very best to produce the very best.

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