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INTRODUCTION

If you were to bring someone into today's world of technology and ask them what they thought about it, they might be overwhelmed by the ways in which we can communicate.

However, they might also see how we're saying more, but connecting less. The challenge with the new ways of communicating online and through other digital media settings is that we're not necessarily connecting with audiences in the way we used to connect.

And that's causing troubles for business today.

Without that ability to connect, online marketing and promotions can begin to seem like large billboards on the Web, instead of interactive and engaging messages.

Building connections online becomes crucial to the success of businesses (both online and brick-and-mortar) today. But how can you create a connection when you never meet a person in person?

That's what we're going to find out. That's what you're going to learn.

From the way you get to know your audience to the way to reach out to them in your local area and through online tools, you can make people feel as though they are talking to you one-on-one.

You don't need to travel to your customers to connect with them, but you do need to meet them and get to know them in some way if you want them to buy something from you.

Technology can only do so much to help your business. The rest of it is up to you.

1.

KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER

No matter how long you've been in business, you need to be certain you know who your customers are and what they want from you. The less you look at your customers, the more out of touch you can become in relation to their needs and their desires from you.

You've heard the stories of companies that went out of business because they just weren't in touch with the true needs of their customers anymore – and you don't want to become one of them.

DO YOU REALLY KNOW YOUR CUSTOMERS?

While you might think that you know your customer, if they're not already coming to your website, this might be due to a lack of knowledge.

Certainly, you may have done market research and you may have done other studies to see if your product was desirable, but if you don't know WHO you're selling to, you might never get the audience you deserve.

Your customer has a certain life and a certain set of needs that you should address each time they come to your site.

But when you don't know them, you can't sell to them.

It can help to stop for a minute and picture the person that is going to buy what you have to sell. Think about what they look like and what their income is.

Think about what they are doing in their life right now and how the products you have to sell impact them.

- Are they single mothers who are struggling to make ends meet?
- Are they females that want to improve their appearance?
- Are they men who want to build up their health?

You may be able to determine some of these characteristics by looking at the way your business has performed up to this point. You can see who the buyers are.

Right now, you need to start thinking about who the person on the other end of the transaction is. If you don't know them, you don't know how to make them happy.

And if you can't connect to the customer who really wants what you have to offer, you're not going to see the profits you expect – and desire.

START ASKING QUESTIONS

You don't have to guess when it comes to getting to know your customers. Just like being on a first date, you can't find out anything about them unless you start asking them questions.

(And this questioning mindset will continue to help you, as you'll see in a later section.)

If you want to learn something about someone else, you need to start asking questions. You need to find out what they think, why they think it, and what they need from you.

You can do this in a variety of ways:

- Surveys – You can find a number of online, free survey systems that allow you to create customized surveys to send out to your mailing list. Then, you can compile the results quickly and see what answers you get.
- Email questionnaires – It can also help to send emails that you have drafted to your mailing list. This looks a little more personal and often is perceived as less intrusive.
- Personal emails or letters – If you want to be even more intimate in the conversation you create with your customers, send them personal notes. Certainly, this is more time consuming, but imagine how a person feels when the owner of a company asks them about their opinion.
- Blogs – When you already have a blog in place and you have a number of readers, pose the questions you want to ask there. This will allow you to collect the answers in the comments section, and it can spark conversations between readers that yield answers to questions you haven't yet thought to ask.
- Online videos – Like a blog, you can reach out to your audience with an online video, asking questions directly to the viewers, and then suggesting ways to send you the answers.

The more you reach out to your audience, the more answers you will receive. And remember that you want to receive the feedback you're asking for; so don't worry if you hear things you don't want to hear.

(Each bit of information will help you become even better in your business, which means you'll see more profits – and more positive feedback – soon.)

You might want to ask questions like:

- Who are you?
- What is your income?
- What is your age range?
- How many children do you have?
- What's working for you?
- What isn't working for you?
- What am I (or my business) doing well for you?
- Where can I (or my business do) better?
- What products/services do you like?
- What products/services do you want to see?
- What products/services do you hate?

The more detailed you can get in your questions, the more you will learn about the direction you are taking.

Something to keep in mind is that while you might not get the best feedback, or even answers you were expecting. This is something that can shock some people because they might truly believe they aren't going to hear something negative.

But you will. Everyone will.

You really can't please everyone, but the more you can find out about what your customers want, you can please more people and you can attend to their needs. The more you can relate and connect, the more you will make business decisions that make people happy.

And you will make more decisions that make your bottom line happy as well.

STAY IN THE KNOW

It's not enough to ask some questions though. Since people change and customer needs change constantly, you will need to find ways to stay up to date with your market.

People are always changing because of their lives and their choices. How they answer your questions today may not be the way they answer your questions in the future.

It's tricky, to be sure, and seems to present the challenge of always having to meet the fickle needs of your market. But that's also the way that you keep the same customers.

When you respond to what people want RIGHT NOW, you can give them what they want RIGHT NOW and in the future.

You might want to look at:

- Your market trends – Before you began your business, you looked to see what the market needed (didn't you?), and that doesn't stop after your business begins. Now, you need to look around to see what else is happening in your market. It can help to subscribe to market blogs or trade papers to help you stay up to date on the latest trends.
- Your competition – Looking at your competition will allow you to see what your customers see when they're looking in your market. While you might not want to do what your competition is doing, looking at the 'why' of what they're doing might shed light on the possible action steps you need to take next.
- Your customer feedback – Of course, listening to your customers is the best way to find out what they want and what they're not getting.
- The buying trends – Look at how many items you are selling (or not selling) to see if you can identify trends in your market. For example, if you sell all purple sweaters, but the black sweaters aren't selling, maybe you need to focus on more color.

Your market and every market are constantly changing. When you take the time and make the effort to continue to review what your market needs and wants, you can stay up to date and you can stay connected.

FIND OUT ABOUT THE FUTURE

You will also want to focus on the what's coming up, so you're preparing yourself and your business for these changes. The more that you prepare today; the more you will be ready for tomorrow's growth.

To see into the future, it helps to:

- Read the comments on your blogs.
- Go to related online forums to see what people are discussing.
- Continue to ask questions.
- Read the market news.
- Ask why customers have changed their ordering habits.

Questions are where the answers are for getting and staying connected to your audience.

Since things are changing, not only based on the needs of the customer, but also because of the ways that the market and technology changes, it's not enough to worry about today.

You need to worry (and ask) about tomorrow too.

The more you ask, the more you learn.

2.

TELL YOUR STORY

Online businesses can appear to be static places where words and pictures are how you relate to others.

While these are necessary for communication, when you want to drive connection, you need to tell your unique story. Everyone has a story to tell, and every business began because of some compelling moment.

Think about people that you find to be exciting and interesting in your life. You feel this way about them because you know their story. But how can a business relate their story to the world?

Often, this is a limited About Us page on a website, but you can do more with your story. You can reach out and touch the people you call your customers, making them want to find out what the next chapter of your success may reveal – and how the unfolding of your story can benefit them as well.

CUSTOMERS WANT TO KNOW YOU

Though we might never meet the president of a company, we feel more connected to them when we know the story of their life.

If you look at the current books for sale, you might notice that many more business owners are writing about their lives and then marketing them as an addition to their products or services.

When we feel we know a person, we begin to feel as though we are a part of their lives, and we are a part of their success. If we can connect with a story, we can relate to a person as just that – a person.

Gone are the days when you could list products online and see people buy them up. Your customers are aching to know who you are.

When a customer knows you, they:

- Trust you – If you're not hiding behind a fancy website, you become a real person, someone who is sharing who they are. At this personal level, the customer begins to trust you and they trust that you are someone who is not trying to trick them or just trying to

get their money. This trust increases customer confidence and it encourages them to buy things that you have to offer.

- Believe what you have to say – Even more important than personally trusting you, when you choose to share your story with others, the readers will begin to believe other things you have to say. After all, if you are honest about where you have come from, then the information you have to share about your business must also be true. This honesty further increases the faith customers have in the business you offer.
- Feel you have their best interests at heart – When a customer knows the company they are dealing with, they begin to feel like a part of a family. They begin to sense that you are someone who has their best interests at heart, and that you are offering things that you feel will bring value to their life and to their goals.

Customers crave stories of others, and sometimes those stories sell products more effectively than any marketing campaign.

Even though you can certainly use stories as a part of your marketing, just sharing who you are allows you to connect with your audience and allows you to become a company that stands out from the rest.

YOUR STORY MAKES YOU REAL

Imagine a product that you want to buy. Now imagine what it would feel like if you had no idea who made the product. While this is not an uncommon situation, customers have begun to wonder if this is the best way to make an informed spending decision.

When you want to connect to your customer, you need to make yourself a real person, a face behind the prices you list on your website.

Not only do you need to share your story, but you also need to make sure it allows you to become a real person, and not just another business owner.

A story allows you to show:

- How your passion informs your business – Within your story, you might talk about how you were also overweight and how changing the way you lived not only created health, but also created a successful product and business.
- How your family informs your business – When you're trying to reach parents and families, your story about how important your family is to you makes you real and genuine.

- How you have struggled and succeeded – A story about how you had to struggle though something will reveal your humanity and your own need to do something different in order to make your life better. No one's life is perfect, after all.
- How you have grown because of your business idea – When you can tell a story that allows you to show how your own business has informed your life and vice versa, you become a real person that can inspire others to do the same.

What you want to remember is that connection is often about finding common ground. Since so many of our personal stories are the same, sharing your own story makes you a real person, not just a business.

When you can focus on the ways in which you are human, you can connect deeply to the people who want to buy what you have to sell.

And the story can be ongoing too. Revealing the ways in which you continue to write your story will allow you to showcase that you are not only a real person, but someone who is just like your customer – always looking for ways to grow and to change.

As you begin to write your story, think about what you have done in your life and what is relatable for your specific audience. Think about what you want to share and what you want to reveal.

Though this might be a challenging process at first, realize that the more honest you are about what you have done and how you have changed your life can help you connect more deeply with your audience.

This might sound as though this is something that only New Age sorts of businesses might want to do. This might sound as though 'professional' companies may not want to get so personal.

But you need to be personal. You need to share the story of who you are, as that's where connection truly begins.

HOW TO WRITE YOUR STORY

The story that you have to share should be as compelling as possible, and when you're the person who has lived the story, it can be challenging to write.

It can help to think about a few things:

- What drove you to where you are now?
- What difficult situations have you faced?

- How has your life changed?

All of these questions create a fascinating story that others will want to read.

If you're feeling stuck about where you might want to begin your story, it can help to write out the story of your life up to this point. Even the smallest details might turn out to be the parts of your story that resonate with readers the most.

You can write out your story on paper or you can start a document on your computer. Just start writing and writing and writing to see what comes and what might be of use to your business goals.

Another way that might be helpful is to tell yourself your own story into a voice recorder of some kind. Many smartphones now have an application that can allow you to do this.

And once you've captured the story, then you can write it out in words and edit it to be even more powerful.

For some, this might end up being a very personal story; a story of how tragic events might have brought you to where you are today.

For others, it might be the story of how you scraped and built your business into what it is today.

Right now, as you begin to write your story, it might not be simple to see what's exciting or what might hit home for your audience, but since you have taken the time to meet your audience with questions, you have an idea of what they might want to hear.

It can also be helpful to look at your competition to see what their story is, and how you can write something better, more powerful than the story they have shared.

There are many ways to create a strong story:

- Use details – Make sure that you include as many details as you can about the story you want to share. The more details you include, the more the other person will be able to visualize what you're trying to share with them.
- Tell the truth – Though this should already be apparent, you want to tell the truth in your story. Be absolutely honest in what happened, how it happened, and what it meant to you. This will help you be vulnerable to your audience, which creates authentic engagement.
- Include pictures – Whenever possible, include pictures that help to tell the story of your life or of the story of what brought you to building the business you want to improve right now.

- Keep it succinct – Even though your story might be longer, you don't want to spend pages and pages telling your story. You do want to focus on the most important details and events.

You don't have to be an amazing writer to tell a story. But you do have a story, everyone does, and it needs to be shared.

Once you have the story, then you can refine it, helping to make it even more powerful. It can help to have others in your life read it and give you feedback, or you might want to talk to a professional writer and editor to see how they can make the facts sound even better.

It might also be good to share the story with a few long-term customers to see what they think and to ask them what they think might be missing from the story.

With all of this feedback, then you can make changes that will help you complete a story that not only speaks to your audience, but also that helps you market what you're trying to sell.

What you need to keep in mind is that in today's market of engagement, it's not about selling the item. You have to sell you first.

SHARE YOUR STORY EVERYWHERE

Once you have a story to share, then it's time to start sharing it with as many people as possible. There are a few ways in which you can do this effectively, allowing you to have the greatest impact on the people in your customer audience.

- Post your story on a website – You can begin to share your story by posting it on your website, possibly changing 'About Us' to 'Our Story.' Let people know that you have made this change, or just list it on your site and see what happens as a result.
- Post your story on a blog – To make your story even more accessible, you can post it to your blog and share the story in multiple entries if it's longer. A shorter version of your story might be great on a profile page, but then you can go into more detail in your blog entries, helping people see the entire story of who you (and your business) are.
- Share your story on video or audio – To make things even more personal, you can record a video or an audio file of your story, in your own voice. This is going to connect with your audience even more deeply, as it's you talking about you.

- Tell your story to audiences – If you can set up presentations or gatherings, make sure you tell your story there too. Invite questions and see what people think when you read the story to them. You might notice that certain parts of the story are stronger and have more impact. And you can receive immediate feedback.
- Create an email campaign – You can also write out your story and share the video or audio in your email marketing campaign or newsletter service. This will spread your story far and you can encourage people to forward the message to others who might be interested.
- Share your story on a related blog or website – By offering to guest post on a site about overcoming struggles, for example, you can inspire others with your story, while also reaching a new market.
- Share your story on Facebook or other social media outlets – Social media is a place where many people already share their stories, so taking your story onto these platforms is a great way to continue a conversation about who you are and what makes you special in your market.

Even though you share your story, you need to continue to relate back to this story whenever possible. Talk through these channels about what has changed in your story, what has shifted.

Update your audience when things are growing and when your story is different than it was before. Like a good TV show or video, people want to know more from stories. They will come back to find out more from you, and from your business.

The story of who you are and what your business has experienced is more than just a marketing strategy (though it can certainly support a campaign). The story is where you begin to have a conversation with your audience, and they will respond to you as a result.

3. SHOW THE GOODS

When you have a brick and mortar store, you get a chance to connect people with the items you sell because not only can you talk to them directly, but also you can show them the goods.

But what happens when you're online?

Instead of someone being able to touch the items and see if they work for them, the customer has to rely on the information they give you. And while words work to quantify the essence of the product, pictures are worth more.

Pictures add up to sales.

STRONG WRITING = STRONG DESIRE

You can't discount the value of strong writing on your business website. This can be more than just descriptions of the items and what they do.

Writing can take other more powerful forms, allowing you to create an experience for the reader, answering their questions and allowing them to be certain of the product you have to offer.

What makes strong writing?

- Clear descriptions – If you are selling a widget, you need to make sure the words that describe it help the customer feel as though they are looking at the item and experiencing it. You need to write (or have someone else write) to describe the item as though the person will never touch it, but allow them to feel as though they are able to do so.
- Effective keywords – While keywords may not be visible or understandable to your audience, they drive the right customers to your store. You need to learn what your target customers are looking for when they use their favorite search engine – and then use those words on your site. As you do this, you will ensure you are connecting with the right customer. A customer who is brought to your site because of the best keywords is a customer who already feels you understand their true needs.

- Concise wording – Of course, readers are fickle too in the way they read. This includes a faster market and a time-conscious audience who doesn't want you to go on for pages about what a product is and what it can do. You need to get to the point and respect the time they have.

If you're not sure your writing is best for your audience, it can help to employ a professional to do the work for you. Or you can spend time looking at similar sites to yours (successful sites, of course) to see how they're reaching their audience.

The more you learn about what your audience already expects, the more you can deliver and the more you can engage.

TAKE GREAT PICTURES

If you are selling items on your site, you need to include the best pictures possible. Yes, this takes a higher quality camera, or a professional photographer who comes to you to take the pictures.

Ideally, the pictures should show the entire product in all of the various orientations it can be – i.e. front, back, sides, etc.

Make sure these pictures are large enough on your site to be easily seen when the person clicks on the picture, and that the pictures are easy to find.

If a person can't see what you're trying to sell, you're not connecting. It may appear as though you're trying to hide the item or that you don't understand an online audience who needs to have other ways of engaging with the products you sell.

When you're the one taking the pictures:

- Use a high MP camera – Make sure the camera you use has the highest number of megapixels you can afford.
- Check the lighting – Ensure the lighting allows the person to see the true colors of the item, as well as the quality.
- Double check the pictures before you post them – Always look at the pictures after you have taken them to see how they will look when someone boots up your site.

You don't have to be a professional photographer anymore to have high quality pictures, but you do need to be aware of what people are trying to find when they browse your site.

HOW TO USE VIDEOS

Videos are another way in which you can begin to connect with the audience. In these videos, you can make the customer feel as though they are in the same room with the item.

You can post videos on:

- Your website
- Your blog
- YouTube Channels
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Etc.

Each time you provide another look at a product, you allow the customer to be up close and personal.

You show that you have nothing to hide when it comes to the products you have, and you show that you want the customer to always feel as though they're in the same room with what you have to offer.

Like traditional pictures, you want to make sure you're using the best lighting and the best quality camera that you can find.

USE THE PRODUCTS YOURSELF

It wouldn't make sense for you to sell things that you don't already use in your own life. Make sure that you are also using the products when you're out and about, helping you connect to the local market, which then allows you to build customer connections online.

- Wear the items
- Market the items in your community
- Share your experiences with friends and family
- Be a part of local trade shows

The more that you show your own use of the products, the more you will instill confidence.

Plus, people can come up to you and engage with you. This makes you less of a seller, and more of a friend.

Other ideas to use the products yourself include:

- Posting pictures of how you use the items.
- Posting blog entries, describing how you utilize the products.
- Sharing your experiences via podcasts and other media methods.

The more that you put yourself and your products out there; they become less of a mystery.

Think about the way that Apple posts videos on their sites about the products they release. While you may not learn everything about a product, you do learn more about what they have to offer and how they might add value to your life.

You need to show that you're a person that feels your products have use in your own life.

And then others will see the value in their own lives.

MAKE YOUR PRODUCTS/SERVICES EASY TO UNDERSTAND

If you're in the business of selling items that are used in a certain way, it can help to demonstrate those items with how-to videos or information packets. This allows the person to visualize how they might use the items when they are delivered to their doorstep.

This also allows you to have a personal interaction, of sorts, with a customer who might never enter your store or touch the product before they order it.

The videos can show the steps to setting up the product, using the product, and adjusting the features.

These videos can be short and simple, and readily accessible on your site or via a YouTube channel.

4.

ENGAGEMENT VS. SELLING

Connecting with customers is a different mindset for many business owners. Since many are taught to simply present a high quality item to customers and let the product sell itself, the idea of engagement is a new strategy that might not come easily.

But once you flip the switch and realize the power of engagement, your business will benefit – and so will your customers.

WHY CUSTOMERS AREN'T BUYING FROM SELLERS

Customers want more than they ever have before. Since economic times have been tighter, they aren't as willing to let go of their money. And who can blame them?

Your customer today is smarter, more questioning, and looking to have a personal experience in the online setting. They're not just going to connect with a product; they want to connect with YOU and your brand.

The online market has been moving in this direction for a while. Because there are hundreds, even thousands, of sites with the same products you are selling (most likely), the customer doesn't have to settle for just one shop.

A customer today is looking for a store that knows who they are and what they want. They are looking to feel as though they are getting that mom and pop store experience, without having to leave their home.

They are hesitant to buy from people who just don't seem to care about who they are and what they need. And that's why engagement is more powerful than ever.

Customers don't want to buy from someone who drives a hard sell because this seems to:

- Assume the buyer can't make his or her own decision
- Be too pressure-filled

- Focus only on the money the company can make
- Discount the personal experience that is possible

When you can stop to think about what you don't like about certain online business experiences, you will begin to see that you're not alone in the way that you want to see marketing occur.

Customers are so much smarter now because they know the tricks of selling, even if they don't know all the steps and even if they're not running online businesses on their own.

They know when you're just trying to make money.

THE POWER OF ENGAGEMENT

When you can commit to the idea of engaged selling and engaged business, you are giving more than most sites out there. You are showing your customers that you are interested in the connection, and not just the money from the sale.

Engagement is about meeting your customers where they are at and delivering more than they expect. And customers DO expect more from you.

The power of engagement lies in its ability to:

- Know the customers – When you engage with your customers, you begin to know who they are. And you might even begin to know about their personal lives, their needs, and their problems.
- Interact with customers – As you create an atmosphere of engagement, you offer opportunities for interaction. This might look like a webinar or a Facebook group, etc.
- Build long-term relationships – The more people get to know you and who you are, the more they will come back to you the next time you have something to sell. They already trust you and will base their buying decisions on this trust.
- Encourage community building – Engagement isn't just about you connecting with one person either. This is about creating engagement with multiple people at the same time. When this happens, you begin to create a group of people who are all interested in what you have to say and what you have to sell.
- Develop brand identities – With each engagement and with each interaction, you begin to build your brand. This is the thing that

people think of when they think of your product. It's the identity that your product has when you are not talking about the product yourself. For example, if you think about Nike, you think about athletics and strength. This is because they spend their time and their money on marketing with that message in mind.

- Create a culture of shared knowledge – When you choose to engage with others, you create the possibility for everyone to have a say in what you offer. Instead of telling others what you have and why it's good for them, you listen and you gain ideas and inspiration from what your customers experience. It's not just about what you think, it's about what everyone thinks.
- Encourage investment – People who feel their ideas are being used for the greater good of a product or a service feel invested in its outcome. Think about Facebook and how it allows people to vote on the privacy issues and other changes. Because people get a say, they begin to feel that this is also their business and they want it to succeed just as much as you do.

Engagement isn't just about money. It's about creating a new way of inspiring your customers to take action – even if it's not always buying the item you have to share.

CHEAPER TO SELL TO SOMEONE WHO IS ENGAGED

You've probably already heard that it's easier to sell to those who have already bought from you than to try to find new customers.

That's what engagement does for you.

Someone that is already invested in what you do, because you've made him or her a part of the experience:

- Doesn't need to be pressured into buying
- Doesn't need to be reminded of how you're helping them
- Doesn't need to be sold

What you need to know, however, is that engagement isn't necessarily a process that happens overnight. It can be a process that takes time, but it will generate massive results for you when it's done well.

Think about any good relationship that you have with someone in your life. Chances are likely that you didn't just start a friendship with them that was amazing from the start.

Instead, you had to have a few meetings with them to learn the basics about them. Once there was a shared trust, then you started to talk more and to see what they were really all about.

When you can start thinking about customers as friends and developing friendships with them, that's when you're in the engagement mindset. That's when the business mind shifts and your business grows out of a more authentic place.

HOW TO FULLY ENGAGE

Beyond knowing your customer, engagement is about truly caring about where your customer is at in their life and how you can help.

To fully engage you need to:

- Be available – You need to begin to be available for your customers, and this doesn't just mean that you need to do all the talking. You could always employ others to manage your communications. What matters is that customers feel your business is accessible, and that they are able to interact when needed.
- Be willing to admit mistakes – Of course, at times, you will make mistakes. Think about when Apple created the Maps feature that didn't work as expected. They admitted it wasn't their best product, and they focused on making it better. While this doesn't sound like engagement, it creates connection because you become a real person (or company) who wants to make sure customers know they hear their concerns.
- Be aware – That said, you need to become more aware of your customers and where they're at in their lives. You need to be ready to listen to everyone and to take in the ideas that are shared with you.
- Be ready to make up for problems – If you do make a mistake, you want to make up for it. Give people a no-questions, money back guarantee. Send them a refund. Write them a personal note.

Engagement begins with you putting more work into the relationships you have with your customers. Over time, this might not be as much work, as the results will begin to speak for themselves.

And your customers will begin to speak up for you too.

NEW WAYS TO ENGAGE

With all of this talk about engagement, you may want to have as many practical and easy-to-utilize ideas in mind before you get started. And there are plenty of ways to engage that you will learn within this book.

To give you some quick-start ideas to manage your new connection-building process, here are some things to keep in mind for now or for the future.

WRITE A BOOK

You've probably noticed how many people today in business are writing books, sometimes about their companies, sometimes about their lives. If you have a longer story to share or you have more ideas you think will be useful for your audience, it can be a good idea to engage with a self-published book. With many publishing services available, it's easier than ever to make this process happen for your business.

TAPE PODCASTS

When you enjoy talking, it might be a good idea to tape podcasts that your customers can upload for free from iTunes. This will be a sort of ongoing conversation with your customers, allowing you to have an audio form of communication and engagement. You can talk about whatever is on your mind or you can address questions that might have come up in your search to learn more about your customers.

OFFER ONGOING INTERACTION

One way that many current business owners are engaging with audiences is to have regularly scheduled check-ins with customers. This could be a video chat with others over Skype, or it might be a Twitter time of the day when you answer any questions with a particular hash tag (#example) that you might have chosen for the discussion.

CREATE SUPPLEMENT PRODUCTS

You can also engage by offering products that supplement other products you already sell with success. This continues to engage the customer and brings them back to find out what else you have that might be of service to them. Since they've already committed to the first product, they're more likely to want the second one, and the third...

UPDATE OLD PRODUCTS

If you offer products that can be updated, you may want to find ways to offer those updates on a regular basis for your customers. You can offer to update some items for free or you can create a low-cost way to update items for customers who are returning, encouraging repeat business.

BRAND WHAT YOU DO/OFFER

Branding is a term that's been tossed around a lot when it comes to customer connection. If you want to make sure that your customers always know what you have to offer, then you want to make sure that when they think of your business, they think of one thing. You might want to find an idea or an image that you can bring into every interaction – i.e. a logo, a slogan, etc.

The more that you begin to think about how you interact online with businesses, the more ideas you can see to be available to you as a business that wants to bring in more customer interest.

Building connections means you need to be active and it means you need to be offering more and more.

It will keep people coming back.

5.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

One of the biggest problems with online sellers today is that they try to force feed information to their customers. There's often a fear that if you don't have all the answers, then you aren't going to instill confidence in your customers.

But what usually happens when you're talking to someone who comes across as a know-it-all? You tend to tune them out, if you can't avoid them completely.

Instead, realize that engagement and connection should focus on creating dialogue with others. And to create conversation, you need to ask questions.

THE PROBLEM WITH TELLING

Imagine what it would be like if you were to go onto a blog that only talks about how great a book is. And no matter what the reviews said or the comments on the blog said, the author would always refute them.

Do you think you would visit the blog anymore? Probably not.

People don't want to be told what to think or what to believe. We just don't want to have someone else say that we're wrong in some way. Instead, we want to have conversations about what we think, and from that place, we can see all of the sides.

A conversation can't happen when one side isn't listening. And the ability to listen is where connection happens.

If you're just telling people what they 'should' know, you're:

- Limiting the conversation – When you just spout off what you know, then the other person doesn't really get a chance to converse with you. When you keep things open and dynamic, then you can see what the other person has to say, which might be more valuable than the price of the product you're trying to sell right now.

- Creating defensiveness – A person who is told things again and again is going to start feeling defensive, even if there's no reason to feel defensive. Some people just like to argue online, and know-it-all-ness can bring those people to your website.
- Encouraging bad mouthing – Along with defensiveness comes negative comments from others who feel you don't listen to anyone. When you want to fill the Internet with comments about how great your company is, you need to think about how you can be in conversation instead of talking AT people.
- Acting in your best interests, but not in the customers' – Customers who feel you will just repeat the same ideas again and again without wanting any feedback will realize that you don't care about them. And while this might not be true, remember that words online are there nearly forever. It can be difficult to change the way you're seen.
- Hindering experiences – Customers that simply see information from you are going to be limited in the way that they experience your product. They won't have the space to share their experiences, which may be helpful to your overall success.
- Showing static engagement – A conversation when one person talks is not a conversation.

You need to remember that customers are people, not just transactions. You need to focus less on telling others what you have to offer, and try out the idea of asking questions.

If you've ever been in a conversation with someone who asks you a lot of questions about yourself, you know that it feels good to talk to this person.

You walk away feeling as though they believe you are special and worthy of their time.

Why not create this same experience for your customers?

HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS THAT GET ANSWERS

No matter what your business is, you can ask questions that get answers and that create engagement.

Instead of trying to have all the answers, realize that your customer might have something to offer too. For example, if you're on a forum that is

talking about a certain product that you offer, and you see that a person is critical of it, you have a few choices:

- Point out where they are wrong.
- Criticize the person.
- Ask questions to understand the problem.

Even though it's certainly easy to fall into defensive mode, where you want to discourage any sort of negative talk about your product, it generally doesn't go well.

It causes you to:

- Receive more criticism.
- Become caught up in an argument of opinions.
- Look as though you're not connecting with your customers.
- Look as though you just don't care.

The truth is that every product and every company on the planet has people that will never like the product. You can't please everyone, and you shouldn't try to please everyone.

True, you want to please your target customers, but if you're listening to them, you always will.

Instead of trying to show where people are wrong, it's better to take a more questioning approach.

- Ask why they feel the way they do.
- Ask questions about their specific comments.
- Ask what they would suggest to correct a problem.

Find ways that you can engage in conversations that utilize curiosity as a way to engage. What happens when you ask questions? People will give you answers.

And when you hear those answers, you can ask more questions until you understand what the person really is trying to say.

For example, a person that doesn't like the blanket you're selling might call your company some not-so-nice name. But instead of calling them a name back, you might ask them why they feel that way. As you continue to ask questions, you might find out they've had a less than ideal experience with customer service.

THAT information helps you. And you might never have known that if you hadn't asked questions. And listened.

PLACES TO SPEAK UP AND ASK

There are a number of places where you can speak up and ask questions of your customers and would-be customers.

- Forums – There are many market-specific forums now online. You just need to register as a user and then you can read and answer postings.
- Blog comments – If you have a blog where your customers can respond, then you can respond with questions to comments made. This can create a lively dialogue that then is listed on your site and that can show others that you are willing to engage in a meaningful way.
- Facebook – When you post links and other things on Facebook, you can ask questions in the string of responses.
- Twitter – You can also respond on Twitter to comments made, asking questions that others might have also wanted to ask.
- Personal messages – Should you receive emails or feedback in other messaging services, then you can ask questions there to ensure you are certain of what's being said and how you can help, if needed.

All you need to do is to set up a keyword alert service (i.e. Google Alerts) to see when new comments about your company and its products are mentioned online.

When you see these places for conversation, you can join in and then begin to ask the questions that will help you further engage with your audience.

UTILIZE THE QUESTIONS

There is a bit of a gray area when it comes to questions, however. If you ask enough questions, you might find there are problems that do need to be addressed.

At the same time, there may also be misinformation that is being put in to the online setting.

When the questions you ask bring up ways in which you can make your business better, act immediately. This is a great way to show how engaged you are and how you are not like other companies who make customers do the work to correct negative situations.

Offer refunds; help with finding services, etc.

Now, if you find there is bad information that has gotten out into the conversation, you can correct that information. You might, however, want to ask the question of how the person came upon the bad information.

The more questions you ask, the more you can learn. And you will prove that you are more interested in a conversation than a sale.

(Which will lead to more sales.)

BE WILLING TO CHANGE

One of the quickest ways to ruin your business is to be resistant to change. If you find out more about your market and you don't agree with it, you need to think over any plans to stay the same.

It would make sense to stay the same if your customer base never changed and your market never innovated. But there are few (if any) markets that can claim these qualities.

Your customer base is going to change, as some are going to get older and move onto something else, or the economy might shift, which causes your audience to look at more options.

Change is a good thing, as it allows you to continue to grow and to prosper as you relate in the business world.

What does this have to do with connection? If you're not listening to the things you learn, and you're not responding, you're cutting off connection with the reality of your market.

Things change. And you will, and you need to change too.

6.

PROVIDE INFORMATION & SOLUTIONS

As you continue to engage, you will find that you learn what your customers want to know and what they feel their current problems are.

Though it's true (and quite possible) that you may not have all the answers, if you're addressing the most important concerns, you will have a stronger connection to your customers.

Information allows you to engage, even when you're not at your email box or on your phone with customers.

ADD INFORMATION TO YOUR WEBSITE

When a person comes to your website, they want to know more than just the price of your products. They want to learn more about what you're selling and what they mean to them.

The customer wants to know what the product is, how it helps their life, etc.

Some ideas for providing information to your customers include:

- Articles – These articles might include information about the products, related topics, etc.
- Information sheets – Each product description can also include an information sheet that allows the customer to see what the item includes, what it does, specifications, etc.
- Instructions – A customer that may not be confident in their ability to use a high-tech product might be more confident if they can review instructions before using the item.
- eBooks – When you have a business that is focused on a product that is a part of a greater challenge in their lives (i.e. weight loss), it can be helpful to include longer books and eBooks that help

explain ways to change their lives, along with using your product. These longer books add value and encourage trust.

- White papers – White papers are longer pieces of writing about the products, the services, etc. They help to give a longer explanation of the item and what it can provide, beyond the specifications. Or these sheets might include explanations of the specifications.
- Special reports – If there are changes in your market, offering special reports on those topics can also help the customer see you are committed to providing them with everything they might possibly need.

All of this information should be completely free to those who come to your site. By providing this information, you continue to build a connection with your customer.

They see you're not just trying to sell to them. You're trying to help.

The information should be:

- Useful – When you share information, it does need to contain something that is useful for the reader. They need to be able to put the information to use in some way, even if it's not immediately.
- Up to date – Since information does change, you will want to make sure that all of the information available on your website and in other formats is current. Reread your information from time to time to make sure you're not giving your audience the wrong details.
- Easily available – The easier a person can access the information you have to share, the more likely they are to use it and to feel they are getting a benefit from it. Think about the people in your target audience who may not have fast computers, for example, or newer word processing programs. Think about sharing information as PDFs to solve these sorts of potential problems.
- Simple to read – The information you offer should also be easy to read, and simple. You don't want to create something too complicated (unless that's good for your audience), as that might not give the best impression to your readers. Check to make sure you're saying everything as simply as you can.
- Relevant – If you present information on your site that isn't relevant to where the audience is and what they need, then they're going to feel a sense of disconnection from you. Make sure you're only sharing ideas that allow them to feel you are looking out for them.

The more you look at the information you want to share and that you have to share, the more you need to think about your audience.

Even though you're not directly engaging with your audience when you post information, it is still a reflection of you and your understanding of your potential customers.

SOLVE CUSTOMER PROBLEMS...BEFORE THEY ARISE

Ideally, customers will connect to businesses that seem to solve problems before they arise. Looking at Apple as an example, not only do they offer a protection plan with products, but also they have locations where you can get setup services, lessons on the usage of software, help with technical problems via the Internet, phone, and Genius bars, etc.

You want to do the same sort of thing.

Think about all of the possible problems a customer might have with a product. How could a customer have these problems solved?

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Find a way to provide technical services to a customer, even if you're not the one that answers these types of questions. Seek out a reliable service that can help customers get problems fixed.

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

While you might provide instructions and how-to videos, it can also be helpful for customers to have access to people who can answer questions about problems they are having with the item.

SETUP SUPPORT

When an item requires some setup, there should be ways for a customer to find help with this process, even if the instructions are clear. Some people, for example, aren't comfortable with technology and need to speak to someone directly.

WARRANTY SUPPORT

If you offer a warranty or the item has a warranty, make sure customers can access this information and the contact information to utilize it.

RETURNS SUPPORT

When a customer wants to return something, it can help to have a clearly defined returns and customer service support line. The customer then can go through that process and have it supported in the most efficient way possible.

The more you can attend to problems before they arise, the more a customer feels connected to your business.

You want to have many different ways in which the customer can reach out to you to get issues resolved.

Even if it's just you in your company, having some sort of system for problem solving for help. Be clear about when the customer can expect to hear from you, and then prioritize the most challenging problems first to ensure everyone is happy with the service they get.

FAQS

It can also be helpful and engaging for a customer to see a simple FAQ (frequently asked questions) page on the site. This should address all of the most important questions that might arise for them.

Instead of the customer having to spend more time contacting you, the answers will be outlined for them on the site, where they can then use the information to decide on their next purchase.

Think about the most common questions (possibly derived from asking questions of your customers) and then answer them simply and directly on your site.

This list of questions can be related to your products, your customer service, etc.

Some questions (outside of item-specific questions) might look like this:

- How do I place an order?
- What happens if I don't see a confirmation email?

- How do I make a return?
- How do I make an exchange?
- What happens if the item is broken when I receive it?
- What is the warranty policy?
- How can I talk to someone about a problem?

A good way to approach making this list is to review your website, page by page, to see what questions you might have if you were a new customer.

Think about all of the possible things you might want to ask during the buying process. And then write out clear, succinct answers.

This saves you time in the long run and it allows your customers to feel connected to you.

MAINTAIN OPEN LINES OF COMMUNICATION

You need to be available to your customers, even when you're the only person running the business.

This allows your customers to feel engaged at all times, and especially when they have questions or problems not answered by your FAQ.

Things you should have on your site include:

- Customer service email and phone number
- Orders email and phone number
- Technical support email and phone number
- General concerns email and phone number
- Returns email and phone number

If you don't have the ability to have multiple phone lines, then you may want to have an all email system for general concerns and other questions, but a phone number for problems.

Have the hours that people can reach you listed on your website, allowing them to have a clear set of expectations about when they can expect your response.

You can also have a clear expectation about when a person might hear back from you – i.e. 24 to 48 business hours.

The more people understand when they can contact you, the more engaged they are.

7.

GET AWAY FROM THE COMPUTER

One of the reasons why you opened up an online business may be that you didn't want to stand behind a store counter for hours, but you may not be connecting with customers by hiding behind a website.

Customers may not have the time to go into stores anymore, but they do want to connect with you personally, if possible.

One of the best ways and one of the most powerful ways to engage is to be away from your computer. By taking the time to move away from your site, you can see who your customers are.

Plus, you will be able to create real life connections that help you find out what your customers want in the future too.

WHY YOU CAN'T HIDE ANYMORE

You can't stay behind your computer anymore and run your business well. It limits your perspective and it limits your ability to know your audience and to show your audience who you are.

If you stay behind your computer:

- People don't believe you're real
- People think you're not interested in your community
- Customers believe you're not interested in true connections
- You become like so many other websites online

By taking the bold step of not being at your computer at all times, you create a unique connection with your audience.

If you look at online marketers today, you will notice that more are trying to be visible in other ways. They attend trade shows, go to conferences, and they are out in front of their audiences.

Yes, it's scary and yes, it's different, but it also sets you apart from most of your competition.

You can't just be a name and a picture online and think that you will be as effective as you could be. You need to be a real person, and a real person is someone who takes the time to get out once in a while.

Of course, these trips away from your computer shouldn't impact your customer service, but they will begin to generate more interest in what you have to do.

A person that isn't afraid to be seen is a person that people want to learn more about online and in real life.

GET UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

The process of being engaged with your customers often comes back to the example of dating. You can't expect to find love if you don't get out of your house once in a while.

And you can't expect to engage with customers in a solely virtual format. You need to do more and there are plenty of opportunities for you to get started in your local community.

While not all of these interactions may lead to new customers, creating a buzz around your business may help you with the long-term goals you have for your company.

Some ideas for getting up close and personal with people include trying to:

HAVE LOCAL MEETINGS

One good way to get out and meet the people in your community is to have group meetings that relate to the market or the topics your business addresses. Or you can get involved with groups that already exist. When you do, you will be able to engage with prospective customers and find out who they are.

TEACH CLASSES

If you have specialized knowledge in your field, it can be helpful to teach classes to the local community. Most cities have a local community center when you can teach low cost classes to local residents. When you do this, you will connect with others through your knowledge, knowing that the

people in your class are interested in hearing you tell them what to learn. Additionally, you create engagement and trust by showing you are informed about your market.

OFFER TO GIVE SPEECHES

Even if you're not talking about the market or the products you have to offer, it can be a good idea to get in front of groups to give speeches. Since you will include a biography in the brochure for the meeting, you can include your business website information, allowing you to connect in that way.

TALK TO LOCAL STUDENTS

It can also be helpful to work with local students who are interested in the work that you are doing. This will pave the way for future leaders, and show that you're a person who wants to do good in the world as well.

BECOME A MENTOR

You can also reach out to recent graduates and offer to mentor them in online business tools (and engagement). This future widens your network and allows you to become more visible in the community.

FOCUS GROUPS

Create a focus group that rewards participants for being in a discussion group for a day about a product of yours or about an idea that you have. Listen to what is said and then you can get answers to strategies you may have been considering.

The more you can put yourself out there, the more you will get responses from others in the community.

While this might seem like a grassroots approach to engagement, even the smallest steps can yield bigger results.

Plus, you will continue to learn more about what the community wants and what you may want to provide to them through your business.

HEAD OUT TO TRADE SHOWS

If you have a product that you want to show to others, trade shows are a good place to set up 'shop.' You can get a booth and showcase not only what you sell, but also who you are.

It's a good idea to look for trade shows that will place you alongside high quality products and business, as well as related vendors. This way, you already know that the customers are interested in what you have to sell, and then you can interact with them directly.

To make your trade show appearance effective:

- Promote your appearance – To make sure people have the opportunity to come see you, let as many people know as possible about your appearance at a trade show. This will allow you to build up excitement as well.
- Create effective signage – You will want to have clear and compelling signage for your booth, making it easier for people to find out and to know who you are – and what you have offer to them.
- Practice presenting your product – If you plan on presenting your product to an audience, you will want to practice this presentation. In doing so, you will be able to see how you need to display the product and you can see what will be more effective, especially when you practice in front of a mirror.
- Make your display interactive – Whenever possible, make sure that your trade show display is interactive. This will allow customers to engage with the items on their own time, and then they can ask you questions or you can ask them what they think when they are engaged.
- Collect customer information – As people come to your booth to learn more, have a way to collect their contact information and to give your contact information to them as well. This can include phone numbers and email addresses.
- Follow up with contacts – Once you get back from a trade show, contact the people that you met and ask them if they have any further information for you. Continue to follow up with them to see how you can help.

A trade show can be an exciting experience and opportunity not only to connect with customers, but also with related vendors and businesses.

Use this sort of trip as a way to engage with as many people as possible, and to see how others are engaging - in person.

SIGN UP FOR CONFERENCES

Like trade shows, conferences can provide ideal settings for engagement with customers and networking contacts. By attending these conferences, you can focus on learning more about your market, while also talking to others who are already engaged in the community.

You can ask questions of the presenters and the vendors to see what you might be missing in your engagement strategy.

Some ways to make the most of conferences include:

- Signing up as a vendor – If you can, you might want to sign up to be a vendor, helping you sell your products in person and to see what others in your market might have to say about what you do – and how you do it.
- Distributing business cards and information – You always want to have marketing materials with you when you are in a networking setting. Hand them out to as many people as possible, or give them out to those who you engage with, allowing you to have a conversation before you give them your website address.
- Going to gatherings – Even smaller (and larger) social gatherings can provide you with opportunities to engage with people who might be interested in what you have to sell and what you have to say.
- Following up with contacts – Like the trade shows, you will want to follow up with your contacts, as quickly as possible. When you do so, you generate interest that can be sustained.

Conferences are often where you can see what others are doing and find out more about what engagement looks like for other online businesses.

Even if you don't meet any new customers, you might walk away with new ideas to help you connect with those target clients.

HOW TO PRESENT YOURSELF EFFECTIVELY

One of the main reasons many online businesses don't put themselves out into the public eye is that they might not feel they can present themselves as effectively as they can on a website.

If you're feeling you're not a strong speaker, that concern is a good thing to consider.

But in order to engage, you do need to learn how to present yourself as effectively as possible, and that begins with learning how to communicate in front of others.

- Take a public speaking class – When your speaking skills are hindered by anxiety, it can help to take a public speaking class in which you have to get in front of others. You will learn not only skills to speak effectively, but also you will reduce your fears.
- Practice in the mirror – Before you speak to others, talk in front of a mirror. This will help you see what you look like when you're speaking, so you can learn about any habits that might need to be broken.
- Have questions ready – If you're concerned you might not know what to say when you're talking to someone else, it can help to prepare questions ahead of time. Have them written down on a card, and refer to it only when necessary. Often, when you've written down questions, you tend to remember to ask them.
- Take a deep breath – As soon as you begin to feel anxiety during a conversation, just take a deep breath, as this will regulate your heart rate and your blood pressure.
- Be interested in connection – When you can walk into a conversation or a speech truly wanting to engage with others, you will find you are more confident.

You may not be the best public speaker, at first, but the more you do it, the better you will get and the more others will respond to you.

You can't avoid being in front of people when you want to connect with people online. Just as the people on the website are real people, they want to know that you are too.

8.

LOCAL BUSINESS NETWORKING

Many online businesses are surprised to learn that networking in their local community can yield bigger results that go beyond their business address.

When you begin to talk to others in your community, you can create a larger discussion about your market and about customer needs. If you can generate this sort of conversation, you can begin to build networks to support customer connections.

Even the smallest connections can lead to lifelong customers.

WHY LOCAL LEADS CAN TURN INTO BIGGER BUSINESS

The local community has become a larger topic of discussion for online businesses that want to create customer connections.

Many people think too big when they want to build an online business. They think that if they market to a bigger audience, they have a greater chance of getting results, but this has not been shown to be true.

Instead, many online businesses find it more effective to start small and to slowly work their way up.

What happens is that you can:

- Get questions answered – If you get a group of local people together and you ask them questions, you will be more likely to have those questions answered directly and honestly.
- Get local support – People love to rally around their local business, especially in the current local shopping mindset. When you have the support of your local community, you can use this support to generate bigger groups of support in the online community. Imagine if you're rated #1 in your town for something, and then

you put this onto your website. That's going to increase connection with those outside of your town.

- Try out new things in smaller areas – If you have big ideas for our company, but you aren't sure about whether they will work, you can try them out in your local community first, asking for feedback.
- Save money on product investment/development – If you do try out a product in your local area, you can keep that investment of time and money small, allowing you to manage your ideas without having to throw money away.

The local community can develop your business, and help you with engagement, even if they're not online with you – yet.

NETWORKING WITH BUSINESSES

Your local area is also a place when you can network with other similar businesses, or just local companies that want to succeed. As you network with other companies, you increase the possibility of generating client leads from (possibly) unlikely sources.

To engage your local network, you should seek out or start:

SMALL GROUPS

Gather with other businesses in your area to share ideas about engagement and to report back on things that worked and things that didn't. While you might not be reaching clients directly, this shared knowledge will benefit everyone.

BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

You may also want to look into partnering with other businesses to work on engagement together. For example, you might share a space at a conference or trade show to save money and still get the exposure you want.

CO-WORKING SPACES

You can go to co-working spaces to see who else is at the space and then ask questions about the types of things they might suggest for your business. The more you reach out, the more likely you are to connect with the best possible resource.

MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Since you are an online business, it can help to mentor a local business that needs online support. This relationship can lead to connecting with clients that you might not have found otherwise.

The more that you engage in the outside world and in your local community, the more the community will give back to you.

But you need to be as engaged as possible since you don't want to appear as though you're just trying to get contacts, even if you are.

THE LOCAL CUSTOMER

If you're trying to be a part of the larger Internet world, it can seem like you're holding yourself back when you're focusing on the local customer, but this new focus is actually more effective.

It can't be stressed enough that trying to please every single person in the world is not the best way to connect with your audience. Think about what it would mean if you tried to be friends with everyone in your life. It would be exhausting.

But when you focus your energy and your efforts on those that you really care about, then you can build stronger relationships and connections, and you'll be focusing on the relationships that really matter.

The local customer is:

- Pulse of the larger community – What you will notice about the local customer is that they have an opinion that might be related to the larger opinion of your market. But since they're in your area, you're able to tap into their knowledge about what's happening and what you need to do next.
- More accessible – Of course, when you're connecting with customers in your area, they're more accessible than talking to people in different time zones online.
- An opportunity for deeper connection – The more you can relate to the people in your local community, the more you have the ability to learn from them and to establish a long-term connection.

The local customer is not someone to avoid or to ignore. While the connections might not seem as global, these connections are helping you build a reputation in your local community – which is a part of the larger community.

HELP OTHER NETWORKS TO HELP YOUR CONNECTIONS

Creating connections is more than just trying to get people to see that you have an awesome product to sell.

Connecting with others is a relationship that needs to work in both directions. Not only are you asking something of your customers, but also your customers are asking something of you.

When you can meet their needs and you can address their concerns, you will build true engagement and connection.

Some ways to help out the local community in order to foster your business success include:

- Sharing resources – If you can share resources with others in your community, you will connect and you will ensure everyone is able to get the support they need. Sharing resources might look like sharing spaces or sharing physical business-related resources or employees from time to time.
- Addressing local concerns – If you can keep your eyes on what the local community needs and is concerned about, you can band together with local organizations to be supportive and engaged.
- Holding events – Within the local community, you can work with community members, as well as with the local businesses to hold events that benefit everyone.

Your local community is where your business began, and it's where your business can become all the more connected and prosperous.

9.

CHARITY WORK WORKS

We're all seen the bigger organizations show off their charitable work. And you might have thought this to be out of your reach since they're giving millions of dollars that you just don't have and that you just can't give to another company right now.

But you don't have to do it all in order to connect with your audience and to connect with a cause.

What you do need to do is to move outside of the business mindset of selling and realize that when you show off your charitable side, you show your customers that you're more than just a moneymaking machine.

You're a real person who cares, and you want to make a bigger difference.

CONNECTING THROUGH CARING

You're a caring person, but sometimes this doesn't seem to connect with the way that people run businesses. Many think that they need to be one way or the other, but they can't be both caring and profitable.

This is not true.

When you show the audience of customers you have that you are a caring person, they begin to see:

- Your willingness to help
- Your ability to look past money
- Your connection to something greater

Customers also know that you can't simply give away all of your money and be profitable. But when you do take the time to start giving what you can, when you can, you can connect to other things they care about.

For example, if you have charitable work that is related to cancer and your business focuses on health-related products, then your audience sees that you are connected to their concerns.

The audience can tell that you're someone who is going to help them too, when they are in need.

WAYS TO HELP OTHERS IN NEED...AND BOOST YOUR BUSINESS

If you're ready to start looking into charitable events, know that there are many different ways to approach this engagement strategy.

You can look into events that focus mainly on your business and getting your name out there, or you can simply focus on the work of charity and then talk about what you have done at a later time.

It's up to you.

Here are some ideas for starting your charitable work:

SPONSORSHIPS

You can start by giving money to a local charity or event, helping to get your name listed in the brochures or on the t-shirts. Sometimes, you can also donate your products to the event or give them away as free gifts to those who have given larger donations.

CHARITY EVENT PARTICIPATION

If you're not interested in having your name in lights, then you can simply participate in the event as a business or as an individual. When you do this, you will ensure you are getting involved, but it will look like less of a business decision.

CREATE A CHARITY EVENT

When you want to support a charity or a cause that doesn't have an event in your area, you may want to begin your own event. This will ensure that the cause is being attended to, and others will notice the initiative you take.

GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

You can also start donating your extra time, money, and resources to your local community, even if they're not affiliated with a particular charity.

To begin your charitable work, it can help to look at what is needed in your area and how you can meet those needs. Think about what you have to offer and how your business can provide support during tougher times.

It can be helpful to attend events that your competition is also involved in, but it's also a good idea to try to find a cause that is solely your own, and one that connects to the audience you have targeted.

Think about what your audience cares about and then make sure you're involved with that charity.

(Of course, if you're passionate about your business, it's likely that you already know a complementary charity that will fit in with your larger business reputation.)

If you're unclear about where to begin, think about what is needed. Over time, you will find there are certain charities that your audience already supports.

And when you hear they are involved, it's time for you to get involved too.

GET YOUR CUSTOMERS INVOLVED TOO

Speaking of getting involved, this process of charity work doesn't just have to be focused on what YOU can do.

You can also get your customers involved in the process, which offers another level of connection. When you're in the process of helping others, you're working together, and this allows you to feel as though you're less of a business relationship and more of a friendship.

Your customers will see that you are passionate about something, and they will want to offer their help.

Here are some ways that you can encourage help from others:

HAVE CHARITY-BASED SALES

When you want to support a certain cause at a certain time, you can offer sale prices or just promotions that will bring donations for the charity. Have a sale that is meant to increase donations to the charity, and then donate a percentage when the sale is over. Not only does this help the charity, but you can also increase your revenue and visibility.

INFORM CUSTOMERS ABOUT CHARITABLE WORK

Of course, if you're not telling others what you're doing to support local charities, then they're probably not going to help you out. Make sure that your customers know about your charitable work. And if you're supporting a specific charity, let them know too as they might be able to tap into their connections to help you increase the donations you receive and pass on.

ASK FOR CHARITY SUPPORT ADVICE

It can also be helpful to talk to your customers about who they feel needs to be supported. Ask on your blog or your Facebook page, or example, which charities should be supported.

The more that you support others; the more it becomes clear that you're connected with the greater community.

One good deed does encourage others, and while you might help others in need, you are also helping your business grow.

HOW TO SHOWCASE GOOD DEEDS PROPERLY

That said, if you're not showcasing your good deeds properly, you might end up causing strained relationships with your customers.

No one wants to see you show off your charity work, but you also don't want to hide it – which is a tricky place to be.

You need to find a balance between being proud of your work and being humble about your actions.

Here are some ways to effectively showcase your charitable work and its impact:

- Share what you have given to charities – Make sure to keep track of the donations that you will be making to charities, helping to showcase the amounts you have raised and what this might do for the charities that you are trying to help.
- Be clear about why you want to give – It can also be helpful to talk to your audience about why it's important that you support charitable work. This will clearly define your motivations and it will help everyone see that you have a clear idea about the 'why' of your charitable work.

- Don't make it about you – Remember, charity work should be about the charity and not about you. Focus on how the actions are benefiting those supported by the charity. Don't talk about how great you are.

Your good deeds do deserve to be noticed, as this creates further connection with your audience. If you're not showcasing them well, you may be causing a rift in the engagement you want to create.

10.

STAYING CONNECTED TO YOUR AUDIENCE

Once you begin to see the results of your connection and engagement strategies, and you begin to see that things are working well, it can be tempting to become complacent.

We all do this from time to time when we think that everything is moving along swimmingly and then we get a bit, well, lazy. We step back and think that all of the processes we've put into place will just take care of themselves.

But the market, every market, is always changing. To keep up with the changes, you need to keep up with your audience.

Stay connected and don't lose touch with the people who have helped you become a success up to this point.

CHECK IN WITHOUT SELLING

While your customers might be excited to talk to you about your products and how they're working for you, it doesn't always happen. Instead, you need to be committed to reaching out to your customers about their experiences and what they think as time goes on.

Some businesses have interpreted this advice as being a time when they should try to sell the customer something, but this is not the case.

Remember, connecting with customers goes beyond the initial question asking and helping of customers and local connections.

This needs to be an ongoing dialogue that looks at the changing needs of the customers and how you can meet those needs.

EMAILS

It is a good idea to reach out to your valuable customers with emails from time to time. Ideally, you should create emails that are personal and not

form letters, allowing you to stay connected and to stay available to your audience.

BLOG POSTS

If you have a larger audience, then you might want to reach out to larger customers by email, but then you might also want to reach out to your bigger community with a blog post. This can just be a simple, 'Hey I'd love an update from folks' entry that directs people to email you or to talk to you in another platform.

FACEBOOK STATUSES

You can also reach out over your social media platforms, helping to see what people are thinking RIGHT NOW and then to continue the conversation with other people who are sharing information.

The more that you stay in the conversation, the more you will learn about what's working, what's not working, and what you could be doing better.

During this time, you don't want to promote any of your products. Just talk about what's happening for the customer and see if there's any way that you can help them.

Think about being supportive and inquisitive. And that will lead you to the answers that allow you to make better business decisions.

CONTINUE TO ASK QUESTIONS

The questions that you ask of your audience and customers should continue on. You need to focus on what they desire of you, what they expect from you, and what they need now that they didn't need in the past.

Let's face it, every single one of us has needs that change. We might want something right now, but in a year or two years, we may think differently.

We might be in a different place in our lives, which requires that we have something completely new.

By continuing to talk to your customers, you can see when they change in what they want, and you can attend to it immediately.

Even if you don't make changes to your company in the moment, you can make plans to implement changes that will attend to the needs of your market.

FIND OUT WHAT A CUSTOMER WANTS NEXT

Most of the time, your customer knows what they want next, even if they're not done using what you've already given to them in the present moment. We're a culture of people who want more, and we have great ideas about what that might look like. If you're not taking the time to ask people what their grand ideas are, you aren't connecting to the group wisdom. Ask directly what the customer might want from you in the future, and you can then 'magically' give them what they've been thinking about.

FIND OUT WHAT'S MISSING

Though you might have done all that you can to address the needs of your market and your audience, you probably missed something. This isn't always your fault, but your customer may have picked up on something that could be refined or added or changed. Talk to your customers about what might be missing and you can begin to see whether you are able to address those gaps.

FIND OUT WHAT ISN'T WORKING WELL ANYMORE

Even though a product might have been great at the start, that doesn't mean it's always going to be effective in the long run. You need to ask your customer what might not be working now and why they think it's not working now.

Again, questions are information; questions are connection. When you don't ask the questions, you won't know the answers to your own questions about how you can help your business grow and succeed.

USE WEBINARS

One of the more popular ways to stay engaged with customers and audiences is to offer free webinars online.

These informative sessions allow your customers to see you and for new customers to find out more about who you are and what you can do for them.

Unlike local classes, you will be able to tap into the larger market, allowing you to increase your opportunities for connection.

There are a few ways in which you can approach a webinar project:

- Instruct – You can use the webinar format to teach people about something that you are passionate about or something that you are highly knowledgeable about. This will be marketed as an opportunity for folks to hear what you have to say and then to ask questions about what you have said.
- Inspire – Sometimes, your market just wants to be inspired, and the webinar can help you create connection in this way. You might get in front of others and talk about things that are inspiring to you, or you might want to share success stories of customers who have used your products to change their lives.
- Interact – You might also want to use the webinar format to simply interact and have a meet and greet with your audience. This will help you learn what's in the field when it comes to your market, and it allows things to be more open to possibility.

You can create webinar in a variety of ways, and it can help to start off with smaller groups of customers to see what your technical needs might be and how it might look for customers.

You can utilize Skype to have people dial into the call and to see you on the video screen, if you have that option and they have that option.

Other possible tools for larger webinars online include GoToMeeting and Adobe Connect.

RUN A SEMINAR

When you teach a class in a local community, it allows you the opportunity to engage in an effective manner, but sometimes, it's not long enough.

Once you have enough people interested in what you have to say, it can be a good idea to engage with your audience in-person, via a seminar. Like a webinar, you will create a scripted informational, inspirational, or conversational setting, but with the seminar, you can actually see people in person.

Here are some of the benefits that you want to consider:

- A longer format – Since you won't be bound by the limitations of time zones, you can have a longer format for your seminar, even an all day seminar, if you like.
- In-person possibilities – There's nothing as beneficial to engagement as being with people in person. If you can gather some of your audience in one room, you will be able to talk to them, address their concerns, and manage their needs immediately.
- Hands-on work – Also, when you're in a room together, you will be able to showcase your products and have demonstrations that allow everyone to understand what you have to sell or offer. Everyone gets a chance to touch the item and to ask questions you may not have considered before.

A seminar can be a yearly event, one in which you introduce new products and new services, or you can just market it as a 'get to know you' event.

It doesn't have to cost anything more than the rental fees, but it will bring you larger profits because you're engaging directly with your audience.

GET PEOPLE EXCITED

As your business moves on and grows, you need to keep the excitement up for your products and services – and this is often where companies begin to lose energy.

You can't simply hope that the excitement continues; you need to find ways to ensure your customers are always eager to learn more from you and from your business.

This will take time and energy from you too, but the benefits are worth it.

You will want to:

- Stay in contact – Many newer businesses will launch products or sales, only to stop talking to their customers once the sales figures begin to rise. You can't afford to break the connection in this way. Make sure you're staying in contact with your customers. Ask them about their experiences and what else you can do to support them.
- Share your ideas – When you're thinking about new things for the company, you may want to talk to the people who have helped you along the way. Start brainstorming with customers via social media or blog posts. Get them involved in the creation process, even if you're already well on your way to completing the project you are discussing.

- Share your timelines – If you have a certain idea about timelines, then it's a good idea to share those with your customers too. You can help build up the excitement for the launch, and that will encourage them to keep being connected to with you.
- Share your visions of the future – Your customers want to know what else you are doing and what it means when they stay engaged with your company. Once you begin to see where your company might go in the future, share these visions.

It's like any relationship when you strive for connection with your customers. You need to make sure the conversation continues.

Continue to share, continue to listen, and you'll continue to connect.

MENDING BROKEN CONNECTIONS

Even with the best of intentions, there might come a time when you will not connect well with your customers or you make a decision that severs a connection.

It's difficult to think about, but preparing for this eventuality is a good thing too.

You're human and you will make mistakes. You might say something that offends people or you might make a decision that causes your customers to question your overall message.

Instead of simply ignoring what has happened, it's better to address it and to confront it. You might be heading in a new direction, and that's something that a customer will want to know.

Or you may have just made a mistake.

When your audience is connected to who you are and what you offer to them, they're more willing to forgive mistakes – just like in a relationship.

Here's what you NEED to do when you notice that your connections are decreasing or people have complaints about the way you are handling things:

ADMIT THE WRONGDOING

If you realize that you have made a mistake, go ahead and admit it. You need to make sure that others know you are aware of what has happened and that you are listening to their concerns about what has happened.

APOLOGIZE IN PUBLIC

When you believe that you have made a mistake that has hurt others, you want to apologize. This might come in a blog post, a video, etc. No matter how you apologize, make sure it gets out to as many channels and platforms as possible. You want to make sure that your entire audience sees you are trying to admit wrongdoing.

EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED

If you decided to do something surprising in your company, and it caused less than positive results, then it might not be a time for apology. Instead, you may need to talk to your audience about why you did what you did. Though this might not be what people want to hear, telling the truth is a way to ensure connections stay strong.

MAKE AMENDS

In the situation where you have done something wrong, you should find a way to make amends for the problem. In doing so, you will ensure the customer feels they are being seen and heard, and they will come back to you. The amends may not need to be expensive either. When you listen to the customer and hear what they want from you to make up for the situation, you might find all they need is an apology.

LEARN FROM MISTAKES

Once you have gone through the process of breaking and the mending connections, try to find lessons to use in the future. No one is perfect, to be sure, and when you can apply the lessons you've learned, you will reduce the possibility of this sort of situation happening again.

When you make connections, there's always the chance that they might break at some point.

But it's how you put them back together that matters. Word will get around about the type of person/business you are.

And that will bring even more people to you – all because you handled a mistake well.

11.

FACE TO FACE FOR THE FUTURE

You've been told repeatedly in this book about the many ways in which you can connect with customers and build relations.

And while you know that you need to get out in front of everyone in your audience, as you grow, this can seem like an impossible piece of advice.

What you want to do is to learn more about what the future might look like and how you can be a part of the changing technology.

Though you'll stay in contact with customers who will help you navigate the new opportunities for engagement, you might also be able to draft a plan of connection before others in your market can.

THE TECHNOLOGY OF TOMORROW

In a certain sense, we have no idea what the technology of tomorrow might look like.

We can guess as to what our phones are going to look like and how we'll communicate, but when we're happy with what we have, it's hard to see what else might be possible.

When you're an online business that wants to succeed, you need to think ahead and you need to predict what the future might hold for you and for your business.

Some of the possible technology trends may include:

CHEAPER COMMUNICATION

Since technology is getting easier to make and technology is becoming easier to use, the prices are certainly going to go down. People who may not have had access to the Internet before may soon have access.

With this wider audience, you will need to be even more diligent about connecting with these new customers.

You will have to start over, in a sense, with your strategy so that you are engaging authentically and on different levels – i.e. new customers vs. long-term customers.

You'll need to help everyone feel welcomed.

SMARTPHONES EVERYWHERE

The smartphone might have been a luxury item in the past, but in the future, these phones will likely be the only phones available for purchase. When this is the situation, you need to engage on that piece of technology, which changes what you do.

You might look into texting and creating apps for phones so that you're engaged with your customer's life. You might consider finding ways to engage with the most popular social media apps on the phones, etc.

Think about what a smartphone can do now, and then think about how much smarter they will become when more people are using them.

OTHER FORMS OF COMMUNICATION?

Let's face it, we know about phones and we know about computers for communication, but the future might have something entirely new to reveal to use.

- Some have speculated that there will be:
- More refined searches online
- Phones in watches and other accessories
- The ability to use the Internet from anywhere

The more people can connect with each other and with your business, the more conversation you can create.

But you need to know what people are using, how these modes of technology work, etc.

Because when you know the technology and you go where the technology is, you will go to your audience.

Start finding out what modes of communication are on the horizon, and how you can get onto them and into the minds of the audience in order to connect fully.

WHY YOU HAVE TO GET IN FRONT OF YOUR AUDIENCE

But it's not enough in the future to learn about technology and to get an app on a smartphone.

You still need to be the face in the crowd of words and website addresses. When you are, you will create engagement that is personal and that is tactile.

It has become easier than ever to create a website, and that means there are many more websites that are in the eyes of customers. You will need to continue to set yourself apart and to connect with customers in a non-digital format.

You need to get in front of your audience because:

- Your face matters – The face that you present to the world is the face that your audience will connect to your product and to your business. It is a unique face and it will set you apart from the others that are competing with your products.
- Being available matters – You can't just have an email address or a FAQ page. You need to be available to the audience you want to engage. This begins with staying in contact, but it becomes even stronger when you meet the audience you are engaging. You need to be available to them in person.
- You have to stand out more – The market is always shifting and changing, and this is something that allows your business to continue to grow, even when it seems that the trend might be moving away from your products. The website trend is also shifting. In the future (and even now), when everyone will have a website, you can be different. You can have regular ways in which you meet with customers and your audience. THAT will set you apart.

The process of engagement is a continuous one, one that you need to diversify and expand as time moves on.

Though there might be times when you can simply rest on what you have been doing and allow it to work for you, you can't stick to this all the time.

You need to innovate, you need to try out new strategies, and you need to stay involved.

The more you continue to add to your engagement strategy, the more customers you can add to your audience.

MANAGING QUESTIONS IN PERSON

Because you will be more engaged and you will be more interactive with customers as time moves on, it can help to be prepared to engage positively and to manage questions effectively.

You don't want to be stumped on a question and then cause a loss of connection because of the way you handled it.

No, you don't need to be a political pundit to handle questions well, but you can use a few strategies to help ensure you are connecting with the person who is asking the question – and to connect with the many other people who wanted to ask the same question, but didn't get the chance to speak up.

When you're asked a question:

ASK ABOUT THE QUESTION

Once you hear from a person about a question they have, make sure that you understand what they mean. Be as specific as possible in following up with clarifying questions. This allows you to show that you are interested in knowing what the person really wants to know and it ensures you don't answer something incorrectly.

ANSWER AS COMPLETELY AS POSSIBLE

When you do know what the question is, answer it completely and honestly. Though you might not want to reveal certain facts, you do want to be honest as it's easier to have a consistent story that connects with your audience. If you can't reveal something, then be clear that you don't want to reveal that piece of information.

BE HONEST IF YOU DON'T KNOW

Sometimes, you might come up against the question that just completely stumps you. And while we never want to admit that we don't know anything, it's better to admit that you're not sure than to answer

incorrectly. Let the person doing the questioning know you don't know and move on. Let the person then know that you will find out the answer and get back to them.

FOLLOW UP WITH ANSWERS ONLINE

If there are additions to your answers that you didn't get to say in person, add them to your blog or to your website. This will continue the conversation and create opportunities for more connection and dialogue.

The more questions you are asked, the easier it is to answer the questions. You will simply need to keep trying to find out what your audience wants to hear and what they want to find out from you.

In time, they will be confident in the way you answer questions, and they will continue to come to you when they have concerns.

That's what builds strong connections.

CONCLUSION

Connecting with another person is not a simple process. There is no app for creating connections and there are no quick fixes or quick starts when it comes to engaging authentically with customers.

You need to be committed to building these relationships for the long run. Your business needs to be ready to continue to reach out, to inspire, to educate, and to listen to the audience.

Over the years, you will begin to be 'old friends' that understand each other and that know you can help each other out.

The future of connection is bright and the power of engagement will continue to be magnified as technology allows us to connect more easily. But that also means that you need to continue to work hard to learn about the people who support you and your business.

Reach out to others, listen to what they have to say, and then you can create connections that allow everyone to benefit.

When you connect, you build trust. When you connect, you build confidence.

When you connect, you sell more.