



Goltz by Jay Goltz On Business

The Moment of Truth—Or Not

I just came back from the dentist. I had one of those semi-annual cleanings where they scrape your teeth with all those metal utensils that you'd rather not think about. My dentist had hired a new hygienist. My usual hygienist, Ellen, was getting too busy so he had to hire a second person. I like Ellen, but what's the difference—or so I thought.

My appointment was at 8 a.m. For lack of a better word, the new hygienist is “perky.” Real perky. She started out with the, “Hi. How are you? And the family?” A real happy morning person. She doesn't even know if I have a family. Under normal circumstances, I hate small talk. I would be more likely to walk up to you at a trade show and say, “How's your business? What's your biggest problem or newest success?” than to say, “How's the family? You look great.”

When I'm about to have my teeth cleaned at 8 o'clock in the morning, my tolerance for this mindless banter is at its lowest ebb. I would really like her to get in, get the job done, and get out so that I can get out and attack the day with my new shiny choppers. (Bear with me. There's a point to this that has to do with picture framing—as if anything doesn't!)

After 30 minutes of this mindless conversation (if you can call it a conversation—I had someone's hands in my mouth), listening to her talk to the other hygienist that keeps walking in and out of the office (all small talk, I might add), and listening to the scraping of my teeth, I'm counting the minutes to when she is done. I'm

waiting for those magical words, “Swish. Rinse. You're done.”

They finally came. She then proceeded to go to the computer to make my next appointment. She turned to me and said, “Both Ellen and I are available. Do you have a preference?” It was the moment of truth. I'm a wimp. I choked. I said, “No. I can do it with you.”

From the second the words came out of my mouth, I said to myself, “What's wrong with me? I'm sure this woman is very nice. She seems to have done a thorough job, but she annoys me.” Ellen also does a good job. And she's *quiet*. I'm left to my own thoughts: What I have to do for the day. How this momentary pain is going to give me future benefits. How much does the dentist make? Does he need new artwork in his offices? Should I have gone to dental school?

But no... I took the easy way out. I signed up for another 30 minutes with Chatty Cathy.

Now this is quite significant. Why? Because I am not known to be a person that doesn't say what is on his mind. As the boss, I have developed a survival instinct of flushing out problems by confronting them. I tell employees right to their face when there is some problem that needs to be dealt with, and I do the same for customers. I think nothing of doing a speech for 300 people and opening myself up to a question, answer, or “challenge” session. No anxiety. No hesitation. I say what needs to be said. But I didn't tell the hygienist that I'd rather go to Ellen—to my old, quiet, friend Ellen.

This was very thought provoking. And I believe I figured it out. As always, it relates to the custom picture frame business. It's called "The Moment of Non-Truth." The truth hurts. And sometimes there is no payback for inflicting the pain. I can't afford those moments of non-truth with employees *or* customers because it will cause problems down the road.

I, like most people, have no problem telling a clerk in a store that there's something wrong. They'll probably agree with you. But it's a whole different story when you're talking to the owner, or in this case, the person who is responsible for the work. You've just spent some time with them and you have some sort of relationship. It's not like telling the clerk that you've known for about 15 seconds that there is something that really bothers you in the store. Custom picture framing is an intimate business (like getting your hair cut). You're no longer a faceless person behind the counter.

This brings me to a phrase that I regularly hear from frame store owners. "None of my customers have complained about... my selection, the look of my store, the fact that I don't take charge cards, the way that I dress, my six week delivery time, my lack of conservation materials or only use of conservation materials, my closing at 4 o'clock..." And that is probably true.

It is also probably true that some of them are going to your competitors. No warning. No fanfare. No sale. No growth. The better customers are looking for more. And even if they are not looking,

more will find them. The fact is there are a lot of things that can be done in a store that will inspire, excite, and reinforce to the customer that you are *the* place to go to in town. It's all at the trade shows. The trade shows that you haven't gone to because you are either too busy or can't afford it. No customer has ever complained that you've gotten stale because you haven't been to a trade show lately, right?

Yes, everybody has customers who complain: whether it's your price, the dye lot of a matboard, or grain on a wood moulding. The problem is they don't represent all of your unsatisfied customers. Most will not complain.

More importantly, they don't represent your uninspired potential customers. This is the customer that looks around your store, at you or your employees, at your corners, or at your framed samples and is not convinced that this is "right" place to frame their art. You should not and cannot expect your customers to tell you how to make your store an inspiring one. They won't. They'll just go to the competitor that is. It is the silent business killer. One of the keys to being professional is to be proactive, not reactive. Fix things before your customers notice. Make things better before your customers notice. Make it better before your competitor does.

As far as my hygienist problem goes, I have a plan. I'm going to call and make my next appointment with Ellen. Chatty Cathy will never know. ■