



Watch out for icebergs

Do your customers survive in spite of you or thrive because of you? We all know that referrals result in the best kind of business because the selling has already been done for you. Your fans have raved about your great service, your terrific staff, and how you went out of your way to look after them. And most of the time price isn't an issue because they feel valued.

The opposite is also true. And it's a disaster. It may not be immediately obvious but, like an iceberg, the danger lurks beneath. Ten percent of it is above the water and clearly visible under normal conditions, but the dangerous part is the 90% below the surface. This is the invisible result; the complaints about your business that happen internally at management meetings, over a beer on a Friday night, or after the second pinot at a weekend barbeque with influential friends. The innocuous iceberg floating on the surface takes on quite a different shape beneath the surface and is far more dangerous than is immediately evident. Of course if the weather is bad, your vision is obscured or you are distracted, the potential for tragedy increases dramatically.

Perhaps the current challenging trading conditions are your bad weather. Your vision may

be obscured because you are distracted by cutting costs.

How will you know if you are in danger?

- When was the last time a client complimented you on your outstanding service or phoned to tell you how well your staff looked after them when they needed that little bit extra?
- Do you know your key clients well enough to discuss their current marketing initiatives and offer some useful insights?
- Assuming you have key performance indicators, are they all about your internal performance or do they include effective measures about how your clients benefit from working with you?
- Is your customer 'service' team complaining about how difficult your customers are to deal with?
- Do you know what DIFOTIS means? *
- When did you last ask customers to rate your performance and make some changes as a result of their responses?
- Do you train your staff to think of your customers as part of the family rather than a necessary evil?

If you feel you don't measure up after considering these questions,

don't panic. Just do what the doctor does: talk to the patient, ask him where it hurts, how long he has felt like this. Listen carefully to the answers and make an informed judgement. Take professional advice if you need it. With the iceberg looming, you cannot simply change course; you may have to deal with some casualties first, but find a cure and you'll not only survive; you'll thrive. And so will your customers.

Let me leave you with this example of good business: A friend has had a business relationship spanning 20 years with a supplier based in Scotland. The supplier recently celebrated its 200th birthday and went out of its way to let its key customers know how much it valued the relationship by sending a personal invitation from one of the senior executives, which simply said: "you get yourself here and leave the rest to us". It sounds expensive, and it probably was if you think about it as a single transaction. However when you consider it from the perspective of the fruits of 20 years of business so far, it was probably a very reasonable investment, and a wonderful way of celebrating and reinforcing an enduring relationship.

* *Delivery in full on time in spec.*

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