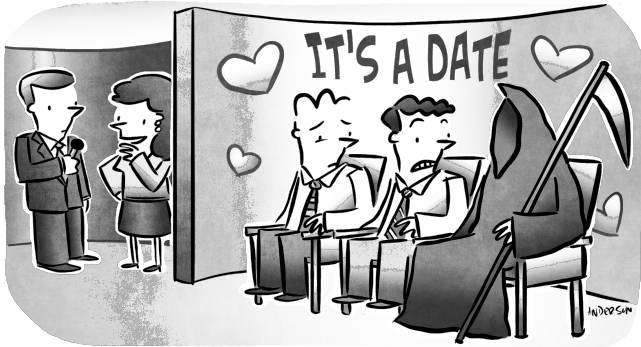# Human + Fallible = Love; Corporate + Sterile = Refund

by Jason Cohen on June 28, 2010

People love and forgive humans, not corporations. Expose your humanity to earn loyal, happy customers, even when you mess up.

"Again, that's like *super* dark, Bachelor Number Three, but I have to admit I'm intrigued."

A lovely new company/customer etiquette has emerged, and small startups are especially suited for exploiting it, whereas incumbents cannot. I hope you're not ignoring it.

Just yesterday someone explained to me what they expect from their website hosting company:

> I want someone else making sure the server doesn't go down. Or, if it does go down, **I want someone to apologize to me.**

Ten years ago, that bold text would have read: "Or, if it does go down, I want **someone to scream at**." Or: "I want someone to **give me a refund**." The new attitude is not "Those assholes better not *ever* screw up," but rather "I expect them to try hard, to care, and to treat me well *when* they inevitably screw up."

This doesn't mean you get a free pass to screw your customers, then earn forgiveness from a heartfelt "open letter from the CEO." Rather, it means:

- **You're doing your best to do right by your customers**, evidenced continuously through all your communication—blog, tech support, website—not just after a crisis.
- **You're learning from your mistakes**, evidenced by problems tending towards the esoteric, and by explaining in your apology what steps you've taken to avoid this and similar classes of error.
- **You're doing everything in your power to be the best**, evidenced by a culture of awesome employees and inventing new ways to make your customers successful, so mistakes are ordinary human error, not negligence or indifference.

It's not even the apology itself; no one's convinced when a large company issues an insincere, legally-vetted "official apology" that you know doesn't fix anything. What that quote above really means is: "I want to work with other people who behave like real people, who are obviously trying their best, and who respond to problems as earnestly and quickly as can be expected."

In short: **People readily forgive honest human error, but become adversarial and distrustful with the typical, sterile customer/provider relationship.**

There are many ways to earn this love; here's a bunch.

The biggest in this context is to do what every blog-about-blogging and tweet-about-tweeting sternly instructs you to do: "Be human." Umm, what? Compared to what, being feline?

(Isn't it weird that we have to be *told* how to "be human?" WTF?)

"No no," they say, "it means let your humanity show—be authentic." Oh brother, ok, how do I do *that*?

The typical advice for "being authentic" is to "just <u>be yourself</u>," but I don't know what that means either. <u>Thales</u> said the most difficult thing is to "Know Thyself[1]," so it must be *really* hard to do that over Twitter and AdWords. (By the way, Thales also said the easiest thing is "To Give Advice." I'll let you bask in the irony for a minute…)

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[1] If you're on this journey, <u>the bottom of this article</u> has a list of questions you can use to try to figure it out.

So I suppose one route to "finding your voice" is to take stock of your total life experience together with your ten-year goals, then synthesize a compelling, internally-consistent philosophy, apply that to all your actions and communications, and summarize it in four punchy words on your home page.

Yeah right, who can do that? Not me, I can't even decide what to have for lunch.

So instead, here's a few more practical ways to discover what's essential to your personality and point of view:

Criticize others.
If you especially enjoy someone's slogan, why? Is it because it's funny, clever, specific, unwavering, simple, conservative, confident, or ballsy? Conversely if you loathe someone's "About Us" page, why? Is it because it's too personal, not personal enough, too detailed, not detailed enough, silly, formal, useless, childish, lengthy, or arrogant? When you see something that strikes a nerve, complete the sentence: "I absolutely [love|hate] that because …."

Decide what you are *not*
For example, you might say "I hate companies who use formal language; I'm never going to allow formality to dictate how I communicate." Or the opposite: "I hate companies who think it's funny and clever to use informal language; I'm going to instill confidence by showing that we behave like grown-ups." It's easy to identify corporate stuff that pisses you off; use that to decide both what not to do and what to do instead.

Copy something you love.
Sounds weird I know—how can *copying* lead to a unique, personal style? But if you think about *why* you love something—a company, an attitude, a writing style, a philosophy—it's because you identify with it so completely. It *is* you! Of course over time you'll morph that copy into something unique, but there's nothing wrong with getting a head start by imitating something you wish you had thought of yourself. Careful though—I'm not advocating plagiarism! The goal is mimicry, not theft; influence, not carbon-copy. Your mindset should be: "The thing I'm copying is a rough draft that needs extensive editing but whose heart is in the right place." <u>Here's more on learning by copying</u>.

Even assuming you successful identify what "being human" means to you, it's still surprisingly difficult to implement because **every strong decision you make will necessarily alienate many people even while it's thrilling others.**

If you adopt an informal style, some people will find it refreshing while others find you untrustworthy. If you're proactive in announcing bugs, some people will reciprocate by gracefully putting up with the problems, while others will be shocked—*shocked!*—and will Twitter that you sell shoddy software. If you admit the entire company consists of two people, some folks will smile knowing they'll get primo customer service while others will flee because of the low probability you'll still be around next year. If you curse on your blog, many people will wince and click "Back" but others will laugh and click "Subscribe."

And yet, strong, specific, and honest you must be. Yes it means turning off some people, but the remainder will love you all the more (and make sure their Facebook "friends" know it).

It turns out, this actually <u>wins far more customers than you think, and here's why</u>.

What's the alternative—having no persona at all? Then why would anyone get excited about you? Why would they put up with your faults? Why would they tell their friends about you?

Is your goal is to become a soulless corporation? No? Well then, do whatever it takes to be soul*ful.*