



Sitting In The Customer's Chair

by

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Is your attention focused on pleasing yourself or your customers? For too many entrepreneurs, surprisingly, the answer is they're bent on pleasing themselves.

To help you understand what we mean, let's take a look at James, an entrepreneur friend of ours. He was getting ready to open his new business – an 11,000 square foot beauty salon and day spa. In his salon, he had set aside an area for 19 manicure and six pedicure stations. Obviously, he was thinking big. Setting up the area was really pretty easy. All he had to do was decide where to place the worktables and the chairs for the manicurists and the customers.

James had invited us along to take a look at his place and we watched with interest as he picked up a manicurist's chair, placed it where he wanted it, then sat in the chair and looked around. After a few seconds, he got up, moved the chair slightly and again sat in it. Satisfied, he then carried over the worktable and the customer's chair. After the first station was in place he went over and picked up the second manicurist's chair and went through the same routine. After he had done this about five times, we stopped him and asked why he was careful to sit in every manicurist's chair. He responded by saying he sat in the manicurists' chairs so he could evaluate whether they would have an enjoyable view. Since the manicurists' would be sitting in the chair for 8 to 10 hours a day, he wanted to make work environment as pleasant as possible for them.

Clearly, by sitting in each manicurist's chair he was really getting into the details of his business, but was he sitting in the right chair? In addition to sitting in the manicurists' chair, shouldn't he also have sat in the customer's chair? James didn't think so. When we asked how he decided which chair to sit in, he reminded us that he had been a hair stylist for years and that gave him an understanding of what a long work day it was for a manicurist. "Her customers were only going to be in the chair for a few minutes," he said.

One good honest way to look at your business is explained in a rule we learned from a business associate we'll call John. John has what he calls the *Four Foot, Four Inch Rule*. John had made an investment in a new bicycle retail store. When John was considering the investment he read the business plan, met with the entrepreneur, and looked at all of the standard things outside investors look at. He felt that the entrepreneur had done a great job of figuring out a really exciting business concept – the store would have an inside circular track for customers to actually test bikes on – and the entrepreneur was so enthusiastic and knowledgeable about bikes, John felt the business was sure to be a success.

Well, shortly after John made his investment and the store opened for business, his daughter needed to get a new bicycle seat and carrying rack. Naturally, John took his daughter to the store he had invested in. The salesperson that waited on them didn't know

John and didn't know that he had invested in the business. And, unfortunately, not only was the level and quality of the service disappointing, the store didn't have the seat or the rack they were looking for. They left very unhappy and John very nervous about his investment.

But John didn't leave completely empty handed. He had his *Four Foot, Four Inch Rule* which means you must always look at a business from two viewpoints. First, you look at it from four feet. That is the view entrepreneurs and investors most often take – looking at the concept, the numbers and the management team. While it is obviously an important view, it is nonetheless focused on the big picture – on the customers, on how the business is going to satisfy those customers, and on who is going to run the business. But as important as that view is, you must also look at the business from four inches. From the level of the details. You need to look at the business from the customers' perspective. Up close and personal. You need to put yourself in the place of the customer to see what your business problems are and if your business is in fact satisfying your customers. And unless you take that up close view, the perspective from four feet might lead you to the wrong conclusion.

As it turned out, the store and its personnel were adept at catering to bicycle enthusiasts but lacked the interest and the skills to serve the general biking public. In a few short years, the business failed (as did our friend's beauty salon).

These two stories bring home an important point. A business must always be looked at from many perspectives. Is this the kind of business you want to be in? You have to love it in order to succeed in it. Second, you have to look at your business from a business perspective. Is this a business that you and potential investors are willing to risk money in? Is the business going to make a profit? Third, you have to look at your business from the perspective of your employees. Good employees help make a good business and there's nothing wrong with wanting to make an employee's day more enjoyable. But for every business, the most important perspective is looking at the business from the customer's point of view. Yes, every business begins by imagining yourself as the customer but you are only one person. You can't run a successful business by only pleasing yourself. You have to look at your business from the perspective of your paying customers – customers who may have very different likes and dislikes than you! Business is a dance, a rhythm, and your customers always lead.

So, which chair would you sit in?

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