



Small Business Builder: How To Say 'Thanks'

Expressing Gratitude Properly in Business Still Matters

By Mary Campbell

—

You might say "thanks" 50 times a day without realizing what it means.

For a thousand years, speakers of English (Modern, Middle, and Old) have used "thank" or "thanc" or "thancian" to convey gratitude, recognition and awareness. The real message is "I see you," "I know you" □ thus "you are important" □ and even "I need you," "we need each other" and "you and I are both doing more here than sucking in valuable oxygen atoms."

Sometimes it's hard for fiercely independent types to say "Thanks." But in business and every other setting, people need to be noticed.

A midwestern bank once put up dozens of billboards featuring a huge yellow smiley face, the bank logo, and the message, "Thanks, XYZ City customers and friends. We care about you." It was a rather clumsy campaign, but the bank clearly recognized that consumers want to be more than "just a number" when they conduct business.

Why to Thank Whom

The reasons to say thanks are spontaneous, courteous, strategic, sometimes all three:

You spontaneously thank people who have changed your life in a small or significant way, even if they don't know it. A few examples:

"Dear Abby: Belated thanks for your 1973 column on relationships. It saved my marriage."

To an employee after a staff meeting: "Whew! Thanks for helping Drusilla solve her budget dilemma. I sure couldn't see a way around the problem."

Courtesy requires you to thank someone who has done you a good turn, or meant to. For instance:

"Thank you so much for the wildflower bouquet" (that actually put you in an asthmatic stupor for three days).

Fellow convention-goer: "That suit makes you look much thinner than the one you wore yesterday." You: "Thank you."

Strategy demands that you thank those whose good opinion you seek □ perhaps to establish a relationship or reinforce one. Examples:

"Dear Dr. Youngblood: We're still talking about your presentation on office politics at the Yippee Skippee managers' meeting. Just want to say thanks & "

"Hi, Winthrop. I called to thank you for showing Pearl and me around yesterday. I've never seen such an efficient operation."

Whether or not your gratitude carries a hidden agenda, it should remain just that hidden, that is, at least in your thank-you note, phone call or conversation.

No, Thanks: Pitfalls to Avoid

Want to say thanks and simultaneously offend, disgust or embarrass the giver? There are many ways to do so.

"Is this Hazel? Hi, this is Bennie. Thanks for taking me to lunch yesterday. Are you ready to come on board and support my candidacy for association vice president?"

In this case, Bennie violated the Code of Expressing Appreciation, rule number one: Say thanks, period. If you piggyback your agenda onto your thank-you message, it changes from "you are important" to "you're important as long as you do the following things & "

"Dear Athena: Thanks for the many extra hours you put in helping at the trade show. Your dollar-an-hour raise starts today. And take tomorrow off." Likewise, "Hi, Jethro. This is Tony. I really enjoyed lunch at the Press Club yesterday. How about joining me next week as my guest at the golf tournament?"

What's wrong here? Code of Expressing Appreciation rule number two is firm: The "thanker" must never put the "thankee" under additional obligation. The point isn't to even the score, it's to let the recipient enjoy feeling noble or generous, for a while at least.

It truly is "more blessed to give than to receive," according to research indicating preference for being the benefactor. So give Athena her day off and her raise, but either wait to convey the news or ask someone else to do it. Call Jethro to thank him, then make a note to call him in a few weeks.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly accept it, it's much too expensive." "You like this dress? It looks like a map of Connecticut!"

Code of Expressing Appreciation rule number three: Accept gifts and compliments with thanks. Exceptions: inconvenient, insulting or intrusive gifts (a vehicle that carries an insurance premium higher than your current car payment; "dinner for two" with someone you abhor; filmy lingerie from a professional acquaintance).

Giving Thanks With A Twist

On the other hand, gifts intended to manipulate you need not always be rejected. Examples:

A supplier that wants more of your business gives you a thousand-dollar "rebate." You send thanks, adding, "Coincidentally, a thousand dollars was exactly what we needed for our scholarship fund. Thanks for making it possible." Consider taking out a small newspaper display ad acknowledging Blunder Brothers Petroleum's donation.

A disreputable organization presents you with a business jet. Firmly, publicly and politely refuse it.

A respectable firm that candidly wants your business invites you to be its guest for a weeklong site-inspection tour of Europe. Accept with thanks. Just don't sign anything.

An editor since the age of 6, when she returned a love letter with corrections marked in red, Mary Campbell founded Zero Gravity in 1984 to provide writing, editing, marketing and other services to small

businesses. Her presentations and workshops address small-business topics from Web sites to business writing. An editor of and contributor to dozens of publications (books, journals and newsletters), she is co-author □ with her sister, Pipi Campbell Peterson □ of the second edition of Ready, Set, Organize! A Workbook for the Organizationally Challenged (JIST Publishing, 2001). Please e-mail her your comments, questions and suggestions at whywalk@about.com. Small Business Builder is published on Wednesdays.

Copyright © 2007 ABC News Internet Ventures