

THE RULES OF THE GAME OF BUSINESS

by Martin Grunstein

I got angry on the golf course recently. It wasn't because of the two short putts I missed or the chip shot that went from one side of the green to the other. It was because of a conversation I had with one of my playing partners.

A chap in his twenties, let's call him Bill, introduced himself to me and told me he worked as a cabin crew member for Qantas. We chatted as we played and I said to him that I fly quite a bit and that he has a pretty tough job dealing with passengers on a day to day basis. He agreed and told me that sometimes he had to put them in their place. I was a little surprised by his response and asked him to explain what he meant by that. He said that if passengers weren't polite to him, he wouldn't tolerate it. "If someone asks for a drink and doesn't say 'please'" he said he would reply by saying "I am sure you mean PLEASE" before getting them their drink because, he said, "they need to be taught some manners".

I was a little flabbergasted and asked "is that how Qantas trains you?" "No" he replied (I was quite relieved) "but we aren't paid to put up with that kind of crap so we give as good as we get".

Guess what? He IS paid to put up with that kind of crap. In fact, that is exactly what his job is! When passengers pay their hard earned money or their hard earned frequent flyer points to travel, they are not paying to get a lesson in manners from some 25 year old kid in a uniform.

International travel is stressful and sometimes passengers are not at their best. They may be tired, frustrated or at the end of their tether after trying to keep a toddler occupied without crying for eight hours. OR they may just be rude people. Either way, the job of the flight attendant is to treat them with respect whether they deserve it or not.

If a passenger, or any customer in any business for that matter, goes too far – sexually harasses or swears at a flight attendant or is violent in any way, that passenger deserves to be disciplined and told that behavior is totally unacceptable and that further action may be taken (because all companies should defend their staff).

BUT if a passenger is abrupt or condescending or unfriendly, that does not give the flight attendant the right to put them in their place. There is no contract that says the passenger has to be friendly, courteous and well mannered to fly with Qantas or any other airline for that matter. And this applies to all businesses.

As a speaker, when I go to conferences I am usually treated very well by my clients. Most of them will be friendly towards me and chat with me before I speak and introduce me to people that I haven't met yet. But not all of them! Occasionally they have more important things on their mind than being hospitable to me.

I have had one client say to me on arrival "I am running around like crazy. Get on the stage, do the presentation exactly how I briefed you to and then get off and keep out of my way". And that's exactly what I did. Was I peeved that I wasn't treated like a VIP? No. I was paid by that client to do a presentation for them. Nowhere in my contract did it say they had to treat me nicely. I just consider it a bonus when they do treat me nicely as happens 95%+ of the time and when they don't, I would never dream of "teaching them some manners".

It seems there are a lot of people who don't understand the rules of the game! The rules of the game are different when you are buying as opposed to selling.

If I am selling to someone and they don't return my phone call, I'll ring again and be just as friendly to them if it takes me three calls to get through to them as I would if they returned my first call. If I am buying and a salesperson doesn't return my phone call, I WON'T ring them back and it's very likely that I won't do business with them at all.

When we sell, and anyone dealing with customers is in a selling situation, including Qantas flight attendants, we sometimes have to give up ego for money. We may have to deal with difficult people, to chase people who don't return our phone calls, be nice to people who we otherwise may not choose to associate with. And in return, we, or the company we work for, get paid. Is it fair? Not always. Is it important to understand this? You bet.

If you can't handle that concept, don't work in a "sales" position. And almost all jobs involve a "sales" position from being a flight attendant to being a retailer to being a doctor. If you are medically trained and you don't like these rules, become a pathologist; if you are offended by these rules become a data entry person so you only deal with computers and when you get frustrated with them, you don't have to be nice to them.

Some of the people in my audiences tell me they were brought up according to the golden rule of "do unto others as you will have others do unto you" and I tell them that applies to their personal relationships outside the business environment. That's how you should treat your friends, your family and the people you want to have in your life. But it is a little different in the business environment.

If money changes hands, the rules change. The buyer can crush the seller's ego (within reason) but the seller can not crush the buyer. The waitress at the cafe may not choose to allow HER children to be rowdy and play with the sugar and cutlery when they go to a café, but it is not her responsibility to lecture the customers with the rowdy kids on parenting, it is her job to serve them with a smile and help make their time at the café as enjoyable as possible.

Just as it is inappropriate for the flight attendant to "teach passengers some manners"!

I have heard of a number of situations where a company has lost business by not understanding these rules. A classic example is when entertaining clients outside the business environment. A salesperson told me he lost a big account after taking the client to the cricket as a way of saying thank you for their loyalty. The salesperson had known this client for over five years and they got on very well. After the eleventh beer he made the mistake of teasing the client about his appearance and the next day the business was taken away and given to the competitor. The salesperson complained to his boss that it wasn't fair because the client teases him about his appearance all the time.

He is right. It's not fair....it's business! If you are my client and we become friends and see each other outside business situations, the rules still apply. You can crush my ego but I can't crush yours. Just as a lot of business is done in social situations, some business is lost in these situations.

You may not like or agree with the rules of business but they are the rules and if you are going to play the game you have to know them.

Good luck!

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