

Small details that lead to big success

How paying attention translates to bigger profits

Michael Harrison

Most of us take what we see for granted. It's just "there". We seldom take the time to interpret the information or think about why it is there or what we can learn from it.

And yet observation is one of the most important skills in business.

Some time ago I undertook a project for an after-market automotive parts manufacturer. To get a better insight into their business environment I visited a number of retail outlets.

Some had expensive imported cars in the driveway. Some had their service assistants in smart clean uniforms. Some had many more service bays than others. One offered free espresso coffee and biscuits to waiting customers. Was it just coincidence that they seemed to have a more affluent type of customer? Another had a computer with a free Internet connection. Was it a coincidence that they seemed to attract younger customers?

Each of these observations gave me an insight into the type of business, their potential to sell my client's products and the personality of the owner or manager.

One of the mistakes we often make is we just look for things that are different. You can learn as much from the things you expect to see. Ask yourself why things happen the way they do in this environment.

As I watched prospective buyers walk in and look around the showroom I noticed that most would take a moment or two to get their bearings then either walk over to the counter or look at a display. If the sales assistant at the counter was busy, invariably they would look at the displays.

What made them choose a particular display? Was it just because it was near the counter? Did it have different colours? Was there more information available? What was it about the



showroom environment that made people do the things they were doing?

I particularly wanted to know if prospective customers noticed my client's display. If so, how long did they spend looking at it and did they seem to find what they wanted. Could they read the sign or did they have to put on reading glasses? Was the writing large enough for the target market?

In other words, were they behaving the way my client wanted them to behave? If not, why not? Was there something my client or his marketing team could have done or suggested that would have achieved better results.

Everything we do has a reason. Once you realise that you begin look for the reason.

As a consultant I am always trying to understand what makes people tick.

My observations include the way they dress, their watch or jewellery, whether there are family photos in view or achievement plaques on the wall. Does their office environment appear to be well equipped, well organised, and technologically advanced? Do the employees seem to enjoy working there?

BUSINESS STRATEGY

How about the outside environment? How is it maintained? How big is the car park? What type of security is in place?

What seems to be important to this company or individual?

Each observation offers some insight into how to deal with this person. Do we have common interests? Are our children the same age? Often a photo will give me a clue. How does this person react to different types of questions? Are business questions OK but family questions off limit? Is there emotion in the answers? Are answers carefully thought through?

Don't look at things in isolation. What happened just before and just afterwards? What mental state did they seem to be in? Was there a phone call that changed their state?

As you get to know someone, identify if he or she is a direct no-nonsense person who likes to

stick to business or an outgoing extroverted type who likes to chat.

If it is the former present your facts logically and efficiently. Be clear, specific, brief and to the point. Explain the effectiveness of different options. If it is the latter, take time to be sociable but don't focus on excessive details.

One of the exercises I use with my clients is to have them record observations under the headings of "environment" and "personality". Next to each observation they record their interpretation. Then we spend some time analysing the interpretation and what's missing. What else could they have noticed?

As well as being a great way for sharpening business and negotiation skills, good observation is the key to innovation. It gives us real insight into the future of business.

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A noted business speaker, author and consultant, Michael is the creator of the Mini Guide to Business series and the author of two books and numerous articles about business success and related topics.

This article offers an insight into some of the tools he uses to create meaningful business strategies.

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