

CAN YOU SAY I LOVE YOU?

by Will Marré

A photograph of two pears resting on a textured, light-colored surface, possibly a woven mat. A large, dried leaf is positioned in the foreground, partially overlapping the pears. The lighting is soft and directional, creating highlights and shadows that emphasize the texture of the pears and the leaf. The overall tone is warm and natural.

The best leaders I know aren't afraid to love their customers or employees. Some are passionate and expressive like a love-struck Italian. Others are as quietly loyal as a Midwestern farmer. They all recognize that gaining others' trust and confidence is a lot like dating.

It turns out that the three principles of courtship are the same three principles driving all forms of intrinsic human connection.

First, we need to imagine the unexpressed needs of our beloved. We recently celebrated Valentine's Day, a day in which many women refuse to tell their significant others what they want. They refuse, hoping to be surprised by the thoughtfulness of their partner, who selects just the right gift and activity that says, "I totally know who you are and what delights you." When most of us are in the throes of freshly blooming love, we enjoy thinking about what would be the perfect way to say I love you. We spend extraordinary effort in doing so.

Later, as the routine of relationship sets in, Valentine's Day becomes a chore. We just want to know what our partner wants so we can fill the order without upsetting them.

Business imitates life

Imagining the unexpressed needs of another is not just a romantic notion. It is also a requirement for customer service. Apple, for instance, continuously courts its customers. Instead of using focus groups, Apple is constantly considering what unique

The same principles drive all authentic human connections, whether it's in romance or in business.



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product will “blow away” its customers. With iMac, iPod, iPhone and iPad alike, Apple is saying, “I totally know who you are and what delights you.” In consequence, Apple enjoys a legion of fanatical customers who truly feel the love.

Second, when we're dating, we take great care in planning positive experiences. We take pains to wear the most attractive clothes, and to select the best movie or restaurant. The main thing is careful thought and consideration. As relationships mature, dating becomes a matter of jumping in the car and asking, “So, where do you want to eat?” The romance and intensity evaporate.

Likewise, we offer our customers constant experiences, from face-to-face and telephone conversations to online and email interactions. We ask them to purchase or sign contracts, we make them promises and we ask their opinion.

All of these touch points are dating opportunities. We can make the touch points personal and extraordinary, or they can simply represent boring transactions. We can be amazing or we can be duds. Consider Disney. For more

than 50 years, Disney has made the guest experience top priority at its theme parks. Every cast member (employee) is trained for every possible situation, from family feuds and sick children to broken rides. And every scenario is a chance to make the most amazing impression possible.

Third, we need to have the guts to say I love you. That is, we need to take the lead in being real. Just like we know when someone is simply going through the motions, our inner sincerity detector knows the difference between the superficial niceness of an undertaker and the genuine empathy of a caring friend.

Love is all you need

A few years ago, I was counseling the CEO of a multibillion-dollar hospital system. It was a difficult job involving many competing factions, ranging from hospital boards and multiple management layers to doctor groups and nurses.

Despite the political difficulty this CEO was nearly universally loved and respected across the hospital. When I asked him how he managed to remain on such good terms with everyone, his answer was

deceptively simple. He said that he genuinely loved his 40,000 employees.

He went on to explain that you can't love a statistic — only an individual. So on his weekly visits to one of his 23 hospitals, he would spend a private 30 minutes with a mid-level manager, admitting clerk or nurse. He would simply ask them about their families, hopes and dreams, as well as what he might do to make things better. He told me, “Everyone has a story, and it's my job to listen to them.”

The bottom line is this: in customer and personal relationships alike, only genuine, authentic, grade-A personal caring matters in the long run.

The secrets of all healthy, exciting relationships are the same. It's love. To make love authentic and powerful, we must invest our energy on imagining the greatest value we can bring to those we serve. We must create extraordinary experiences — and above all, we must connect with people in their real lives. Few among us excel at this, and those who do change the world.