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“THE BUSINESS OF FRIENDSHIP”

PG. 21





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A successful entrepreneur once told me that he had a strict policy of never doing business with friends, as he feared making poor decisions and jeopardizing friendships. I was quick to respond with the opposite point of view. By seeking opportunities to do business with friends, I turned a company that started with one borrowed boat into the largest sailing school of its kind.

To sail a boat efficiently, you need a coordinated team with the flexibility to change tactics as necessary. Things happen on a sailboat without warning, and oftentimes there is little room to maneuver. As the captain, you want to be with people you know, trust and like. The same goes for business. Guided by a “philosophy of friendship,” I’ve spent 30 years building relationships with community members, industry peers, employees, business partners— anyone I meet, really. I approach everyone with an open mind, and my business thrives because of it.

Here are some tips for building a business, friendships first:

» **Stick to the Basics:**

Call me old-fashioned, but I believe in doing business with eye contact, handshakes and hugs. Face-to-face conversations develop meaningful relationships, yet too many business owners rely on digital communications. The result is cacophony instead of connection. We create such strong bonds with our clients that they tell their friends it’s worth it sailing with us, even if they live on the other side of the globe.

» **Talk Less, Listen More:**

We have members who’ve paid their monthly membership dues for years, even though they rarely, if ever, sail. Why? Because my staff has learned to talk half as much and listen twice as hard. In doing so, we discover people’s interests and give them opportunities to connect with each other in the real world. In business, it’s all about engagement. The more you know about your clients, the better.

» **Make a Friend, Not a Sale:**

I emphasize to my employees the value of making a friend versus making a sale. For example, one of my managers recently referred the parents of aspiring young sailors to a competitor that specializes in youth instruction. The parents were grateful, as was I. Why? Because I’m confident these people will come back as clients when their children are older. In the meantime, they’ll refer their friends to us.

» **Communication is Key:**

Finally, the key to doing business with friends is clear communication. I don’t expect free services from my friends, and they understand that there is a fair retail value to the services that I offer. Clear and direct conversations ensure that neither party feels like it is being taken for granted. As a result, the positives outweigh any potential negatives, and I have a cadre of companions who care enough about me and my business to be honest and tell me when something needs improving.

My father, who worked as a chef for 50 years, used to say, “Good food isn’t enough to succeed. You need to make people feel special. Greet them warmly, come out from the kitchen and talk with them. Give them a heartfelt goodbye and invite them back.” His commitment to building a business based on friendship is not just fun, it’s also effective. By befriending my clients and giving them opportunities to forge meaningful relationships with one another, I’ve ensured their loyalty and recommendations. That’s why my circle of friends just keeps getting bigger.

Anthony Sandberg is president and founder of OCSC Sailing. Visit www.ocsc.com or e-mail Anthony at anthony@ocsc.com.