

Article location: <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/55/love.html>

December 19, 2007

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Love Is the Killer App

By [Tim Sanders](#)

The most powerful force in business isn't greed, fear, or even the raw energy of unbridled competition. The most powerful force in business is love. It's what will help your company grow and become stronger. It's what will propel your career forward. It's what will give you a sense of meaning and satisfaction in your work, which will help you do your best work.

I know what you're thinking. The world is still reeling in disgust at the murderous events of September 11 and still trying to come to terms with a war against a stateless enemy. Companies in almost every industry -- and almost every company in my part of the world, Silicon Valley -- are closing operations, cutting people, and taking whatever tough steps are necessary to stay alive. Your colleagues are anxious about their careers, worried about the future. And I'm here to convince you that what the business world needs now is love?

Now more than ever. The most profound transformation in business -- a transformation made more urgent, not less so, by the calamitous events in New York and Washington, DC -- is the downfall of the barracudas, sharks, and piranhas and the ascendancy of nice, smart people with a passion for what they do. Forget about the Internet for a moment. Forget about Wall Street and the Fed. What's really different about the economy is that lousy guys finish last.

There are two tough-minded reasons for this soft-hearted reality. The first is the abundance of choice in business -- choice of products, schools, media, and career paths. Choice spells doom for villains. At a time when more of us have more options than ever, there's no need to put up with a product or service that doesn't deliver, a company that we don't like, or a boss whom we don't respect. The second reason is what I call the "new telegraph." It's almost impossible for a shoddy product, a noxious company, or a crummy person to keep its, his, or her sad reality a secret anymore. There are too many highly opinionated and well-informed people with access to email, instant messaging, and the Web.

The bottom line: If you don't like certain people, it's easier than ever to escape them. If you are a lousy person, it's harder than ever to keep people around you. Hence, the power of love. What do I mean by "love"? The best general definition that I've read comes from philosopher Milton Mayeroff's brilliant book, *On Caring*. Love, he writes, "is the selfless promotion of the growth of the other." When you help others grow to become the best people that they can be, you are being loving -- and as a result, you grow.

Mayeroff talked primarily about love in our personal lives. But what we need is a definition of love in our professional lives. Here's mine: Love is the act of intelligently and sensibly sharing

your knowledge, networks, and compassion with your business partners. The secret to being a high-impact leader and the essence of individual and corporate success: Learn as much as you can as quickly as you can and share your knowledge aggressively; expand your network of people who share your values and connect as many of them with each other as possible; and, perhaps most important, be as openly human as you can be and find the courage to express genuine emotion in the harried, pressure-filled world of work. And one last point: Behave this way not because you expect something in return -- a quid pro quo -- but because it's the right way to behave. The less you expect in return for acts of professional generosity, the more you will receive.

My First Love

I came to understand the power of love the old-fashioned way: by experiencing it firsthand and by watching as it took me to some amazing places. (It's also worth noting that my formative experience with love in business involved Victoria's Secret lingerie.)

First, some background. Since graduate school, my career path has been anything but a straight line. In the early 1990s, I was living in Dallas, trying to scratch out a living as a member of a five-person band. Eventually, my wife (who was a fellow band member) and I tired of the musician's life, and I took a marketing job at a video-production company. That position led to a job with a cable-television company, which in turn got me interested in streaming video over the Internet, which then led me to Broadcast.com -- the now-legendary startup that was cofounded by Mark Cuban.

It was as if my professional life had finally begun. Today, Mark is famous as the brash owner of the Dallas Mavericks and a young Internet billionaire (yes, there are still a few left) who doesn't play by the old rules. What people forget about Mark is that he built a great new-wave company around enduring values. When it came to customers, Mark had a motto: "Make love, not war." Not original, but to me, it felt like the elixir of life. Mark passionately believed that customers should be happy, even if it meant working 24 hours a day to please them. I'd never met anyone like that before. I was thrilled. I dedicated myself to learning everything I could about strategy, service, and the Internet. I went to conferences, studied white papers, and read books -- shelves of books -- on everything from the basics of marketing to the new logic of the digital economy.

Then I got my big break -- a chance to share everything that I had learned from my crash course in business and the Web. In late 1998, not long after I'd finished reading *Net Gain*, the influential book on virtual communities by then-McKinsey consultant John Hagel and Arthur G. Armstrong, I got a call from Ken Weil, a vice president at Victoria's Secret. Ken wanted to explore the costs of broadcasting a lingerie fashion show over the Web. What he wanted was a good price. What I wanted was a chance to evangelize the ideas that I had learned from *Net Gain*.

Still, my company was in the business of making money, so we set up a routine conference call. In attendance were Tim Plzak, a director at Victoria's Secret's parent company who was responsible for the Webcast; Ken Weil; my boss; and me. It turned out to be the call of my life. I reviewed some of the big ideas from *Net Gain*. I explained that these weren't just blue-sky concepts, but practical tactics that could make or save Victoria's Secret money. I explained how the fashion show could create an immense email-address database that could support an inexpensive conversation between the company and its customers. Think "virtual community" and "member." And I sent a copy of *Net Gain* to Ken.

He got it. He saw the value of using the fashion show as a draw for customer information. Even though we didn't bid the lowest price, we got the business. And on February 2, 1999, we hosted an event that went down in the annals of Internet history. Because so many people who were trying to log on to the show had experienced technical difficulties, some media pundits called it a failure. *Saturday Night Live* even staged a parody of the event. But for us and for Victoria's Secret it was a huge success. When the event was over, Ken told me that it was the most positive business experience of his life. He even wrote a letter to Mark Cuban saying so. (I still have that letter above my desk. Mark had it framed for me.)

The following spring, Victoria's Secret decided to stage a second event. This time around, the goal was to make sure that it was a flawless user experience. So I committed myself to facilitating an alliance between Broadcast.com and our "co-opetition," America Online and Microsoft. It was a daring strategic step for us -- and the first time that I was willing to share my growing network of contacts with reckless abandon. We hosted a summit at which Victoria's Secret could talk to everyone before they signed a contract with us. I even left the room so that the other companies could strategize about networking and distribution (and perhaps try to take the business away from us).

But instead of teaming up with someone else (and yes, other companies did try to underbid us), Victoria's Secret stayed put, because, as they told us, we had been willing to share our knowledge and our network to make everything work for their benefit. The second show was a bigger (and smoother) success than the first. And Ken became a friend for life. He understood that I wasn't trying to sell him a bill of goods and that I cared about his success just as much as I cared about my own. And I hoped that the feeling was mutual. Our bond was not just professional -- it was personal.

The Power of Love

My experience with Victoria's Secret taught me the three critical drivers of professional success, the three elemental particles of love in business. They are knowledge, networks, and compassion. To be an impact player in business, you simply have to know more than most other people know. That means taking the power of ideas seriously, reading books voraciously, and developing a system of organizing what you've learned. But all of your knowledge won't amount to much if you don't have a network of people to share it with -- and enough compassion for the people in that network to understand that your success is a direct result of their success.

Those factors helped me to move from Broadcast.com to an executive position at Yahoo (which acquired the company in 1999) and then to my current role at Yahoo, where I get to travel the globe, strategizing with some of the biggest companies in the world.

And I'm not alone. Over and over again, I've discovered that the businesspeople who are the busiest, the happiest, and the most prosperous are the ones who are the most generous with their knowledge and their expertise. People who love what they're doing, who love to learn new things, to meet new people, and to share what and whom they know with others: These are the people who wind up creating the most economic value and, as a result, moving their companies forward.

Even in the digital era, when the Internet connects hundreds of millions of computers around the world, the power of love in business is rooted in the centrality of the human factor. Success is based on the people we know. Everyone in our address book is a potential partner for everyone we meet. Everyone can fit somewhere in our ever-expanding business universe. And

the value of our network is a function of our willingness to share it.

We collect marbles, baseball cards, and antiques in order to hold on to them while they increase in value. The purpose of collecting contacts, however, is just the opposite: to give them away -- to match them with other contacts. So don't screen people out. Those who appear powerless or insignificant may be stars waiting to rise. Someday, they may become key nodes in your network -- and create a huge opportunity for you. And they will remember that it was you who was on their side before everyone else was.

But don't just listen to me. As you think about the right way to deal with your colleagues, customers, and business partners -- about how to conduct yourself in a world in which nice, smart people finish first -- just listen to Lennon and McCartney, who said it better than anyone else: "In the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make."

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Sidebar: Why Love Conquers All

It's risky to talk about love in business, especially in these turbulent times. Here are five tough-minded reasons why generosity is the best strategy for individual and corporate prosperity.

You'll build an outstanding brand. By becoming a knowledge guru, sharing your network, and being a compassionate partner, you'll differentiate yourself. You'll be useful, memorable -- special.

You'll create an experience. Business is not just about what you know -- it's about whether you can break through the clutter and information overload. When you represent knowledge, opportunity, selflessness, and intimacy, you are not just a smart colleague; you are fun, interesting, and valuable.

You'll get access to people's attention. The scarcest resource in business is attention. How do you convince people to really pay attention to what you're saying or to give you advice that you need? People with outstanding brands and people whom others are eager to deal with attract undivided attention. This produces results.

You'll harness the power of positive presumption. Making progress means making change. One of the biggest obstacles to change is getting people to trust you. Businesspeople embrace the power of building relationships with a deep level of trust. Your colleagues will presume that your arguments hold water, that your recommendations are solid, and that your referrals are valuable. They'll presume that you have their best interests at heart (which you do). This is a powerful advantage.

You'll receive exceptional feedback. There's one last tough-minded reason to share what you know: You'll learn whether your knowledge has value. If you are eager to offer people knowledge, they will be eager to give you helpful feedback in return. They'll tell you which ideas worked out well and which didn't work out so well. They'll tell you which contacts were helpful

and which weren't. They'll keep talking to you. And you'll keep learning from them. It's a loop.

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