

Remember community in the rush to riches

by **Stever Robbins**

It's the holiday season, and in theory, we're all caring for our Fellow Person. Actually, most of us are frantically shopping, hoping that the Christmas season is profitable, dreading that visit to our parents, and generally letting the happiness of business crowd out the happiness of those of us who comprise the business.

To make matters worse, in the midst of my frenzy of buying, someone had the audacity to ask what were the best presents I've ever received in my life. I thought about it. All the best presents I've ever received were gifts you can't buy. One of my favorites was a totally unexpected friendship card waiting for me by a crackling fireplace in the ranger's station at the top of Mount Greylock (the highest mountain in Massachusetts). To this day, I have no idea how the card got there! And the best present I've ever given? A surprise party to my partner, who had never before had a happy birthday celebration. In both cases, the cost was nominal. The warmth, love, and companionship was off the charts.

Think about that. Community. People. Relationship. Those are the things we look back on that really give us joy. So how does economics and money fit into this? Surely, it must. Though according to Dr. Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association and happiness researcher, once you're above the poverty level, there's no correlation between money and happiness. But our business behavior can certainly affect community, people, and relationship.

I had to take the light rail last week from Newton Center back into Boston. Newton Center's small subway depot has since become a coffee shop. Although this subway stop requires an unusually large amount of change for a single trip (\$2.50), the cash register proudly proclaims, "No change for subway customers."

I guess I just don't understand the business rationale. Most retail businesses would kill for an entire community's worth of foot traffic each day. You want change for the subway? Sure! Just wait by our warm, delicious impulse-buy products and we'll make change once you're at the register.

Maybe they're afraid it will be hard to supply the change. How hard is it, really? They get change regularly from the bank for their register. Next time, just stock up on quarters. It really isn't that much additional trouble. Two additional customers a day (at their gourmet-coffee prices) would pay for a part-time employee whose sole job is to do the subway change run every morning.

But to me, there's a deeper issue: it's one of community and friendliness. When a store only gives change to purchasers, neighborhood residents and regular travelers won't stop in. That means they won't interact, and that much more community gets lost in the race to make Economic Decisions the Be-all and End-all of our existence.

Why not give change because it's a nice thing to do? Or because it's the only way for your clerks, who work 60 hours a week to pay their rent, to meet other people from the neighborhood face-to-face?

It's the little courtesies, the little interactions, and the smiles as we join each other in our daily business that tie us together as a community. Between our walkmans, net connections, and other "time saving" devices, we've eliminated much of the casual communing people once enjoyed. Rather than hanging signs rejecting our community members if they won't buy from us, why not seek to build a community where people like each other so much they want to do business?

Start now. And it's a great time of year to try out the theory that community matters. You have a built-in excuse: if someone notices you putting people and relationships first, you can always blame it on the holidays.

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