

## Attitudes Are Contagious. Is Yours Worth Catching?

One of my clients is a serious “motivational thoughts junkie.” He has a whole bookcase full of motivational books in his office, by authors ranging from Roy Rogers to Dale Carnegie. And they’re not just there for show; not only has he read them all, he can quote from most of them at length.

He also has no fewer than 30 motivational posters, plaques, deskplates and other assorted items in his office. He spends his days among soaring motivational messages, and to at least some degree, all of this motivational power is working. His business has grown steadily over the years, and he seems to do a pretty good job of handling the emotional highs and lows that go along with running a small, entrepreneurial business.

I asked him recently if there was one thought that stood out among all of the others in providing the kind of motivation he seeks. He pointed to a small plaque on the wall, next to a large picture of his family. It said: “Attitudes Are Contagious. Is Yours Worth Catching?”

“This is my business,” my client said, “but it doesn’t go anywhere unless my employees follow my vision and my example. They’re going to mirror my moods and my attitudes, and I’ve learned over the years that I need to keep my head on straight if I expect them to do the same.”

### Maintaining A Good Attitude

I’ve always thought this client had a pretty healthy attitude, but he reminded me that it’s not always easy to maintain it. “Last week,” he said, “my lead pressman made an absolutely stupid mistake. This is a guy who’s been with me for almost five years, and I pay him \$18.50 an hour. We had a job that was 500 2-color letterhead on Classic Linen stock. He ran 10,000 of them.”

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“I sat him down and I told him that I wasn’t happy,” he answered, “but I tried to keep it positive. I asked him to think about what we could learn from the experience, to maybe keep a mistake like this from happening again. Then we got the rest of the staff together, and we all talked about how even the best of us make mistakes when we’re not paying enough attention to what we’re doing. I even told a story about a dumb mistake I’d made recently. The bottom line was to pay attention to the details; to check and then double check and then triple check if that’s what it takes to make sure we get it right.”

It probably goes without saying that this is a “happy” shop; a place where people enjoy coming to work every day—and where customers seem to enjoy the experience of doing business with a group of people who demonstrate a consistently good attitude. From my perspective, it all starts with an owner who understands that attitudes *are* contagious, and makes sure that his is worth catching.

### The Other Side Of The Coin

Unfortunately, there are far too many “unhappy” shops in this industry where bad attitudes prevail. And more often than not, those bad attitudes are “caught” from others; either the owner or another employee.

I have another client who is wrestling with this problem right now. She has five good employees...and one bad one. I’ve told her on several occasions that her “bad apple” is hurting her business, and that it’s only going to get worse if she doesn’t act soon. She herself butts heads with this employee at least once a week, over issues ranging from coming in late to writing up orders incorrectly to neglecting to shave before coming to work. Looking back on the situation, she now realizes that she probably shouldn’t have hired her older brother in the first place!

My client’s attitude has been that “he’s my family, so he’s my problem.” Up until recently, she simply didn’t understand that his bad attitude was spreading to her other employees, and so was hers!

### Magnified Effect

The last time I was in her shop, I overheard a conversation between two of her employees which went something like this:

Employee #1: “I spent half of this morning straightening out the mess (the brother) made on the Women’s Club order. I’m getting awful tired of doing his work for him.”

Employee #2: “Me too. I used to like working here, but I don’t even think (the owner) really cares anymore. And if she doesn’t, I’m sure not going to knock myself out.”

When I told my client about this conversation, she said: “You know, the sad thing is that they’re right. There are times when I really don’t think it’s worth the effort. Dealing with my brother has taken a lot of the fun out of this business for me too.”

This story may yet turn out to have a happy ending. My client now understands that her other employees are reacting to her attitude as much as her brother's. She has promised me that she'll speak with her brother and "lay down the law." If he agrees to do things the way she wants them done, he'll be allowed to stay. If not, she'll let him go. She isn't looking forward to having this conversation, but she understands that it's necessary on several levels; for her own benefit, the benefit of her other employees, and ultimately, to protect her sales volume and her relationships with current—and future—customers.

### Top 10 Destructive Attitudes

This specific situation—allowing a known negative situation to continue until it effects other employees and/or customers—stands at the top of my list of the Top 10 Most Destructive Attitudes in the quick printing industry today. I thought you might be interested in seeing the list in its entirety:

**Most Destructive Attitude #1: Allowing a known negative situation to continue until it effects other employees and/or customers.** A better attitude is *when problems arise, I'll solve them!*

**Most Destructive Attitude #2: If you want it done right, you have to do it yourself.** Two very negative things happen as a result of this attitude: a few people end up doing all of the work, and the others simply let them. A better attitude is *teach and trust...but hold each employee accountable for the quality of his/her own work.*

**Most Destructive Attitude #3: All people care about these days is price.** If your employees hear you say this often enough, they'll start to believe it, and the next thing that happens is that they start slacking off on quality and service. A better attitude is *we'll work hard to find and fulfill the people who will pay more for greater value.*

**Most Destructive Attitude #4: A clean desk is the sign of a dangerous mind.** It's a lot more dangerous to encourage the perception that it's OK to be disorganized. A better attitude is *let's keep things organized and efficient...from top to bottom.*

**Most Destructive Attitude #5: You can't find good help these days.** You can find good help if you're patient and careful in hiring, and if you're willing to pay premium wages for premium people. A better attitude is *I'll do what it takes to hire and reward the best—including raising my prices...and let anyone else work for my competitors.*

**Most Destructive Attitude #6: Education and training cost money.** Education and training are an investment in making money. Even if #5 is partly true and there is a limited pool of really good people, there's no shortage of pretty good people who can be trained and developed into solid performers. A better attitude is *I'll do whatever it takes to help my employees to be all that they can be.*

**Most Destructive Attitude #7: Business card orders and "lobby copies" are more trouble than they're worth.** You won't make much money on individual small orders unless you price them for profit—not simply to complete with the lowest priced supplier in your town! A better attitude is *to charge enough to make these orders attractive, and demonstrate a level of sales and service that makes that price seem like a good value.* And while you're at it, remember that many of your walk-in customers won't buy much, *but if you treat them well, they'll buy everything they can from you!*

**Most Destructive Attitude #8: Just because they have a computer, they think they're graphic designers.** You can complain all you want, this phenomenon is here to stay. A better attitude is *let's teach them what they need to know about designing something to be printed so that things go smoother the next time we do business together.*

**Most Destructive Attitude #9: Everyone wants something for nothing.** The absolute worst thing that can happen in any business is to operate without respect for your customers. You may just be blowing off steam when you say something like this, but a young and impressionable employee may take it a lot more seriously. A better attitude is *everyone wants more for their money, and we're going to stand out among all of the other printers in this market by giving it to them!*

**Most Destructive Attitude #10: Brokering is less profitable than internal production.** This is a long-time pet peeve of mine. Brokering can be every bit as profitable as internal production...if you simply charge enough for brokered products and services. Sure, if you charge more than people are willing to pay, you won't get orders, but that's true of internal production too. A better attitude is *every project we handle for a customer has value, and we're going to charge for that value.*

### Attitude Adjustment

In the military, there's a time-honored tradition called "attitude adjustment." When your superior officer or NCO doesn't like your performance or your accompanying attitude, he or she calls you aside and screams at you for a while. Like many things in the military, this is a strategy where results are pursued by way of an application of force.

In business, an attitude adjustment might be necessary sometimes, but the military approach is often counter-productive. I've seen employees simply walk out after being screamed at, and if that was what the screamer wanted, it would probably have been easier on all concerned to simply say "this isn't working out, and I think it would be better if we parted company."

I've commented before on the difference between leadership and management. You might remember me writing that any idiot can be a manager, since that's really only a matter of having a title. The most effective managers, though, are the ones who are leaders as well. And the most effective leaders lead by example. Their actions reflect their attitudes, and their attitudes are healthy and productive.

I guess the real point of all of this—and the real tie-in to a column on sales and marketing—is that you might be able to sell considerably more of your products and services if some of your own attitudes undergo an adjustment. To be charitable, you may never have fully appreciated the effect that any negative attitudes you have may be having on your business. If you'll let me be less-than-charitable, you may have to admit that you know the negative effects, but you maintain those attitudes anyway.

Either way, you can't escape the fact that attitudes are contagious. If yours are worth catching, they will take your business forward. If they're not, they will continue to hold you back. And while we all have to deal with the reality that there are things in business and in life that we can't change, our own attitudes—and through them, the attitudes of others—are among the things that we can.