Keeping Up Appearances

Written by Steve Marr
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The Flower Art Gallery asked me to evaluate why their sales were flat while other galleries in the area were experience increased growth. According to Peter, the owner, foot traffic just seemed to be down. When I visited, I walked around the building, noting that the windows needed washing, the sign was faded by the sun, the welcome mat was dirty and several lights were burned out that would have highlighted art. Inside, the paint was becoming dated and chipped in places.

The appearance of your facility is a key factor in enticing customers into your store and establishing confidence. Time, weather, and neglect of "the little things" can create a negative impression of your business. Keeping everything shipshape can actually increase your sales. Over time, we can tend to lose sight of the gradual deterioration in the appearance of our businesses. But those small changes can make a big difference.

I suggested that Peter arrange a general housecleaning, including windows, carpets-the works. A fresh coat of paint gave the gallery a clean, inviting look. The total cost was less than $1,000, and the result was an immediate increase in foot traffic-more people came in rather than just looking through the window. Sales picked up 10 percent in the first three months after the housecleaning, earning back the expense of the cleanup many times over.

King Solomon observed, "Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks" (Ecclesiastes 10:18 NASB). It may take a while before neglect will cause the roof to leak, and at first you may not notice the problem, but when a small leak becomes a torrent, major damage will occur. To prevent small problems from becoming big disasters, review the condition of your facility every six months. Ask your employees and customers to give you a candid perspective on the appearance of your store. Also, budget sufficient funds to keep your facility in tiptop shape. Like a house, a business needs upkeep.

At another struggling business, I noticed that overgrown shrubs in front of the building gave an unkempt appearance. When I mentioned the problem, the owner said, "I can't afford the time to

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do gardening." I suggested that he remove the shrubs, put down gravel, and power wash the building. These simple, low-cost changes made an immense difference in curb appeal.

Lavatories are a key indicator of how much pride an organization takes in maintaining a positive appearance. How often have you found a dirty restroom in a restaurant? What does it do to your confidence in the quality of the food? Whenever I visit a new client, I always make a stop in the restroom. The level of cleanliness gives me a very good indication of the company's overall commitment to quality. Although maintaining clean restrooms can be an unpleasant task, it makes a positive statement to your customers.

In your offices, maintain orderly desks, reception areas, and all places within a customer's sight. If working in close quarters, install barriers to hide any messes. Keep handwritten notes off the walls, and avoid posting cartoons and other questionable humor. In one store, I saw a sign that read, "Customer complaint line: call 1-800-GET-LOST." Another business had a button labeled "Ring for customer service." The button was in the center of a mouse trap. Such humor may draw smiles, but it may turn off customers and is best avoided.

King Solomon observed, "I passed by the . . . vineyard of the man lacking sense- and behold, it was completely overgrow with thistles, its surface was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down" (Proverbs 24:30 NASB). Such problems-whether a broken down wall or an overgrown garden-don't happen overnight. But just as surely as thistles will choke out a productive vineyard, allowing the appearance of your business to deteriorate will choke off customer growth.

Steve Marr, Your Christian Business Coach