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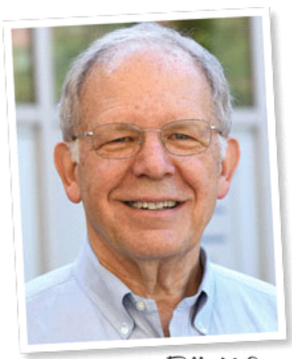
“Frank” Advice to Remember

Bill McCurry



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“Frank” wasn’t a big man, yet he was described by those who worked with him as either a bull or a bear. Those weren’t stock market labels, but references to a firm personality who had high expectations of himself, his team and his customers. Although we’d met at industry events, I didn’t know him well. However, when I was invited to speak at a convention near his store, I phoned and we agreed to a quick visit and store tour.

When I arrived, he was behind the check-out counter, talking on the phone, “I’m giving $400 in product to two schools this month. I’m also going out to speak with the kids about a potential future in this industry.” He hung up and welcomed me.

I congratulated him for supporting school educational programs. He replied that had been somewhat forced on him. Curious, I asked, “What’s the rest of the story?”

It seems a few months earlier, his new contract CPA had threatened to resign the account, “You’ve told me three times about a customer trying to cheat you with what you thought was a fraudulent return. I can’t justify my time listening to continued complaining about something that happened years ago.” This stopped Frank cold. He appreciated the insights the outside accountant gave him to improve his business operations and didn’t want to lose that resource. “What do I have to do to get you to stay on?”

The accountant asked, “How much do potentially fraudulent returns cost you in a month?” Frank instantly shot back, “Probably $1,000.” The accountant silently reflected he hadn’t seen that in the monthly financial statements, but wisely didn’t comment on it. Instead, he said, “Okay, Frank, here’s what we’ll do. You budget $1,000 per month for questionable customer demands. At month’s end, you will donate whatever is left in that month’s budget to customers or charities.”

Frank reluctantly agreed and established the “Abuse Me Fund.” He said the first month was an anomaly, with only two questionable returns that totaled $80. He spent that month’s last day standing at the check-out area giving customers $920 of free items he thought would help them. It killed him to do that because he knew the next month would be way over $1,000. In fact, it was roughly $200, so again he stood in the store, adding things “on the house” to customer’s carts.

I met him the fourth month when he'd decided to use the money to support local educational/vocational endeavors. He was certain the upcoming months would burst through his monthly budget. More than a year later, obviously still curious, I checked on how his Abuse Me Fund was doing.

Somewhat bashfully, he said, "I'm still doing it. I'm thankful because it has changed my entire approach to looking at customer frustrations and putting those outlier cases behind me. I really considered them bigger problems than they were. I've relived each scenario in my mind whenever a customer asks for something close to unreasonable. I had to learn—and finally did—that there are many more good people out there than sharks trying to eat you."

Frank is no longer with us, but I'll always owe it to him and his CPA for the lesson: "More good people than sharks." Frank's attitude is worth adopting. Rather than being frustrated at his accountant, he was grateful for the man's understanding of Frank's personality at that time and his wisdom in helping Frank discover the blindnesses masking him from the truth.

This November let's take some extra time to be thankful for the gifts and blessings we have, especially for the people who care about us. Although we might not recognize it at the time, we owe special thanks for those who take time to challenge our preconceived notions. May we continue to thank those who offer us insight and be open to their ideas. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 731-8389.