

"Play by the rules, but be ferocious" » Phil Knight

The Griswold Effect

One of my more festive neighbors had their outdoor Christmas decorations and lights installed the week before Thanksgiving.

While my initial response was, "You've got to be kidding me," I soon just smiled and tipped my cap to their eagerness.

Of course, I'm pretty sure the HOA didn't share their early yuletide enthusiasm.

The thing that struck me in the days to come was how I normally drive by that home several times a day and rarely pay attention to it.

But for the week or so when it was the only home lighted and decorated, I noticed it just about every time I drove by.

On one occasion, I flashed back to the time I ran my first branch in a Winn-Dixie store in Thibodaux, Louisiana.

(Yes, the jokes right themselves.)

After Thanksgiving, store departments were encouraged to put up Christmas decorations.

The store manager told me that he had boxes of Christmas lights behind the store, and I was welcomed to as many as I wanted.

When I asked, "As many as I want?", he chuckled, "I want all our departments to look festive. You can lead by example."

They'll Talk if You Listen

A recent conversation with the manager of a midtown Houston "gastro pub" reminded me that you can learn incredible amounts about the operations, goals, needs, and challenges of businesspeople if you simply give them the opportunity to tell you.

In this case, I had a bit of time before a Saturday theater performance my son was in.

The corner pub just a few steps from the theater has a great layout and atmosphere.

I was one of the first customers of the day and grabbed a table while they completed opening tasks.

Besides the two folks working in the kitchen, the manager and one waitress handled everything from the bar, to taking food orders, to bussing tables.

I only learned the person taking my order was the manager/co-owner after a short chat. She was very friendly and began telling me what items on the menu weren't available because shipments hadn't arrived.

I joked about how much more work it is to continually have to explain what isn't available.

It may have been my expression of empathy that first got her talking. But within a few moments, I felt like I was getting a short course on restaurant management.

Long story short, I ended up earning the nickname of "Dave Griswold" by the time we were done.

For years, I joked with groups that if not for the roof on the building, you might see my branch from space. You could definitely see a bit of a glow from even the far corners within the store.

Jokes aside, however, awareness of our branch clearly increased during December.

Customers who never so much as glanced our way stopped and smiled. Many paid compliments.

I was also later told by the Floral Department manager that leaving the Christmas lights on after our branch was closed for the evening was very eye-catching. She borrowed the idea.

Seasonal decorating has been one of my pet topics ever since.

Even slightly changing the look of a branch draws attention. In busy, high-traffic areas – whether along roadways or within stores - that which becomes static becomes ignored.

You compete against aggressive marketers in a high-tech, sophisticated industry every day.

Yet, something as simple as a few eye-catching decorations now and then just might earn you what everyone is competing for: customer attention.

She talked about managing cash flow in today's world. When she explained how a case of romaine lettuce was \$40 one year ago, but was \$130 today, my jaw dropped.

She passionately talked about the challenges of attracting, training, and keeping good people.

A nice atmosphere, plentiful TVs, great food, and a wall of beer isn't enough to build customer loyalty.

She explained, "When I'm able to keep good people on staff, our sales go up. Things run smoother. I can spend more time talking to customers and making sure everyone is happy."

I smiled and told her she just described the challenges most businesses face.

I suggested (and she agreed) that it's not money alone that keeps good people. If you treat people fairly and let them know they're appreciated, they tend to stay with you.

When she learned I work in the banking world, she laughed and said, "I've never had a banker in here asking about my business."

Now, that rang in my ears for a bit.

In challenging economic times, opportunities to listen to and assist small business folks multiply. Whose stories will you hear this month?

"Business opportunities are like buses, there's always another one coming." » Sir Richard Branson



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Dave Martin, author of [The In-Store Advantage](#), has become one of the most prolific writers in the banking industry. His keynote presentations, seminars, and podcasts have an authenticity and humor that brings teams of all sizes and seniority levels together.

For more info about having Dave or an FSI Consultant speak to your group, email Tina Coleman, tcoleman@SupermarketBank.com or call 800-992-4978.

Financial Supermarkets, Inc. • fsi@supermarketbank.com

383 Clarkesville Street • PO Box 1450 • Cornelia, GA 30531 • (800) 992-4978

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