Why It Pays to Be Like able

Dave Kerpen

40 years ago, a brand like Green Giant could sell a lot of mediocre corn with a great jingle and a huge television advertising budget. 20 years ago, a company like Circuit City could be a miserable, secretive place to work, but it wouldn't matter much to shareholders or customers because they likely would never find out. Social media has changed all that very quickly.

The speed and ease with which information travels—the good, the bad and the ugly—is faster than ever before, and only accelerating. Today, the brands that succeed aren't the ones that spend the most money on disruptive advertising—they're the ones that spend the most money on creating valuable, meaningful products, and customer service.

Today, the businesses that succeed aren't the ones who keep costs down by not giving perks to employees—they're the ones who create an open, transparent, fun place to work where passionate people can exchange ideas. Today, more than ever before, for businesses, brands, and entrepreneurs, it pays to be likeable.

Social media is, in many respects, like the world's largest cocktail party, where friends and strangers can communicate with one another freely (if without the drinks). It stands to reason, then, that business people who use social media well are like the popular people at cocktail parties—more like Dale Carnegie than David Ogilvy—listening, telling great stories, being passionate, and remaining not only interesting, but interested. In social media, the loudest advertisers don't succeed as much as the better listeners do.

This may be the social media age, but the businesses that benefit won't just be those that are using social media well. It isn't just important to listen to your customers on Twitter; it's important to listen to your customers everywhere. It isn't just important to be responsive to customers on Facebook; it's important to be responsive to customers everywhere. It isn't just important to be able to tell a great story on the social web; it's important to tell a great story everywhere, whether you're socializing at a golf event, meeting in the boardroom, or delivering a big sales pitch.

In order to be successful in today's society, businesspeople must be obsessed with their customers and prospects, and always doing right by them. Leaders must be obsessed with their staff and corporate culture as well, embracing their employees as the word of mouth marketing evangelists they can truly become. This manifesto will take the principles of likeable social media and apply them to business in general—how to become a likeable leader of a likeable business, one worth talking about in a positive way.

Unfortunately, there are still far more stories of unlikeable businesses than likeable ones. In June 2006, Brian Finkelstein was frustrated about the extremely poor customer service he had received from his cable television company, Comcast. After missed appointments and broken routers, his opportunity for revenge came when a Comcast technician actually fell asleep on the couch after being put on hold for so long by his own company. Finkelstein shot a quick video and uploaded it to the Internet. Over 3 million people have now seen the video, "A Comcast Technician Sleeping on My Couch," surely negatively affecting Comcast's reputation and brand.

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The good news is, Comcast responded. Frank Eliason, then the customer service manager, started a program called "Comcast Cares" in 2007, and Comcast became one of the first examples of a business proactively using Twitter to resolve customer service issues and strengthen relationships with customers.

On July 6, 2009, aspiring singer Dave Carroll uploaded a video onto YouTube he called "United Breaks Guitars." The video tells the story of a United Airlines flight during which Carroll's guitar was broken. Far worse than breaking his guitar, thought Carroll, was United's refusal to pay for it and the company's rudeness to him following his flight. He was angry, but he didn't call the media—he didn't need to. He just made a little video and uploaded it to the world's largest online video community. United didn't respond to the video, but the public did. In just three years, over 15 million people have viewed Carroll's video, damaging United's reputation—and their stock price.

At the same time, rival airline JetBlue has established itself as a leader in online and offline responsiveness, with the industry-leading Twitter account @jetblue and shorter-than-average phone wait times. While most other U.S. airlines have struggled in financial performance, JetBlue has grown a whopping 80 percent over the past five years.

Have you ever had a bad experience with a bank? How about a cable television company? Or an airline? Or a local business? Or a rude salesperson or office manager? For many years, companies large and small have struggled with how they treat their customers and prospects. But the times have changed. It used to be that a customer shared a bad experience with a company privately, through a comment card. Now it's shared publicly on Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. It used to be that a customer shared a bad experience with several friends. Now it's shared with several hundred, or several thousand, or several million. And companies have no choice but to listen.

Twenty-five years ago, mediocre companies could spend lots of money on television ads or cold calls and generated lots of sales. Poor customer service, poor follow-up, or poor products didn't matter. Today, everything matters. Most of all, being likeable matters.

The Role of Social Media in Today's Society

When I was a child, I remember a family meal at a local diner that led to three of us getting food poisoning. My mom called the restaurant and complained, threatening to call the local media and have the restaurant written up in our local newspaper. Twenty-five years later, that newspaper no longer exists. In fact, the entire face of media has changed. I now have more Twitter followers than the circulation of many small-town newspapers, at least those that are still around.

What happened? While newspapers were shrinking and folding, the social web was born. Facebook went from nothing to a billion users worldwide in nine years. Twitter went from nothing to 500 million users in seven years. People went from getting information from linear media and sharing it with a few friends to getting information from social media and resharing it with many friends.

It's important to note that, while I may have a lot of connections via social media, and while you may have a lot of connections via social media, and while online influence matters to a certain extent, it's the medium that's more important than the individual when it comes to sharing messages. You may not know the name "Janis Krums," but you have probably seen his photograph of a plane crashing into the Hudson River in New York City. Many millions of people have seen this picture, which Krums tweeted. Yet Krums had only approximately 170 followers on Twitter the day he shared the picture. The picture resonated extremely well with a few people, who shared it with others, who in turn shared it again until it was also shared through linear media such as television—and within a few hours, it spread and spread and spread. Text, pictures, and videos such as "United Breaks Guitars" are created and shared by millions of people each day in the new social web. Today, you don't need to call up the local media when you have something to say—you are the local media.

What This All Means: Obsession With the Customer

In a hyperconnected, social media–driven society, businesses can no longer afford to be mediocre. Businesses large and small must be obsessed with their customers, making and keeping them happy. If it seems scary that one disgruntled customer could negatively impact your business, it is scary. But obsession with your customers cannot only stave off negative results; it can lead to extremely positive results as well. The people who can share negative stories through social media can also share positive ones. In the same way that stories of customer service failures can spread quickly, so can stories of going above and beyond to delight your customers.

But Your Customers Can't Be Your Only Obsession

At your organization, the people you interact with as much as—if not more than—your customers are your colleagues and employees. Being likeable isn't just about your customers. After all, if the people at your company aren't passionate about what they do, don't work well together as a team, don't listen to one another, and don't enjoy a strong company culture, how can they possibly create amazing experiences for your customers? The entire staff at your company, to one extent or another, and for better or for worse, is now your marketing team.

The 11 Principles of Likeable Business

We will explore 11 principles of likeable business that together make for more likeable leaders and better, more customer-centric organizations. If you follow these principles, are you guaranteed to avoid a "United Breaks Guitars" disaster? Of course not. Are you guaranteed to be able to show a clear return-on-investment from integrating these ideas into your daily workflow? Of course not. But these qualities in people, simple as they may seem, establish the all-important culture of an organization, which in turn affects the experience of customers. Leaders in any organization set the tone for the people who work for them, who eventually set the tone for the products and services and customers' experiences. In today's world, every customer's experience matters more than ever before.

And over time, you will find, it's not only beneficial to build a more likeable business for your organization's bottom line—it's beneficial for your own bottom line as a human being.

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1. **Listening.** Listening is the foundation of any good relationship, communications plan, or business. 50 percent of all communication is listening, and yet we're way more experienced at and used to talking than to listening. Great leaders listen to what their stakeholders, customers and prospects want and need, and they listen to the challenges those customers face. They listen to colleagues and are open to new ideas. They listen to shareholders, investors, and competitors. They listen and ask questions with focus—not waiting to talk, but waiting to understand. Twitter has made it possible to listen at scale to your stakeholders. Think not about what you can tweet to get the word out, but about what and who you can listen for to better understand. Listen first and never stop listening.

2. **Storytelling.** After listening, leaders need to tell great stories in order to sell their products. But, more important, they need to tell great stories in order to sell their ideas. Storytelling is what captivates people and drives them to take action. A likeable leader has a strong vision and purpose and always has stories to sell that vision. A great story includes a beginning, a middle, and an end, some conflict, and an interesting hero. It is valuable to be able to tell a great story to a prospect over lunch, but it is even more valuable to be able to tell your story using pictures and videos on the social web. Years ago, the vehicles for storytelling were the 30 second TV spot or a five color glossy brochure—costly and time-consuming. Today,

with few barriers to entry and a little creativity, great storytelling can be done through an Instagram photo, a YouTube video, or a Facebook post.

3. **Authenticity.** Great leaders are who they say they are, and they have integrity beyond compare. Vulnerability and humility are hallmarks of the authentic leader and create a positive, attractive energy. Customers, employees, and linear media all want to help an authentic person who lets them in to succeed. There used to be a divide between one's public self and private self, but the social Internet has blurred that line. Likeable leaders are okay with who they are online and offline, and are able to merge their personal and professional life together. For older generations this takes some getting used to, but it's much easier to just be who you are, and the people around you reward that genuineness.

4. **Transparency.** It has always been easier to tell the truth than to lie. But thanks to social media, there really is nowhere to hide anymore, and people and businesses that attempt to keep secrets will eventually be exposed. Privacy isn't entirely dead, but it has become increasingly difficult—especially online. What if people embraced the public nature of today's world, and simply lived a life without anything worth hiding? What if businesses shared their financial and strategic plans more openly with their employees? Openness and honesty about what you're thinking, doing, and planning will lead to happier staff and customers—and a happier you.

5. **Team Playing.** No matter how small your organization, you interact with others every day at work. Letting others shine, encouraging innovative ideas, embracing the team's mistakes, and following other proven rules for working in teams will help you become a more likeable leader. You'll need a culture of success and humility within your organization—two traits that aren't often associated with one another, but when combined create a potent force for good things to happen. You'll need to encourage out-of-the-box thinking, even (and especially) if that means respectful disagreement with the leaders. The team that plays hard together, shares together, and is vulnerable with one another, is the team that will also work hard together to accomplish the mission.

6. **Responsiveness.** The comment cards of yesterday are now the tweets, Facebook and blog posts of today. Today's leaders must be responsive to their customers, staff, investors, and prospects. Every stakeholder is a potential viral sparkplug, for better or for worse, and the winning leader is one who recognizes this and insists upon a culture of responsiveness. Responding shows you care and gives your customers and employees a say, allowing them to make a positive impact on your company. Not responding is a response, one that says "I don't care." Is it really worth risking the next "United Breaks Guitars" video?

7. **Adaptability.** There has never been a faster-changing marketplace than the one we live in today. In almost every industry, advancements in technology necessitate frequent changes in strategy, models, products and implementation. Leaders must be flexible in managing changing opportunities and challenges and nimble enough to pivot at the right moment. Stubbornness is no longer desirable. Instead, humility and the willingness to adapt when needed mark a great leader. You can maintain your mission, vision and purpose indefinitely while still adapting what you actually do to accomplish that mission, vision and purpose.

8. **Passion.** Those who love what they do don't have to work a day in their lives. People who are able to bring passion to their business have a remarkable advantage, as that passion is contagious to customers and colleagues alike. A lack of passion is contagious as well, so it's important to surround yourself with equally passionate people. If you're not passionate about what it is you're doing, go read What Color is Your Parachute and find your passion today. Life is to short to waste a moment. Finding, increasing, and living out your passion will absolutely affect your bottom line.

9. **Surprise and Delight.** Surprise and delight has always been a good tenet of business. But today, it's more important than ever, since social networks allow word to spread faster than ever before. Likeable leaders underpromise and overdeliver, assuring that customers and staff are surprised in a positive way. We all like to be delighted, and surprise and delight

create incredible word-of-mouth marketing opportunities. Free giveaways are like magic, bringing legendary status to your company, if at a cost. But you don't have to spend money "to surprise and delight. Sometimes it's all in the customer service, or the packaging, or the product itself.

10. **Simplicity.** The world is more complex than ever before, and yet what customers often respond to best is simplicity—in design, form, and function. Taking complex projects, challenges, and ideas, and distilling them to their simplest components allows customers, staff, and other stakeholders to better understand and buy into your vision. We humans all crave simplicity, and so the likeable leader must be focused and deliver simplicity. What is the one thing you do better than anyone else in the world? Focus on delivering that, and on clear, simple language that communicates what you do.

11. **Gratefulness.** Finally, likeable leaders are ever grateful for the people who contribute to their opportunities and success. Being appreciative and saying thank you to mentors, customers, colleagues, and other stakeholders keeps leaders humble, appreciated, and well received. It also makes you feel great, and karma is always returned to the bottom line. In the digital age, hand writing thank you notes each week is a great habit to get you in the mindset of gratitude, and to deliver impactful communications to your customers, partners, prospects, and colleagues.

The Role of the Consumer in Creating a More Likeable World

Last January, I took my family on the most amazing vacation of my life, to the Beaches Resort in Turks and Caicos. We were there for only four days, but our time was jam-packed with fun activities, the weather and beach were gorgeous, and the staff at Beaches was nothing short of perfect. The Sesame Street character integration was fantastic, as my kids were not only able to take photos with Big Bird, Elmo, and Zoe, but able to hang out with them, play games, and have a dance party. To top it all off, on our last night there, Zoe came to our hotel room and tucked in my girls, reading them a story and creating a memory that will surely last a lifetime for all of us!

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I haven't just told that story here—I've told it to thousands of people on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Google+.

When I have issues with companies or with customer service reps or salespeople, I share those issues with the world through social media. I hold companies to high standards of products and service, and when those standards aren't met, I share. Shouldn't we all? But I also share stories of likeable businesses, leaders, and, experiences. I want the world to know about the good businesspeople and organizations out there, those who listen to their customers, respond to changing needs, and are passionate and grateful.

It's likely that you're a businessperson, salesperson, or leader in your organization. But most certainly you're a consumer as well. As consumers, we all have the opportunity—and I would argue the responsibility—to share the good and bad experiences we have.

You have the opportunity to hold unlikeable businesses and leaders accountable through social networks, and businesses have the opportunity to receive direct and immediate feedback from their consumers. When Netflix changed its policy in September 2011 and planned to launch Qwikster, the world reacted, and Netflix listened and immediately changed course. The social web even allowed protesters to unite and overthrow unlikeable leaders in Egypt (Hosni Mubarak) and Libya (Muammar Gaddafi) in 2011.

With that opportunity comes the responsibility for consumers to share good stories about the likeable leaders and companies who make our lives better, put smiles on our faces, and provide simple products and services that add value. I challenge you to think about not only how you can change your organization, but how you as a consumer can recognize other likeable businesses—and in turn share your own stories.

Get Likeable!

One of the key leadership traits is responsiveness. It's one of my own personal core values, as well, and so I respond to all of the thousands of tweets, (Twitter.com/DaveKerpen), emails (dave@likeable.com) and Facebook messages (Facebook.com/DKerpen) that come my way each week. Please know that I always remain open to feedback, questions, thoughts, and ideas.

The principles of a likeable business are all simple—some would even say obvious. And yet so many organizations, large and small, struggle with them. Seth Godin, bestselling author and entrepreneur, said, "How dare you settle for less when the world has made it so easy for you to be remarkable?" **The time is now. Be likeable—not only for your business success, but for your own peace and happiness.**

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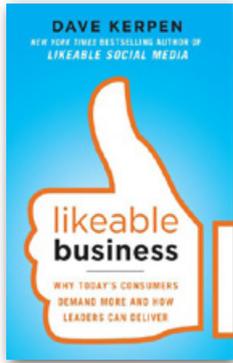
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Dave Kerpen is the CEO of Likeable Local, a social media software startup for small businesses, as well as the chairman and former CEO of Likeable Media, an award-winning social media and word-of-mouth marketing firm with triple digit revenue growth for 4 consecutive years. Dave and his wife Carrie lead a team of over 60 people in working with brands, organizations, governments, and small businesses to better leverage social media to become more transparent, responsive, engaged, and likeable. Likeable Media was named to both the 2011 and 2012 Inc. 500 list of fastest growing private companies in the United States. In 2012 Likeable Media was named one of Crain's Best Places to Work NYC.

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