

Face Time

By T. Scott Gross

There is a tremendously valuable asset going to waste in your organization...face time.

Face time is that old real estate principle of highest and best use applied to the boss. Even in this egalitarian world where the boss is known by Pam or Chuck, customers, internal and external, still put a premium on time spent with the boss.

Face time is nothing less but a whole lot more than the mere presence of El Jefe. The Chief Honcho. The Boss. The Grand Poobah.

Face time is important for three reasons...status, example, and intelligence. More about these in a moment.

Office time almost never has the same value as face time. Offices are too often a place to hide.

If the boss has superior expertise, then why isn't it in the field or on the floor where it can be shared? If the boss is a marginal sort, then maybe the office is the place where he or she is least likely to do damage. Otherwise, most of what gets done in offices either could be done by someone who has a much lower face value or, as is often the case, office work is work that really needn't be done at all.

Pagers are a variation on the theme. Pagers are too often an excuse to be someplace you shouldn't be. Period.

The Employment of Face

Face time puts the boss in direct contact with the customer. Even at the lowest level, the boss's face has incredible value. When we owned our little restaurant, where four dollars would get you lunch and change, people wanted to be recognized by the owner. They wanted to know that when they walked in the door, the owner, not a clerk or cook or assistant, would call them by name.

A restaurant that serves mediocre food but where the boss is omnipresent will beat out a fine dining establishment where the boss never makes an appearance.

Think about the businesses that make you feel good and I guarantee that the boss is likely to be present much of the time. Better yet, I guarantee that the boss is right out front, maybe even knows you by name. Right? Right!

You visit the White House. What do your neighbors want to know? See what I mean?

You travel to Hollywood. What do your friends ask about? The weather? No way!

The same goes for your business. Your customers want to see Y-O-U! You don't have to be a celebrity to have face value. Like the Wizard of Oz might say, "What you need is a title." 'Boss' will do nicely.

When we visit Boccone's Restaurant we know three things. The food and service will be out of this world. We'll have to wait for a parking space and then wait for a

table. We'll see Al or Mary Helen, probably both. And it's the latter fact that accounts for the first two on the list.

Face time also has immeasurable value in terms of the training that inevitably occurs. Look, all learning is by doing. The things your people are most likely to do (learn) are the things that they see in the work environment and try for themselves. This means that the other people at work are, in fact, your training program. It follows that since the boss is, well, the boss and carries pretty hefty face value, then the boss is the most potent training aid of all.

Be careful! This sword cuts both ways. The last thing a boss can get away with is a "Do as I say, not what I do" attitude. Like it or not, what the boss does, the troops do. Boss grouchy—grouchy troops. Boss quality-minded—troops watch quality. Boss cleans break room—boss cleans break room! (This stuff is powerful but not perfect!!)

The important thing to remember is that floor time isn't necessarily face time. If you are working the floor out of sight and earshot of the employees your time, at least as far as the employees are concerned, has no more value than that of another body on the clock. It may still have face time to the customer and then, only if the customer knows that you are the boss.

The Boss on the Line

One late night I slipped into the office in underwear and tennis shoes. (I know that's an odd combination but the office is attached to the house and the dog doesn't seem to mind.)

The phone rang and I answered, "T. Scott Gross & Friends" just like the staff had taught me!

"Can I order a book at this number?"

"Yes, ma'am. You certainly can!"

"I need it by tomorrow. I've looked at our local bookstore and they are out."

"Well, if you live in the San Antonio area I'm going to the airport and could drop it off to you."

"I live in Kansas City."

"Sorry. Not that airport! Tell me, why do you need the book tomorrow?"

"I read an article about Positively Outrageous Service and got so excited about it that I called a staff meeting for the morning. I assumed I could buy the book locally."

"Well, I bet I can help you with a few of the concepts...". We talked for nearly half an hour as she took notes, asked questions, and generally became a semi-expert on POS.

"You've been so helpful!" she said. "I can't believe that someone working the order desk this late at night would be so knowledgeable! Tell your boss that you deserve a raise!"

I was so proud of myself for being a good order-taker I didn't tell her that I had also written the book!

Face time. No value.

The Third Value of Face Time

The third value of face time is intelligence gathering. All the mystery shoppers, 800 lines, comment cards and focus groups in the world won't tell you half as much as will your loyal customers. Nothing beats asking customers face-to-face what they like about your product or service or how they would change it if they were in charge. Customers will spill their guts helping you beat your competition if they think they are dealing with someone who can and will make a change for the better.

There is such a thing as telephone face time too! A few minutes on the phone every day calling customers to ask, "How are we doing?" has more value than an entire day spent poring over numbers from last period. Last period is history! A real customer on the line is opportunity!

Face time is leadership in action. Tom Peters called MBWA, Management By Walking Around. I call it MBWA...Management By Working Around. Nothing beats first-hand experience and MBWA is definitely it. Smart managers make a point of scheduling themselves to work a shift or two with the troops. Are you putting in your face time?