

## We are obligated to manipulate our customers

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Before you unfriend me from your social media, give me a chance to explore with you an uncommon interpretation of manipulation in the context of business transactions.

But first we have to start with another distinction - ethics.

*Ethics (noun)* – “a set of moral principles; a theory or system of moral values; the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group.” (Merriam-Webster)

Notice that the definition doesn't really say whether those morals and principles are good or bad. That assessment is usually derived by the norms of the prevailing times.

Take alcohol consumption for example. In the early 1900s, the “Prohibition” movement here in the United States successfully argued that such consumption was not only unethical but responsible for the moral decline of our citizenry thereby leading to the Volstead Act which outlawed the practice. Just fourteen years later, the law was overturned as the ethics of the time had changed.

However, not all ethics are governed by regulations. Take tardiness, as an example. From Terri Morrison and Wayne Conaway's excellent reference book on doing business internationally "*Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands*," here are a few extracts along the ethical spectrum of being on time:

- Denmark: "*Tardiness conveys incompetence and poor time management.*"
- Australia: "*It's not enough [for an employer] to request that people arrive on time; you have to prove that their tardiness causes harm.*"
- France: "*No insult is intended by tardiness ... People and relationships are always more important than a soulless schedule.*"

For those of you like me that travel frequently, you can just about set your watch by the on time departures of some trains and airlines. For others, their schedule is more like a possibility than a probability (and others a mere fantasy).

On the world stage, just notice press comments on how some world leaders purposefully use tardiness as an ethic of power when meeting with another world leader like a president, a Prime Minister, the Queen of England or the Pope.

So perhaps we can agree that ethics by themselves have no immutable quality of being positive or negative. They just are. It's up to us, in our time, in our culture, in our context, both individually and in groups to define whether a particular ethic is good or bad.

My company focuses on B2B transactions so in that context, my claim is that "ethical" behaviors are those that promote more satisfying customer relationships and grow your business. Stated more succinctly, good ethics are defined from your customer's perspective.

With that as background, let's now dive into the subject of this article.

*Manipulate (verb)* – control or influence a person or situation cleverly, unfairly or unscrupulously. (*Merriam-Webster*)

Many of us have a visceral, negative reaction to the word manipulate because we abhor being "controlled ... unfairly or unscrupulously."

We can be reminded here of the quote by Earl Taylor, which is nearly ubiquitous in common sales training courses, "*Nobody likes to be sold but everybody likes to buy.*"

In a [video on our homepage about Trust in business](#), I discuss that annual surveys consistently rate sales as one of the most untrustworthy professions. Why is that? I submit that it's a result of the numerous sales training programs that teach their practitioners how to unethically manipulate a prospect into buying something they don't really need or paying a price well above the value received.

For example, the term "used car salesman" has become somewhat of an insult in our pop culture lexicon because of the manipulative sales tactics that used to be (perhaps still are) a part of their ethics. So much so that unscrupulous car sales are regularly parodied in movies, television, advertising and comedy acts and why (supposedly) more ethical car sales mechanisms emerged in the marketplace (e.g., like Saturn's non-negotiable sticker prices or USAA's online car buying service).

For a more sophisticated example, the next time you're watching TV, pay attention to one of those advertisements promoting the latest "miracle" prescription drug treatment for everything from constipation to diarrhea, low A1C to high blood pressure, dry mouth to wet sinuses, bald head to hairy back, whatever. By regulation, drug companies that make positive treatment claims must also include information about the negative side effects. Comedians have a field day pointing out the ridiculous irony that's exposed when the side effects for most of these drugs are worse than the disease itself.

Look more closely, though, and notice how the background images and music are all upbeat and visually appealing. The ad companies know that we humans are visual beings and, all else being equal, our brains will focus on the handsome, smiling couple walking hand-in-hand on the beach and mostly ignore the words of the narrator in the background "... talk to your doctor if you experience any of the following side effects: all of your hair falls out, your extremities turn green or sudden death."

As a thought experiment, imagine the impact of these same commercials if the visuals and voiceover were flipped – i.e., imagine pictures of hair loss, vomiting, gangrene and dead bodies were shown all the while a voiceover plays “... enjoy walking hand-in-hand with your loved one on the beach while your rash disappears and you become richer...” Ok, a bit tongue-in-cheek, but I bet you would agree that the viewing public would be repulsed by the images followed by the collapse of the prescription drug market.

So let's define that example as a form of ***unethical manipulation*** – trying to mask the “truth signal” of adverse side effects inside the “noise” of upbeat messaging.

When I say unethical, I mean ***from the customer's perspective***.

Its persistence in the marketplace implies that the industry itself views their own conduct as highly ethical since all of the drug and advertising companies duplicate that strategy with each new prescription drug that enters the market.

Now let's imagine “not that” – a form of manipulation that is fair, scrupulous and ethical from the customer's perspective.

For that we need to turn to sports and music. Recall any of the following firsts that you experienced:

- The tennis coach adjusting the grip on your racket.
- The baseball coach teaching you how to swing a bat.
- The horse trainer helping you place your foot in the saddle's stirrup.
- The swim instructor holding you the first time you floated on your back.
- The golf pro physically adjusting your stance.
- The guitar teacher placing your fingers on the proper cord.
- The violin teacher adjusting how you hold the bow.

In every one of these examples, and there are plenty more for sure, the instructor (aka vendor, seller or supplier) is physically manipulating the student (aka buyer or customer). And we (or our parents) were paying them to do so!

When we, as a customer, are certain the seller is going to take care of our concerns, then we are perfectly happy being manipulated.

Sometimes it's part of the explicit nature of the transaction, like the coaching examples I cited above. Other times the agreement to be manipulated is more implicit and subtle.

As in the example of a lawyer using persuasive argument to manipulate their client's logical thinking into accepting the terms of an agreement because the lawyer knows it's in the best interest of the client. Or a fiduciary financial planner that manipulates our investments in an attempt to earn higher returns. Or the university professor that manipulates our critical thinking skills so that we may interact with the world more successfully. Or the movie maker who manipulates our reality for a few hours for our own enjoyment.

In each of those examples, we willingly agreed and even expected to be manipulated by the service provider. In the case of the lawyer or the fiduciary, our agreement was in the form of a signed engagement letter.

This is what I call ***ethical manipulation*** – controlling or influencing our customers for the sake of ***taking care of their human and business concerns***.

So whether they say as much or not, our customers always pay us to manipulate them.

Our obligation is to make it ethical. For their sake and ours.

If customer manipulation is solely for your own benefit, then it's unethical. If the manipulation is mutually beneficial, then we claim it's both ethical and obligatory.

As simple as that.

Until next time, keep *Putting the H2H into B2B™*.

- jeff goldfinger

For more on how we might be able to help you increase revenue by restoring the human connection in your sales conversations, [send us a note](#) or [sign up for one of our events](#).