

A BUSINESS CAROL: THREE THEMES FOR THE HOLIDAYS

amenable

Nothing says “Happy Holidays” quite like a healthy dose of existential dread.

The holidays can be an opportunity to reflect on the year’s successes, but for many small business owners, the season is just as likely to invite feelings of inadequacy. Maybe you aren’t hitting your sales goals, maybe you are swamped with the workload, or maybe you’re looking at others in your field and thinking, “Is there really a place for me here?”

You’ve likely felt that tension—the desperate need to maintain momentum with the nagging question of “why?” You might even feel a little haunted by the feeling, but that’s not a bad thing.

If you’re taking the time to read this, you’re already on the right track to meaningful unproductivity. We hope you can sit back, maybe sip some spiced cider, and reflect on how every challenge that small business owners face is an opportunity to step into spaces where larger businesses don’t fit.

If there’s one thing we’ve learned from *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, it’s that you should let ghosts share their message, so with that in mind, here are three ideas you should allow to haunt you in this unproductive moment.



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THE GHOST OF SPENDING PATHS



There are different ethical arguments for rethinking spending habits around the holidays. In recent years, both consumers and scholars have started to question the moral weight of unchecked spending.

If “moral weight” sounds too abstract, think about how you feel as a consumer after each Cyber Week. Odds are you feel at least a little conflicted—you got some great deals, but a flash sale or two tapped a primal impulse to hit “one-click purchase” before you could consider whether you actually wanted it.

This plays into a distinction between “hedonic” and “utilitarian” shopping approaches. In layperson’s terms, that’s the difference between buying things you want versus things you need. If you’re a small business owner, you’re likely catering to the former, touching on the possibility of an emotional attachment.

In a study a few years ago, researchers found that hedonic purchases revolved around brand loyalty and required a longer “courtship” period through tools like social media, whereas utilitarian purchases involved last-minute price comparisons (Li et al., 2020). There are two key points we can take from this study. It’s important to view prospective customers as being on an emotional journey with you, but there’s another leap we can make:

You can prevent the kind of buyer’s remorse we discussed above.

In a cultural moment where there’s widespread skepticism—maybe even cynicism—about where we spend our money, you have the ability to give people a good reason to spend. Holiday flash sales might appeal to the basest hedonic spending impulse, but their immediacy burns out and can actually sour people on a brand.

Think about the subtle resentment you feel each time you look at the set of weights that was “a really good deal.”

If you carefully frame your work as an ongoing relationship with customers, holiday sales can be viewed as the start of that journey, rather than the culmination of it.

You can give people a guilt-free reason to trust your brand.

THE GHOST OF CRITICAL PRESENCE

The philosopher Simone Weil wrote that “Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.” Whether or not you’re religious, the concept is resonant for those of us who struggle to prioritize our focus.

There’s something significant—maybe even sacred—in the fact you are limited. You *must* make decisions about where you turn your attention and where you are present. Large companies don’t have to make the same kinds of decisions. They might pragmatically make decisions about where to expand their service offerings, but they don’t have attention in the way that you do.

The holidays are an opportunity to reflect on what your business considers essential attention, but don’t simplify the word “essential.” This is not just a survival-mode focus. Instead, it’s a way to frame the life-giving distinctives of your business. This will look different in every context, but it might be useful to reflect on the following questions:

- > Are you going to focus on personal communication with customers?
- > What steps might you take to move towards more sustainable practices in your production?
- > Will you give your attention to accessible customer support?

There’s no one-size-fits all model, but attention is all about narrowing your vision to improve your focus.

THE GHOST OF BUSINESS FUTURE

During the holidays, aspirations of longevity may take a back seat to making immediate sales, but what good is a customer if they never come back? You'll often hear talk about brand loyalty, but for small business owners, the barrier is often the business itself.

Think about the gap between who you are and how you market yourself. This may be difficult because it takes an ego to sustain a small business—to believe that it can and should succeed.

For example, if you're a candlemaker, you probably have a spiel about what makes your candles the best, but if you allow yourself to be brutally honest for a few moments, you know that they're just candles.

They might be great candles, but there are lots of places selling great candles.

That leaves you with the reality that you are the most valuable part of your business—the most distinctive feature. If you feel a little squirmy reading that, it's understandable. Admitting this truth can feel bad because we all want to be perceived as humble.

Ego isn't bad, but arrogance can stifle your business so much that it dies.

Lest this sound like feel-good nothingness, think about the implications of taking a good, hard look at yourself as the heart of your business. If you still don't see a mixture of strengths and room for growth, think of it in these terms:

Your value is your values.

During the holidays, you can easily get caught up in the impulse to cater to other people's values, but it's a time to assert your own—a process that goes hand-in-hand with refocusing your attention. If attention is deciding what you will do, values are reinforcing why you do it, so you might consider questions like the following:

Why do I bother with a small business when there are easier things to do?

If economic realities were removed from the equation, what purpose would my business serve?

How would my business change if I wasn't involved?

By clearly articulating to yourself where and why you fit into your business, you can establish your niche more effectively because it will be yours.

CONCLUSION

It's not easy running a small business.

There are probably times you want to quit cold turkey, but that's just the way the (Christmas) cookie crumbles. We'll spare you any more holiday jokes, but if you're approaching burnout this holiday season, try to view it as kindling instead. It's a chance to revitalize your work. You do what you do for a good reason. If you feel like you can't compete with larger businesses, remember this—you never really had to.

If you're interested in guidance as you figure out how to incorporate these ideas, or you're feeling inspired and need a team to make your idea a reality, give us a shout.

REFERENCES

¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0022242920911628>

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