

## THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF STRATEGIC GIFTING

I was once called the G.O.A.T. of gifting by somebody pretty famous. It was exceptionally flattering, yet delightfully ironic: this person didn't know that my whole career incubated in 20 degree weather, knee-deep in barn feces, milking goats.

### **(QUALIFIER IN CASE YOUR READERS DON'T KNOW ME – YOU CAN TAKE THIS OUT IF YOU WANT)**

Before I was an author, before I had a big enough team to call ourselves Ruhlin GROUP, before we launched a high-end gifting program and worked with high-end professionals, savvy small business owners, and sports franchises like the Chicago Cubs?

I milked goats. Know this: nothing is more motivating than pulling teets at 5am before school in the middle of a 47 acre farm. I needed out. But there was no digital revolution yet and the amount of professional opportunities in rural Ohio were less than abundant. So I did what many students do as they search for their proverbial stepping stone. I sold CUTCO knives.

This sales position would lead me to a mentor whose deep heart-of-generosity would set the trajectory of my professional career forever: attorney Paul. Paul seemed to make his money in everything not attorney related. He owned oil wells, gas wells, and had his hands in a half-dozen other businesses in town. Everybody wanted him to be part of what they were doing.

Prior to showing him my Cutco presentation, I researched his clients and found that 99% of them were men: CEOs of insurance companies, banks, oil companies, and they all loved the outdoors. I had the perfect plan. I was going to sell him engraved pocket knives.

So I make the best pitch of my life –I remember literally sweating with enthusiasm-- and he smiles at me and says, "Hey John, what about these paring knives? Can I engrave those?"

Urgh! "Paul, I'll sell you as many paring knives as you want, but why would you give grown men a kitchen item? That seems a little weird."

His response blew my brain apart. "In 35 years in business, the reason why I have more referrals and deal flow than anyone else, to the point where I don't even have to prospect anymore, is because I found out if you take care of the family, everything else takes care of itself."

It was like BOOM! Light bulbs exploding in my brain. The reason Paul was the town patriarch wasn't because he was more special than anybody else. It was because he was more generous, more well-known, and most-liked.

Fast forward millions (and millions) of dollars, countless successes, and twenty years later. Here are the ten things your competitors are screwing up with their strategic gifting.

### 1. THOU SHALT: THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT GIFTING.

Behind every business decision is a human being. Human beings are hard-wired to love (and reciprocate) great acts of kindness. For those of you who may not be bought into being generous for its own sake and demand tangible ROI? Gifting is the ultimate marketing initiative. There is no ad campaign you can

create that will emotionally anchor somebody to you the way a well-thought out gift will. There's just not.

## 2. THOU SHALT: THINK OBSESSIVELY ABOUT THE RECIPIENT

This means doing research. Social media and the digital world make this easy: there's no excuse for you to know nothing about your dream targets. Enroll others in their network to help you. Look for clues in every interaction you have with these VIPs and, for gosh sakes, write things down. Giftologists (as I call my tribe) know that the key to success with strategic gifting is to try harder than everybody else. That's what makes them more memorable than their competition. Duh.

## 3. THOU SHALT: GIFT FEARLESSLY

This means flush out wimpy thoughts like, "I'm not very creative," "I don't have the budget for this," and "I hope I'm not sending the wrong message!" These are all weak thoughts your brain will use to take you out of the game. Do you think Attorney Paul was worried whether or not his clients' wives would be offended when he sent them gorgeous, American-made, hundred dollar paring knives, engraved with their name on it? Please.

## 4. THOU SHALT: GIFT OUT OF APPRECIATION WITH NO EXPECTATIONS

Quid-pro-quo gifters are the worst kind of people. "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine." My back doesn't itch. This type of transactional gifting can have the opposite effect of your intention. So avoid any words in your handwritten note (yes, handwritten notes are a must) that insinuate you are expecting something in return. But where's the ROI in that, you ask? Just trust me.

## 5. THOU SHALT: AVOID CLICHÉ EXECUTION.

The first thing a Giftologist receives when they sign up for my email list (shameless plug) is a TOP 10 list of the world's worst gifts. Every single professional has purchased some of these: food, gift cards, money, and other such emotionless things that your competitors think are brilliant. And while we're attacking the predictable? Gift randomly. Everyone expects something around Christmas. A Giftologist will knock your socks off on a random Tuesday in June.

## 6. THOU SHALT: HAVE A BUDGET.

It doesn't have to be big. In fact, start small. But start. In the absence of a budget, your gifting will be done spontaneously, not systematically. You earmark dollars for other marketing and branding channels don't you? The difference with strategic gifting is that this actually makes you memorable. It's the deep versus wide approach. It doesn't matter what that budget is, by the way. Because...

## 7. THOU SHALT: GIFT PRACTICAL LUXURIES.

Giftologists gift best-in-class. That means the items that your recipient would love-to-have but would probably never buy for themselves. Example: if you have a hundred bucks to spend on a business gift, don't buy your recipient a watch. Gift them a handcrafted, hand-carved, personalized coffee mug. And no, you're not going to put your name or company logo on it, because then your gift is about you.

#### 8. THOU SHALT: GIFT ITEMS OF CONTINUITY.

The best Giftologists are those that avoid “one-off” gifting. Nobody has ever branded themselves by placing one advertisement. Why would this be any different? Memory making –whether it’s to your VIP clients, targets, or your rainmaking employees– requires gifting regularly. For one gift, you send the monogrammed Tumi shoe-holders. The next gift, they get the monogrammed cufflinks (in the same font. Which was chosen by your VIP’s wife via Facebook messenger.)

#### 9. THOU SHALT: FOLLOW-UP.

I once heard a story of a business leader who spent thousands of dollars sending his employees organic meats. The bill was paid but –for one reason or another– the order never went through. By the time this leader discovered that his employees never got their assortment of smoked, grassfed, organic proteins? The company was out of business. Always follow-up with recipients.

#### 10. THOU SHALT: MAKE THE ORDINARY EXTRAORDINARY

One Giftologist (hi Matt!) sends his new employees wine with their names on the bottle. He also includes a handwritten note on the top of the box and an oil stopper so it can be transformed when the wine is gone. Engraving, monogramming, and any other kind of personalization are absolute game-changers. Your goal is to be gifting heirlooms. You are creating marketing pieces that are too good to ever be thrown away. Or you’re not. And you’re like everybody else.

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If you’re not sick of my New King James English yet? Let’s wrap this thing up by bringing it full circle. Attorney Paul wasn’t generous because he was wealthy. He was wealthy because he was generous. You, too, can attract the most (and best) attention by being the most (and best) generous version of yourself.

Be the type of leader that makes remarkable, unforgettable, impressions. Because it’s not the thought that counts. It’s the thoughtful thought that counts.

-John Ruhlin