

# Mrs Fittler's Eggs



There is one experience from my teenage years that left an indelible impression on me - so much so that I can picture the scene as clearly as if it happened yesterday. I draw upon it time and time again in seminars and public speaking classes. If you've read any of my other books, you may even remember the story of Mrs Fittler's eggs.

This never-to-be-forgotten experience in my life not only serves to make a point about customer service, but also dramatically demonstrates to beginning public speakers how powerful mental images can be.

Before I show you how I use the story to paint vivid mental pictures for my audiences, let me tell you what happened that summer when I was 17.

Every January, Mum and Dad would pack up and head for the old Coogee Bay Hotel in Sydney. They would stay up there while Dad did his buying for the next year from a wholesaler name Hoffnung.

The year I turned 17, the set off for Sydney as usual, leaving a manager in charge of the store. They left me there, too, waiting for my chance to make my first executive decision. After all, I reasoned, I had learned a lot about business just by being there and helping around the shop. I was eager to prove I could handle things just as

well as he could - and maybe even better! I was a 17-year-old time bomb, just waiting to explode.

At last my opportunity came. One Tuesday, I was left in charge for a few hours. And every Tuesday for 20 years, Mrs Fittler had come into the store to sell my father a dozen eggs.

Now you must understand that supply and transaction. It was just something Mrs Fittler did. Every Tuesday she came into town and sold Nicholas Malouf a dozen eggs. So there I was, in charge. And in came Mrs Fittler with her eggs. The eggs were fresh but my relationship with Mrs Fittler was rotten. We had just never got on.

I watched her walk in, her face becoming less friendly when she saw that it was that young upstart Doug behind the counter. In that instant I knew what I was going to do. Here was my chance to show who was boss.

She walked up to the counter and held out her package. "Good morning," she said. "Here are your eggs."

Poor Mrs Fittler. She hadn't realised yet that it was Doug Malouf, the hard-nosed businessman and master negotiator, whom she was dealing with this time. We already had plenty of eggs. I was in a position of strength. So I let her have it right between the eyes.

"We don't want your eggs."

She didn't seem to notice the crushing blow I'd dealt her. She just fixed me with one unblinking eye.

"Where's your father?" She said. "He's been buying my eggs for 20 years."

This was my moment of truth. I had the power to make decision and I was going to use it.

"My father is in Sydney ... and I'm the boss. And we don't need your eggs."

She looked at me again without any signs of emotion. She still didn't seem to realise that I'd won.

"Is that your final word?"

"Yes," I said

My cousin Betty in accounts had been watching what was happening. I looked across at her,

expecting to see a new respect on her face for my decisive action. Instead, she was smiling at me. But it wasn't a triumphant sort of smile, it was more .... pitying.

Mrs Fittler walked across to her.

"Betty, I'd like you to make up my account ... and the Cassidy's and the Jarriday's and all the other Fittler accounts. It'll save them a trip. Have you got any idea of what it's like to be 17 and to have just cost your father's business its best five accounts ... plus another six that weren't bad either? Believe me, a wisdom tooth extraction without anaesthetic looks attractive by comparison.

Suicide becomes and genuine option.

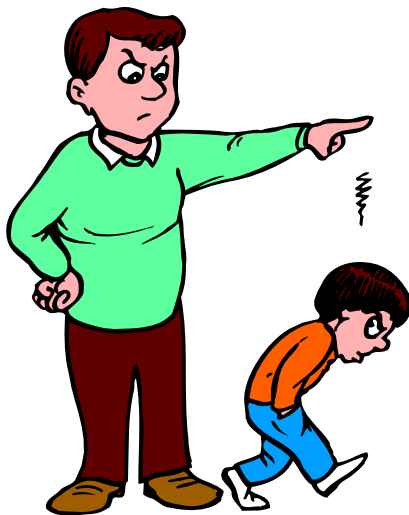
Mrs Fittler clearly didn't understand the laws of supply and demand. She didn't notice that I was in a position of negotiating strength.

She just closed 11 accounts and left the store. Betty was very supportive.

"Just wait till your father gets back," she said. "He'll kill you."

Actually, he didn't kill me. He was very understanding. He discussed the matter calmly, and outlined the options available to me.

"Get the accounts back," he said, "or don't bother to come home."



When I got off my bike and walked up to Mrs Fittler's front door, there she was framed in the doorway. The theme from *High Noon* filled the room behind her. Things didn't look good. I didn't have to open my mouth.

"Your father sent you, didn't he?"

I nodded.

"Let me tell you something, son. I'm coming back to your father's store. But it's only because he's such a good man. I wouldn't want to hurt him because he's got a fool for a son."

What could I say?

"There are the eggs," she said

She was right. The eggs were there. The same eggs she'd brought in three weeks ago. Wrapped in the same newspaper. You didn't need to be able to see them to know they were there. I took a long look at them.

"Well, make up your mind," she said. "Do you want them or not?"

She had me, and she knew it. The master negotiator had been beaten. I picked them up delicately and turned to go. She put her hand on my arm to stop me and handed me another parcel.

"Here's two dozen more for the last two weeks. Make sure your father gets them ... all of them."

When I got home from Mrs Fittler's, my father underlined the lesson I had learned.

"Always remember that the customer is your business," he said, disposing of the eggs. "The moment you stop giving customer service is the moment you don't have a business."

You see, what I hadn't understood was that buying Mrs Fittler's eggs was not a business transaction. The purchase showed that Dad wasn't just a shopkeeper. He was part of the community, giving as well as taking. Those eggs represented the relationship of mutual trust and respect he shared with all his customers.

So that's what I learned. Trust is the basis for prosperity in business. If your customers trust you they won't be one sale wonders. They'll keep coming back. And they'll bring their friends.

What happened to me might be excusable because I was only 17. And it is easy to be wise about it 30 years later. But I still see business people behaving in much the same way in their contacts with their clients.

So remember to keep your eyes open for Mrs Fittler. Sooner or later she's going to walk into your office. And when she does, be sure that you buy her eggs.

I use the story of Mrs Fittler's eggs to show people how they can take an incident from life and make it live for an audience. It's a great story to tell from the front, because it's on me. It doesn't bring race, sex or creed. When I tell it, I point the finger only at myself, and that means the material is *safe*.

Why is this story telling technique so effective? For one thing, when you are drawing from your own experience, you don't need notes or props - you can "chat it". The blueprint of that experience is so strong and so vivid in your own mind that it's easy to bring it to life for an audience.

Aim to build a store of stories from the host of experiences in your life. What lessons have you learned in life? Most of us can remember at least one. Who or what taught you that lesson? Can you turn it into a story by carefully choosing words and images that will speak directly to the cameras in people's minds?

Learn to embellish your story so that your audience can vividly imagine it with you, as I did with the story of Mrs Fittler's eggs. Select words that will appeal to the five senses: sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing.

For example, when retelling the story, instead of simply saying "dozen eggs", I might say something like: "I can still see the eggs, wrapped up in their newspaper on Mrs Fittler's table". What can you picture more easily? "A dozen eggs" or "eggs wrapped up in newspaper on a table"? Those words were chosen specifically to help the listener picture what they looked like.

Here are some more examples from the same story:

*Smell:* "You didn't have to see them to know they were there."

*Hearing:* "The theme from *High Noon* Filled the room behind her."

*Touch:* "She put her hand on my arm to stop me. (Here, become an actor. Actually lay the part of two different people - Mrs Fittler, reaching out to put her hand on your arm. Then turn, glance down at your arm and look at the space opposite you as though you could really see Mrs Fittler

standing there while you mimic the conversation. Dramatise it! Exaggerate it! Be an actor. If you behave as though that person is actually there will you, the audience will be able to "see" them too).

See how it works? You were there. The members of your audience were not. So you have to help them draw those vivid mental pictures.

Don't forget that pacing is a very important part of helping people to picture a scene. Just as variations in pace in a passage of music enhance the enjoyment of the listener, strategic pauses will build suspense and add power to a punchline. For example:

*Betty was very supportive (pause) ... "Just wait till your father gets back," she said. "He'll kill you." (Act it out! Point your finger when you are playing Betty. Let your face express the emotions).*

*Actually, he didn't kill me. He was very understanding. He discussed the matter calmly, and outlined the options available to me (pause) ... "Get the accounts back," he said, "or don't bother to come home."*

Similarly when you are using an emotion event as a basis for your story, you can increase the impact of your words by speaking more quietly or using pauses. Try *increasing* the volume when describing *dramatic* confrontations. In short, experiment with different storytelling techniques, and expressive words and phrases, until you find a style that's right for you.

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