By Calvin Sun

Okay, stop snickering. Although this article discusses country music, it nonetheless can help you. Yes, I know all the stereotyped themes of country music: She leaves him, he cheats on her, his dog dies. And of course, let's throw in Chevy trucks, the Tastee-Freeze, and trailer parks. However, if you get beyond these initial impressions and really think about the lyrics, you can gain some insights into advancing yourself in your career by working better with others. Let's look at 10 such ways.

1 Set and manage expectations

Here she comes a walkin' talkin' true love
Sayin' "I've been lookin' for you, love"
Surprise, your new love has arrived
Out of the blue clear sky

My most important point comes from my most favorite song.

If you're going to surprise people at all, make sure they're pleasantly, rather than unpleasantly surprised. The failure to set and manage expectations contributes more than anything else to customer, co-worker, or supervisor unhappiness. People don't really judge your work by how well you did, or even how well you did compared to the "typical" worker—rather, they judge it in comparison with how well they *expected* you to do. So if you know in advance that a proposed approach carries risk, make sure everyone knows it. If you're going to be late with an assignment, let your boss or client know as soon as possible. Don't make them find out from another source.

2 Don't trust your memory alone

Baby write this down
Take a little note
To remind you in case you didn't know
Tell yourself I love you and I don't want you to go
Write this down

We all have multiple tasks and endless meetings, with all of their associated commitments. Trying to remember them all risks forgetting some of them. Don't take that risk. Write down your tasks, whether it be on your PDA, your computer, or even a plain old piece of paper.

3 Remember that your electronic creations hang around

You can find a chisel,
I can find a stone,
Folks'll be readin' these words
Long after we're gone

You've seen that button on your e-mail screen that says Delete. It really doesn't, you know. Chances are, the recipient(s) of that e-mail still have a copy, and they could have forwarded to others. Even if they didn't, your systems people probably backed up your e-mail already.

For these reasons, think before you send. An ill-advised e-mail can cause not only personal and professional problems, but legal ones as well. If your company is sued, the other side, through the process of discovery, can legally request relevant information you have about them—including e-mail.

This point applies as well to other electronic communications, such as postings to forums or entries on your Facebook account. That stuff stays around and could come back to haunt you. Think before posting.

4 Use the right medium to communicate

Her telephone rang about a quarter to nine,
She heard his voice on the other end of the line.
...
She said, "don't bother coming home
By the time you get here I'll be long gone
There's somebody new, and he sure ain't no rodeo man"
He said, "I'm sorry it's come down to this
There's so much about you that I'm gonna miss
But it's all right baby, if I hurry I can still make Cheyenne
Gotta go now baby if I hurry I can still make Cheyenne"

We've all seen examples involving overkill in e-mail communications. Rather than get up and meet face to face, workers send e-mail back and forth, even if they're in the same office.

Meeting in person can be a nuisance, so communicating by e-mail or telephone can save significant time. However, these alternate forms of communications lack the impact of a face to face meeting. If clear communications is important, and if the matter involves a serious subject, consider meeting face to face. Don't be like those companies that actually notify employees via e-mail that they're being let go. Don't be like an old boss of mine, who left his office for another part of the building, then called us from there to tell us he was taking another job in the company. Doing that is just as bad as the woman who told her cowboy husband not to come home.

5 Think before you speak

Getting' paid by the hour,
And older by the minute
My boss just pushed me over the limit
I'd like to call him something
I think I'll just call it a day

I once heard a great analogy regarding the tongue: it's like the rudder of a ship. Even though the rudder is small compared to the rest of the ship, it has the ability of changing the course of that ship. Similarly, our tongues produce words, and we need to choose them carefully. Once spoken, they can never be taken back. So think before you speak. Is there a more diplomatic or tactful way of saying what you want to say? I'm not telling you that you always have to say things diplomatically—just think about it before you do so.

6 Keep the customer informed

That ain't no way to go,
Girl it just ain't right
Don't you think that I deserve
To hear you say good bye?

Among the victims of the Titanic disaster were Hudson, Bess, and Loraine Allison, the latter being three years old. Only one member of that family, one-year-old Trevor, survived, and that was because of the family nurse, Alice Cleaver. After the collision, while everyone was in the Allison stateroom, she took Trevor and left, not telling the Allisons where she was going. The two of them entered a lifeboat and were later rescued.

Great, you say, Alice Cleaver acted correctly. However, stop and think about the remaining family. Do you think they too got into lifeboats? Of course not. In fact, Mrs. Allison and Loraine turned down such a chance, under the mistaken belief that Trevor was still on board.

Don't treat your customers like mushrooms. Make sure they know what's going on. If they don't know, they can become anxious and upset.

7 Tell customers when a problem is fixed

So often times it happens
That we live our lives in chains
And we never even know we have the key.

You know that old riddle about the tree that falls in a forest? Here's a variant: "If the IT department solves a problem, but the customers don't know the problem is solved, is the problem really solved?"

Don't laugh. That problem your customers reported might be keeping them from doing any work at all. Therefore, knowing that it's been solved allows them to resume working, and hence become productive again more quickly. If they find out three hours later about the fix, they will have mixed emotions, at best. Sure, they're happy that the problem has been solved. However, they're going to be upset that they had to wait to find out. Therefore, once you fix the problem, make sure the customer knows.

8 Have a positive attitude when you communicate

Go heavy on the good and light on the bad,
A hair more happy and a shade less sad.
Turn all that negative down just a tad:
That'd be alright.

Your customers and others who work with you are not interested in what you can't do. They're interested in what you *can* do instead. Saying things positively rather than negatively not only sounds better to the listener, it generally is simpler to express and involves less risk of confusion. So for example, instead of saying, "I can't help you unless you log off," consider saying, "Please log off so that I can help you." Instead of saying, "We can't begin until we get the requirements," consider, "We'll need the requirements before we begin." The way you express yourself affects the way others perceive you. Be the partner and not the roadblock.

9 Don't forget that lost customers are difficult to get back

Love is like the Mississippi
When she's gone she's gone

Finding a new customer takes five to six times the effort and expense of gaining new business from an existing customer. What's worse, a customer who has a bad experience will tell 15 to 20 other people about that experience. So if your service is sufficiently bad to drive that customer away, not only must you find another to replace that lost customer, your job will be harder because of the bad press you may have gotten. If you're an internal support group, don't think you're exempt. If enough of your internal customers become unhappy with your group, they might consider outsourcing you.

10 Do what's right for the customer

I just climbed out of a cottonwood tree
I was runnin' from some honeybees
Drip dryin' in the summer breeze
After jumpin' into Calico Creek
I was walkin' down an old dirt road
Past a field of hay that had just been mowed
Man I wish you'd just left me alone
I was almost home.

The narrator of the song had come across a homeless man, asleep on the street during a wintry blizzard and subzero temperatures. When the narrator shakes the man, the latter awakes and protests because he was content just to freeze to death.

3

You've doubtless heard the saying "The customer is always right." I respectfully disagree, and say instead that one must always do what's right for the customer. Is that customer an action that can cause problems for others in the company or for the system? If so, you may have to be politely assertive, and explain why that action is inappropriate. Because you know more about the system than the customer, presumably, you have a responsibility to speak up in this way.

The key, though, is to disagree without being disagreeable. Can you find an alternate method of achieving the customer's objectives, while maintaining system integrity? Can you break the customer request into smaller pieces or do it at a different time? By thinking flexibly, you might be able to develop a solution that satisfies the customer.

Songs and associated performers

1. "Blue Clear Sky," George Strait

2. "Write This Down," George Strait

3. Id. (same as the previous one)

4. "I Can Still Make Cheyenne," George Strait

5. "It's Five O'Clock Somewhere," Alan Jackson and Jimmy Buffett

6. "That Ain't No Way to Go," Brooks and Dunn

7. "Already Gone," the Eagles

8. "That'd Be All Right," Alan Jackson

9. "Love Is Like the Mississippi," Brooks and Dunn

10. "Almost Home," Craig Morgan

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