

# Affection: The Antidote for Defection

## Creating Customer Nurturing Experiences

By Jim Cecil

**Valentines Day.** What a rare day in many parts of the world to say Thank-You to your best customers, best friends and those you love the most. My friend, Bob Valentine, now retired President of Valco Graphics in Tukwila, Washington, has a natural way of saying Thank You.

Each year, as a printing firm, he produces an elegant valentine greeting and sends it to his best customers with a note that says, "With a name like mine and customers like you, every day really is Valentines Day."

OK. Sure, it's easy enough for a guy with a name like Valentine, but how do you express the appreciation, respect and affection you feel to your best customers? It's easier than you might imagine. All it takes is an intention to mold stronger ties with key individuals — a willing administrative assistant to help with the details like memory and production, and making the time and patience to sit down and write a few simple letters.

Research has shown that frequent contact between key executives of key customers is the hallmark of a healthy and growing business relationship and it seems to prove true across all cultures and all ethnic customs. As time grows progressively scarcer, finding the opportunity to make frequent, positive, intelligent and personal interactions (experiences) with even your top 20 customers is tough.

It's one of those critical but frequently postponed responsibilities of every

customer-focused executive. I advise our clients to plan a minimum of nine 'relationship-building touches', evenly spaced over a period of from two years to life to ensure that the fundamentals of relationship management are covered.

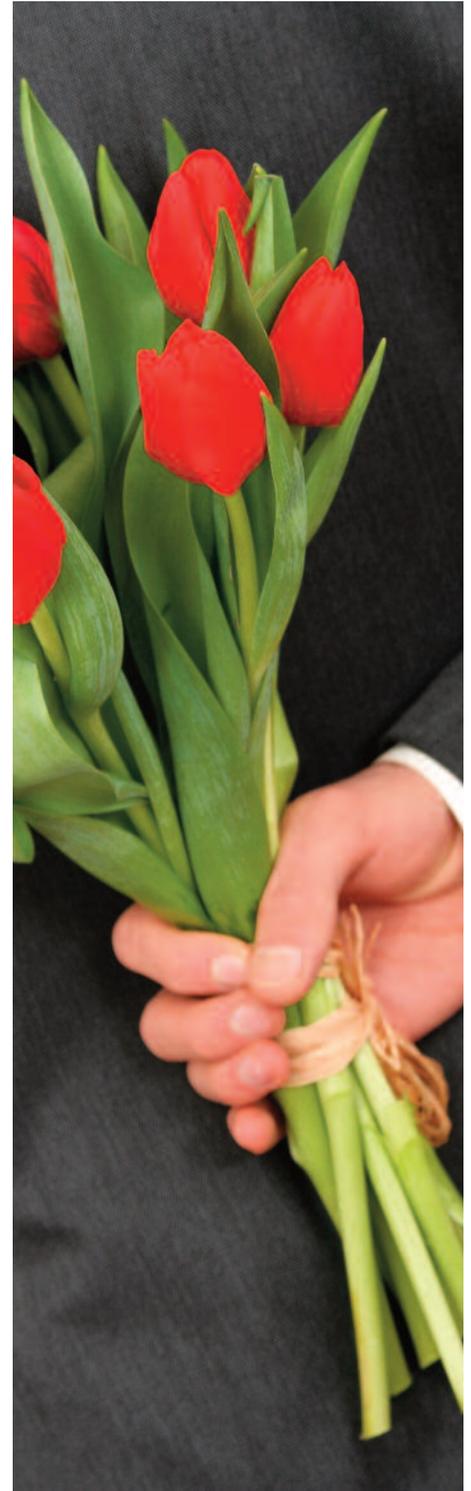
While Valentines Day is a wonderfully appropriate time to begin, nurturing touches are welcome all year round. I can think of at least nine letters that every executive could sign. Start with a Thank You letter and then at about 60-day intervals, send the following:

- \* A Customer Satisfaction Inquiry
- \* An Article of Interest
- \* Some New Service Opinion/Preview
- \* An Invitation to Event
- \* An Executive Book Summary Gift
- \* Your 21 Best Tips
- \* A Referral Offer to Help
- \* Your Core Values

Like a gentle, spring shower, such contacts reinforce and articulate your values, your market position and your unique differentiation in an intelligent and respectful manner.

One that says you consider them to be an "A" customer. Begin today. Start with a list naming the key person in each of your 20 best customers.

**Say Thank You.** In your own words — tell the person how much this business relationship means to you personally and invite a dialogue on ways to even strengthen the bond.



**Say How'm I Doin?** It's not necessary to send a massive customer opinion survey. Just a sincere letter that tells them why you are asking the five questions you'd like addressed. You pick the questions — what do you really want to know? Make the scoring simple as 1 – 5 or A, B or C. Assure the reader you will personally review and act on any comments they make.

**Say What do you think?** Ask their opinion about products or services before you change or add them. They'll tell you the truth and will usually become your earliest adopters.

**Say I thought about you today.** Send a relevant, visionary book or even an executive summary as a gift. A simple, brief note that says "I read this the other day and thought about you (or our customers) and wanted you to have a copy."

**Say How can I help?** Offer to refer or introduce them to your contacts. Ask them to profile an "A" prospect from their perspective and allow you to suggest appropriate introductions. A basic law of the harvest suggests you feed before you reap and the law of reciprocity almost guarantees the favor will be returned.

**Say Have you seen this?** Stay on the lookout for articles, books, or even individual press mentions. (Google Alerts) A brief note attached to the article says volumes in a short space. It's a relevant touch that reminds without pressure.

**Say Come Join Us!** Invite your top 20 to an event at least once a year. It can be an personal and individual appreciation luncheon, a new product launch, an introduction to a VIP event or virtually any reason to ask people to join you and to feed them. It's an ancient and proven ritual that fuses people together.

**Say Here's 21 Tips.** Every firm has developed, over time, their own unique compendium of great tips, tricks, solutions, ideas, clues to solving major problems for their customers. Have a list of these nuggets compiled, edited and printed. They make a useful, intelligent and appreciated gift that keeps you in front of their mind often.

**Say We're here for you.** Find unique ways to express your values without your having to say them about yourself. I found a great



little book called "Whatever It Takes," ([www.compendiuminc.com](http://www.compendiuminc.com)) and in 128 pages, there are over 300 powerful quotations on the topic of the simple value of going the extra mile. Naturally, as the sender, you get attached to the values enclosed and with every reading, you reinforce on their mind one of your key attitudes about your relationship — doing whatever it takes.

While every day is rarely Valentines Day, every day our key customers need tangible reminders that we care and that we take them seriously. Like an ardent suitor, a campaign of personalized contacts will allow you to pursue, persist and inspire customer loyalty with professional and appropriate persistence.

Make this Valentines Day the day you commit to intentionally touching at least your top 20 customers, your most valued employees and even your key suppliers and alliances, and make those contacts ones that matter. If words fail you, you can find letters like these and many more at [www.nurturemarketing.com](http://www.nurturemarketing.com)



*Jim Cecil consults marketing teams on customer nurturing. For a free electronic copy of his booklet, A Cure for the Common Cold Call, visit [www.nurturemarketing.com](http://www.nurturemarketing.com) or 425-641-3333.*