

ISSUE 23

Compliments of Your Name Here

# BUSINESS

## IN ACTION

### THE BEST E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS

The leading options of 2026

PG. 04

### THE BUSINESS OF ART

PG. 16

### IN TOUCH WITH THE CONSUMER

PG. 32



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## Front of Tear Out Card 1



### Eight Strategies for Better Public Speaking

Save the advice on this card to become the best communicator you can be.



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## Back of Tear Out Card 1

**01**

**Consider your audience.** What do they need to hear? Focus on their needs and attitudes toward the topic.

**02**

**Open strong.** Start with a story or interesting statistic to capture attention immediately.

**03**

**Connect with your audience.** Involve your attendees by asking questions and inviting them to envision what you are saying.

**04**

**Be strategic with your word choice.** Choose effective language geared toward your listeners.

**05**

**Remember the goals of your communication.** Your speech should be informative, emotive, and actionable.

**06**

**Stay in the moment.** Remind yourself how much value you bring to the table.

**07**

**Seek responses.** Engage with the audience by requesting feedback about what you presented.

**08**

**Keep in mind that it takes time.** Be patient with yourself, and practice your skills.





Dear Bill and Judy,

Among all the essential factors to business success, a key one not to undervalue is connecting to your audience on a meaningful level. This issue of Business in Action offers ways to do so with a profile of a company that's an old pro at it, a means for creating raving fans, and tips for handling disgruntled customers.

Collin Street Bakery is known across the globe for producing a delicious holiday staple: fruitcake. Read about how the brand has stayed relevant since the nineteenth century, from prioritizing fresh ingredients to expanding its product line to selling wholesale.

Acquiring clients doesn't mean much if you can't keep them, and an increasingly important tool for going about it is loyalty programs. Discover how they came about, how they work, and why you should strongly consider one for your enterprise.

Of course, a primary reason that companies lose clients is because they're simply unhappy. Inside, an expert offers advice for understanding the problem as a whole and dealing with their frustrations gracefully.

How will you earn loyalty from your clients with the end of 2025 approaching? As always, it's a pleasure to send you this magazine.

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# BUSINESS

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# AI Tools to Boost Your Business

Revolutionize your processes with programs and software  
driven by artificial intelligence. BY ALLISON GOMES

**AI has transformed technology**  
interaction, moving from simple  
tasks to powerful business  
productivity tools. While numerous  
solutions exist, here are four top  
options to enhance workflow  
and operational efficiency.

► ChatGPT

One of the most popular AI programs,  
ChatGPT employs a conversational  
interface to generate humanlike  
text, ranging from articles to  
code. By inputting prompts, you  
can receive information and  
suggestions, enabling you to  
explore topics, seek advice, and  
solve problems. The model also  
refines its responses based on  
continued interaction to provide  
more tailored and relevant outputs.

For more info, visit [chatgpt.com](http://chatgpt.com)

► Lumen5

Lumen5 simplifies video creation  
for marketing by transforming  
blog posts into engaging content  
for websites, social media, and  
more. Simply provide the link, and  
the software will extract text  
and images, automatically  
matching them with stock visuals  
and timing them to reading speed.  
You can then customize the  
resulting video to your liking.

For more info, visit [lumen5.com](http://lumen5.com)



Test out one or  
more of these AI  
tools to determine  
if your business's  
current workflows or  
operational processes  
could benefit from  
utilizing them.

► Looka

Looka streamlines logo creation,  
allowing you to craft a brand  
identity without design expertise.  
Using your business details and  
selection of inspirational logos,  
colors, and symbols, the software  
will create dozens of options,  
which you can further personalize.  
Once you finalize your logo, you  
can purchase it outright or  
subscribe to a brand kit that  
provides access to tools for creating  
cohesive marketing materials.

For more info, visit [looka.com](http://looka.com)

► Tidio

Tidio enhances customer  
service with AI-powered chats—  
which offer canned responses  
and a virtual assistant your  
employees can use to deliver  
high-quality responses—and  
chatbots that can give automated  
answers to common customer  
queries, reducing strain on your  
support team. Plus, the platform  
provides visitor insights so you  
can track sources, locations,  
and website activity to improve  
customer engagement.

For more info, visit [tidio.com](http://tidio.com)



# THE BEST E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS

Which service is ideal for a budding digital shop, factoring in pricing, features, customization, and more?

BY **ANDRE RIOS**  
PHOTOGRAPHY **AS NOTED**



GETTY IMAGES



**A**ccording to **EMARKETER** research, revenue from online shopping is projected to hit \$7.9 trillion by 2027, an astounding figure you may be eager to claim your share of. But in order to do so, you'll need to adopt an essential tool of the trade: an e-commerce platform. This digital asset will equip you to build and customize a virtual store, manage your inventory, accept secure payments, and even keep tabs on your customer base. Here are four top options to consider, any of which could help you achieve your true earning potential.

### Square Online

Square's smartphone and tablet accoutrements—especially its ubiquitous white and square-shaped card reader—were once all the rage at farmers markets and food trucks aplenty. And while tap to pay has somewhat diminished in demand, the company's e-commerce platform, known as Square Online, remains a common implement of numerous online shops. In fact, its website claims that utilizing the service can lead to a whopping 97 percent increase in sales. More than just a payment tool, it furnishes you with

all you need to create a robust and immersive virtual store; thanks to its simple, intuitive customization options and helpful video tutorials, you can go live within minutes of initiating your plan.

The basic version of Square Online, requiring no monthly fee, boasts ample tools for easing store setup and management, including integrations with social media for making cross-platform sales, compatibility with Square's point-of-service system for processing and tracking live transactions, and SEO tools that can attract more website traffic. However, be aware that despite the "free" label, the company will still claim 2.9 percent plus 30¢ on every transaction. Then again, this means that you *only* pay if you sell—an appealing perk for upstart ventures.

You can also upgrade to Plus mode for an additional \$29 a month to utilize all the prior elements plus more customer-friendly ones, the ability to customize your site to your brand, and the option to set up patron loyalty programs. And if you enroll in the Premium plan for \$79 monthly, you'll unlock a slightly lower transaction fee at 2.6 percent



and even more perks, the most noteworthy being 24/7 customer support for peace of mind as you craft and captain your new enterprise.

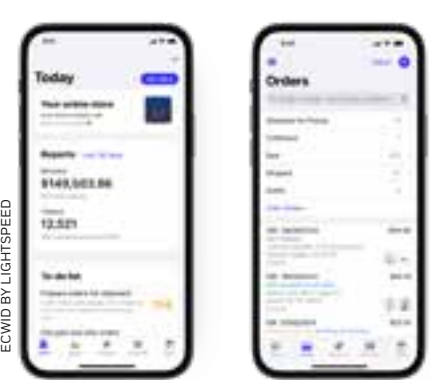


For more info, visit [squareup.com/online-store](https://squareup.com/online-store)

### Ecwid by Lightspeed

Named for a shortened version of "e-commerce widget," this service may be ideal for those who already have a successful brick-and-mortar, pop-up, or social media-based business due to how it incorporates seamlessly with multichannel shops.

Although its site-customization tools fall short of Square Online's for some, it will allow you to embed your virtual store on an existing website and various social media pages—popular examples of such integrations include Squarespace websites and Instagram, each of which you can manage from Ecwid's



centralized inventory platform. Additionally, you can optimize it for a mobile layout to welcome smartphone shoppers into your store.

Many clients have particularly enjoyed Ecwid's organization features, including task reminders and product categorization, that ease the inventory process and allow them to focus on other store-management responsibilities. You can even review customer-behavior analytics and craft email campaigns to help foster repeat business. Do you wish to do more with your platform? Look to the site's in-house coding and design services, which can assist you in optimizing your third-party integrations. Better yet, if you're seeking to polish your business skills, hop over to Ecwid Academy for topical lessons.





Begin with the Starter plan for only \$5 a month (no transaction fees to be found) to build a basic store, or opt for one of the three higher tiers for advanced features. The Unlimited plan earns especially high marks since it allows users to create a multipage website with infinite product slots, SEO features like a blog, and more.



For more info, visit [ecwid.com](https://ecwid.com)

## Wix eCommerce

This product offers merchants robust and versatile solutions for simplifying online-business leadership, enabling business owners to sell effortlessly across multiple channels. You can accept transactions in person with a point-of-sale system, on a branded online store, via a mobile app, and through direct integrations with social media sites as well as on other popular online marketplaces. What's more, this system eases management of all your operations, from payment processing and order fulfillment to shipment of goods and analytics review.

In addition, Wix eCommerce utilizes AI to present highly relevant products to browsing customers, craft segmented



email campaigns, create custom social-media marketing programs to increase conversion rates, and more. For instance, it can generate blog content that the company website claims can boost organic traffic by 71 percent on average. In fact, the platform is so advanced that it guarantees 99.99 percent uptime and high-performance stability, even during peak sales times. Just as cutting-edge is its unparalleled drag-and-drop design editor, which will allow you to build a personalized storefront without writing a single line of code. Whether using one of the hundreds of fully customizable templates or designing your own site, you can create a shop that is compatible with your company's brand identity without breaking a sweat.

Merchants can also expand their businesses beyond selling products—such as by booking service consultations, hosting events, and managing customer memberships—all within Wix eCommerce's comprehensive environment. Getting started is as simple as creating a free account and building your online store; however, once you launch it and begin taking payments, you will need to switch to one of the four paid options. Try the Business tier for \$36 monthly, for instance, and you can enjoy enlarged storage space, additional collaborator possibilities, and much more.



For more info, visit [wix.com/ecommerce](https://wix.com/ecommerce)

## Zoho Commerce

Billed as “a beginner's playground and an expert's home turf,” this service provides a broad range of benefits for just about any online seller. Its comprehensive software is designed to simplify setup—its website asserts that you can go live in just five steps—and it welcomes customization to your heart's content. The generous standard features, like straightforward

According to **EMARKETER** research, revenue from online shopping is projected to hit **\$7.9 trillion** by 2027, an astounding figure you may be eager to claim your share of.

order tracking and inventory management, can elevate just about any e-commerce business, but the platform is also well regarded for its smooth integration with other products. Consider those within Zoho's suite, including its Books accounting functions, CRM sales management and analytics, and Desk customer-support manager, as well as Mailchimp's marketing tools.

Yet even if you choose not to expand into these full perks, you can still enjoy numerous benefits through Zoho Commerce. Some standouts to note are price lists you can generate for your customers, template-swap tools that ease shop redesign, and product specifications that showcase enticing details (e.g., 100 percent all-natural cotton) to buyers.

To begin, book a personalized demo and fourteen-day free trial, after which you can select the proper plan

for your business's size, number of employees, budget, necessary tools, and more. Larger-scale enterprises can even hire Zoho Commerce to build a custom operation. The platform takes no transaction fees and its membership fees are competitive across the board, making this one of the most cost-effective e-commerce services out there.



For more info, visit [zoho.com/commerce](https://zoho.com/commerce)

Take  
Action

Determine the goals and budget for your digital store, then consider which of these products may provide the benefits you need.



# BUILDING A FRUITCAKE EMPIRE

Hayden Crawford, a partner in Collin Street Bakery, discusses the secrets of his company's longtime success, including what makes its world-famous fruitcakes so sought-after and the next chapter of its growth.

INTERVIEW WITH **HAYDEN CRAWFORD**  
BY **MATTHEW BRADY**  
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF **COLLIN STREET BAKERY**



**My business partner's family, the McNutts, headed a group that bought it from them in the 1940s. In 1951, after many years in the regional bread business, the company moved out of that increasingly competitive industry and shifted its attention to fruitcake. The rest is history.**

## How did Collin Street Bakery begin?

August Weidmann, a German immigrant who settled in Corsicana, Texas, founded it as a small bread and pastry bakery in 1896. A few years later, a local entrepreneur partnered with him, and they soon moved it to another location with a second-floor hotel and bigger production facility.

My business partner's family, the McNutts, headed a group that bought it from them in the 1940s. In 1951, after many years in the regional bread business, the company moved out of that increasingly competitive industry and shifted its attention to fruitcake. The rest is history.

## How did your fruitcakes become so popular?

In the 1890s, Corsicana became the largest oil producer in the world, enticing people and businesses to pour in. Among our hotel's visitors were celebrities such as John Ringling, who bought our fruitcakes and gave them out as gifts when he traveled with his circus. Those recipients then contacted us for more, and our mail-order business—one of the first in the country—began, allowing people to order from practically anywhere in the world.





That was also possible because of the fruitcake itself: it's dense, so it would last much longer than other foods at the time. We could even ship the product overseas; despite taking weeks, it'd still be fresh and tasty when it arrived.

### Johnny Carson famously joked about fruitcake. What kind of effect did that have?

The jokes and skits on his show in the 1980s brought in an era of fruitcake negativity. Before then, Collin Street Bakery had a very strong corporate business. But in the years following, we saw such sales continually decline—no doubt because these companies were concerned about how their gift might be perceived.

Here's how bad it got: even perception was going against us. We'd ask people, "Do you like fruitcake?" and most would say no. But when we asked the same folks whether they had ever tasted it, the answer would *also* be no. That stigma lasted for years. Luckily, with it a few generations behind us, corporate sales have since returned.

### What makes your fruitcakes so special?

Almost a third of every one we produce is pecans, and the remainder is a delicious medley of glacé fruits, including

Here's how bad it got: even perception was going against us. We'd ask people, "Do you like fruitcake?" and most would say no. But when we asked the same folks whether they had ever tasted it, the answer would *also* be no.

pineapple, cherries, raisins, and papaya, that are bound together by a secret batter moistened with locally harvested clover and wildflower honey. In addition, each DeLuxe Fruitcake—our original version—is hand decorated, making them slightly different and one of a kind.

### Has the original recipe ever changed?

Yes, slightly. Gus's original recipe called for walnuts since they were abundant in Germany. But when he arrived in Corsicana, he no doubt realized that there were few (if any) walnuts around but plenty of pecans, so he used them instead. Also, back in the seventies, we switched from butter to margarine because the former tended to go bad on those long transatlantic trips. However, since travel is light years more

efficient today, we're moving back to butter.

Finally, there's the matter of citron. For generations, bakers and homemakers would use it in small amounts as a balance to sugar; without it, a cake can taste *too* sweet. It turned out, though, that some of our suppliers were having trouble getting actual citron and replaced it with specially treated turnips, which delivered a similar taste and texture for a fraction of the price. When we discovered this, we immediately sought a piquant-tasting alternative and found it in papaya, something we were already growing at our farms in Costa Rica.

### How many stores do you have?

We have two in Corsicana: the original bakeshop in historic downtown and the newer location on its outskirts on I-45. Initially, some of our execs worried



that building the latter would cannibalize the former's sales since it would be just ten minutes away in the same town, but they are both very popular with a particular audience. Some people like the convenience and beauty of our newer I-45 location, while others still prefer the ambience and coziness of the downtown one. Another interesting note about the original store: unlike almost all the rest of corporate America, we maintain

our own call center, bringing in sixty to eighty locals during the holiday season to answer phones and help take orders.

We also have a bakeshop on I-35 in Waco, just north of Baylor University; it's our largest store at around 9,000 square feet. And on I-20 in Lindale, near Tyler, we have our fourth location, featuring gorgeous architecture with a smaller, more relaxed footprint.



**You started creating different versions of your fruitcake. How did that help your business?**

For years, we only offered the DeLuxe, our classic Christmas cake. But the cost of the skilled manpower needed to efficiently hand-decorate it with concentric rings of pecans and carefully placed fruit kept getting more and more expensive. So we recently created our Classic Fruitcake, which is the exact same recipe with a generous helping of pecans just sprinkled across the top. The labor savings are significant, allowing us to sell this cake at a more affordable cost.

**How in demand are Collin Street Bakery's fruitcakes today?**

We produce about a million pounds per year and deliver them to all fifty states and around 190 countries—almost every single nation you can ship into. For many people, it has become a tradition through multiple generations. We even published a book of customer testimonials about how our DeLuxe Fruitcake or company in general has positively affected their families and holiday traditions.

We certainly have some amazing stories. A guy who worked at the South Pole



**We produce about a million pounds per year and deliver them to all fifty states and around 190 countries—almost every single nation you can ship into.**

ordered a fruitcake to help his team celebrate the holidays. A Kilimanjaro climber arranged for his to be delivered up the side of the mountain by Sherpa. Another customer told us he smuggled one through the Berlin Wall. We count celebrities as customers, too, including Hall of Fame pitcher

Nolan Ryan, singer Lyle Lovett, Vanna White, and Chuck Norris.

**You're also in wholesale. Tell us about that branch of your business:**

Funny enough, it was my father—who was the bakery's marketing

guru for years—who came up with the tagline “Never sold in stores” during fruitcake’s heyday. We made it exclusive so you could only buy one of our cakes if you shopped directly with us. Now, with the internet as ubiquitous as it is and reseller shops seemingly appearing on every corner, we offer multiple ways you can find our products, including in your favorite grocery store during the holidays as well as on Amazon’s, Costco’s, and Walmart’s websites.

**What's next for Collin Street Bakery?**

I’m excited to say that we’ve started rolling out our foods into grocery stores across the country! We also got interesting feedback from bicyclists, who told us they eat our fruitcake because it’s a calorie-dense product that gives them long-lasting energy; based on this input, we created energy bars. Overall, though, we’re still a nearly 130-year-old family business baking fruitcake that means so much to so many. That’s why we love coming to work every day. ■

For more info, visit [collinstreet.com](http://collinstreet.com)



# THE BUSINESS OF ART

Wisconsin-based scratchboard artist Melissa Helene discusses her path to entrepreneurship, quest to help other creatives navigate it, and ever-expanding business.

INTERVIEW WITH **MELISSA HELENE**  
BY **MATTHEW BRADY**

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## **WALK US DOWN YOUR PATH TO BECOMING AN ARTIST:**

I grew up creating art—I was always drawing and took every art class available in junior high and high school. In college, I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I *did* know that I didn't want to be a "starving artist" or an art teacher. So I got my degree in sociology with a minor in youth studies and worked in the nonprofit realm for several years after graduating.

However, I was regularly looking for something different. Since I was already making graphite and charcoal drawings and

oil paintings as a hobby, I started planning to do art full-time. Soon after, I discovered scratchboard, an art form where you carve images into Masonite boards composed of a smooth white clay base with a black ink overlay. Something immediately clicked: I'm a very type A person, which made the medium's attention to detail very appealing to me. I founded Melissa Helene Fine Arts and Photography soon after in 2015.

## **WERE YOU ALWAYS EAGER TO START A BUSINESS?**

Yes. Before I did, I was actively trying to sell my art more. At one festival, I confided







to some fellow artists that I was thinking of launching a full-time art business, and they encouraged me. I decided to move forward with it that same weekend. In retrospect, it was a very bold move; I didn't have any relevant knowledge or even a job at the time. But it worked out.

**WHO ELSE SUPPORTED YOU ALONG THE WAY?**

My parents were hugely supportive and integral to me being able to start my business. I literally couldn't have done it without them—I was still on their health insurance! My dad has been the workhorse behind my success for a long time, helping me figure out booth displays and how to hang and frame items. Plus, both of my parents are salespeople

by trade. My mom in particular loves to actively talk to people and sell, and she's taught me how to get better at landing the sale in different scenarios, such as when someone's got a work in their hands. However, we definitely have different approaches when we're at art festivals. As the mother of the artist, she can get away with saying things about my work that I wouldn't dare utter. *[Laughs]*

**HOW DID YOU EVENTUALLY DEVELOP YOUR BUSINESS ACUMEN?**

At that festival I mentioned, a few of my artist friends were hustling to sell their works. I peppered one with business questions, but she couldn't answer most of them. I quickly

discovered that many working artists don't have that sort of background; the majority are just flying by the seat of their pants. They don't even keep records, such as receipts, or track their income or expenses throughout the year. I was shocked.

Ultimately, I went out on my own to learn business, essentially through lots of great resources and online



mentors—I read blogs, listened to podcasts, and took business courses. However, none of them applied directly to being an artist. For example, online entrepreneurs focused primarily on coaching or selling other products. I had to do a lot of cherry-picking through the information to figure out how I could incorporate proven strategies into my business. I found that very exciting,

and I still do everything I can to continue learning, especially keeping up with trends in social media.

**YOU ALSO TEACH OTHER ARTISTS ABOUT HOW TO BE BUSINESSPEOPLE. WOULD YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?**

I wanted to start helping other artists because I think everyone could

“My mom in particular loves to actively talk to people and sell, and she's taught me how to get better at landing the sale in different scenarios, such as when someone's got a work in their hands.





benefit from approaching their art as a business. If you want to do it just for the love of the craft, go for it. But too many are making things so much harder for themselves by not having anything in place to analyze what’s working and what’s not. The way that I’ve always approached my business from day one is that it *is* a business and I need to make my living from it. That’s why, unlike most artists, I don’t get super attached to my pieces or have any issues selling what I’m making—after all, it’s the reason I’m making it.

**WITH YOU FOCUSING SO MUCH ATTENTION ON GROWING YOUR BUSINESS, WHAT DO YOU GET FROM CONTINUING TO ATTEND FESTIVALS?**

From an artistic standpoint, I get almost nothing. I’m there purely for business. You can really tap out a market very quickly if you’re only locally focused, especially in my case since I live in a tiny town in Wisconsin. Festivals get my work in front of huge crowds; tens of thousands of people may be walking through. And even though only a small percentage of those are going to see my pieces and an even *smaller* percentage will connect with them, it’s well worth it.

Plus, while there are many other ways I could choose to get exposure for my work, I’ve found art festivals to be the most



efficient. I have a nice following on social media and have sold a little there, but I haven’t quite cracked the code on it yet. So at least 70 percent of my business comes from festivals, where I get to network and meet other artists and art show directors, interactions that lead to different types of opportunities. For example, I’m using these events to promote my online course, which I’m trying to build up as well.

My goal eventually would be to sell more via my website and social media and attend fewer festivals as my business grows. Right now, though, I’m still doing anywhere from ten to fifteen a year. That may not sound like a lot, but it is when you’re selling mostly original artwork.

**YOU’VE BEEN RUNNING YOUR BUSINESS FOR A DECADE. HOW DOES THAT MAKE YOU FEEL?**

It’s crazy. My life has changed so much during that time, like getting married and having our kid. But starting my business was absolutely the right choice since it perfectly merges the two parts of my personality: orderly and creative. That said, being an artist isn’t easy, and trying to make a business out of being an artist is even harder. I’m proud of myself for doing that. ■

For more info, visit [melissahelene.com](http://melissahelene.com)





# The Benefits of a Loyalty Program

Through turning consumers into loyal fans, this strategy can help create lasting customer relationships and, as a result, increase revenue.

BY ALLISON GOMES







As essential as attracting new clients is to growing a company, long-term success relies on retaining them. One of the most effective ways to do so is through a well-designed loyalty program, a tool that not only encourages repeat business but can also enhance your brand reputation and bottom line. While the concept has changed over time, the goal remains the same—keeping customers engaged and coming back for more.

### → A BRIEF HISTORY

Loyalty programs can be traced back to either ancient Egypt or the nineteenth century, depending on how you define them. During the former, people received tokens based on their work completed and class status, which they could then exchange for bread, beer, and more. However, since Egypt lacked a fiat currency, some scholars argue that these pieces functioned more like money than a true loyalty program.

Fast-forward to the nineteenth century, and you see perhaps *the* real origin story. American retailers began giving customers copper tokens when they made a purchase, which they could redeem for

discounts on future items. By the end of the 1800s, the concept had further evolved, with companies introducing trading stamps, checks, tickets, certificates, and other collectibles that people could amass and turn in for products.

Then in 1981, the concept of the loyalty program changed dramatically thanks to the launch of American Airlines' AAdvantage frequent flyer program, the first of its kind to reward customers with miles redeemable for future flights. This groundbreaking approach revolutionized the way businesses handled retention and ultimately led to the widespread adoption of points-based systems across various industries, from hospitality to retail. Today, loyalty

programs have evolved further with digital integration, personalized rewards, and data-driven insights, making them more effective than ever.

### → HOW AND WHY IT WORKS

The primary value of a loyalty program is its ability to enhance customer retention. It's widely known that acquiring a new client is more expensive than keeping an existing one, requiring up to five to seven times the cost. So by incentivizing repeat purchases, you can boost customer lifetime value to generate more profit from each person. Additionally, a loyalty program can help create emotional connections with patrons if they enjoy the benefits it provides, fostering a sense



of exclusivity and belonging. In turn, this satisfaction can lead to more referrals for your business, organically expanding your clientele.

Beyond retention, these programs often yield valuable consumer data. By tracking behavior, you can personalize your business's marketing efforts, tailor your product offerings, and even predict future purchasing trends. This can lead to better decision-making and more effective engagement strategies.

### → IMPLEMENTING A PROGRAM

To begin this journey, you need to carefully plan your approach to ensure that it benefits both your company and your consumers. The first step is to set a clear goal—whether it's increasing repeat purchases, growing your customer base, or boosting brand engagement. Understanding what success looks like will help you determine the best type of program and how to measure its effectiveness. Here are some top ones to consider:

- **Points system:** Shoppers accumulate points with each purchase, which can be redeemed for discounts, freebies, or exclusive offers.



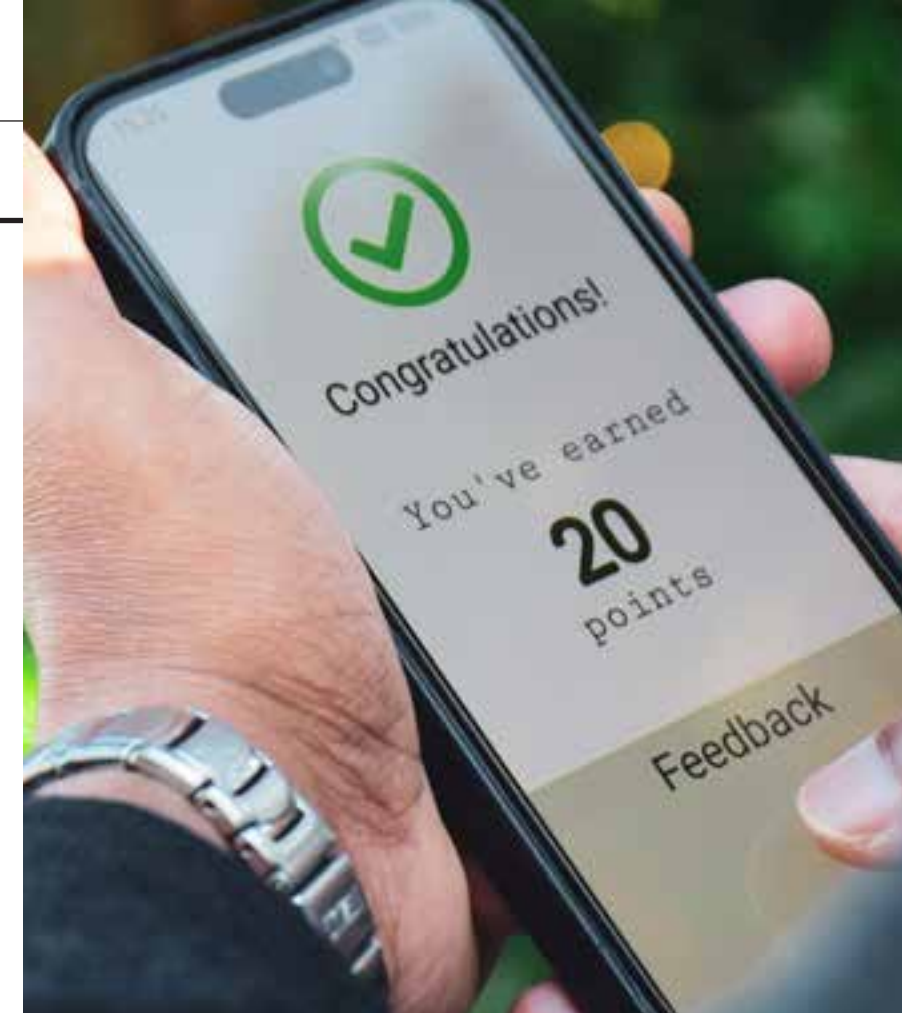
- **Punch cards:** Repeat visits or purchases are tracked—digitally or on paper—to allow patrons to earn a free or discounted item after reaching a set milestone.
- **Tiered programs:** Staggered loyalty levels unlock progressively better perks, encouraging higher spending and rewarding long-term clients with exclusive benefits.
- **Subscriptions:** A paid membership grants access to special privileges, such as free shipping, discounts, or even VIP experiences, creating a steady revenue stream while boosting customer retention.
- **Referral programs:** People earn rewards for bringing in new business, enabling you to leverage word-of-mouth marketing to reduce acquisition costs and strengthen brand advocacy.

### Take Action

Review the different types of loyalty programs, and determine which one could work for your business to improve customer retention.

When choosing a program, remember that simplicity is key. If your customers find it difficult to understand how to earn or redeem rewards, they may lose interest and take their business elsewhere. A straightforward system with clearly defined rules, such as receiving a specific number of points for every \$10 spent, makes participation easy and encourages consistent engagement. Digital tools like a mobile app and automated email updates can further enhance the experience by making it effortless for people to track their rewards.

Additionally, it's vital to align your loyalty program with your brand and your customers' preferences. For example, a boutique fitness studio might benefit from a tiered program that rewards frequent visits, while a coffee shop might find success with a simple punch card for tracking bought drinks, which patrons can



keep in their wallets. Tailoring your approach to what may appeal most to your client base will ultimately make your program more compelling and valuable, creating the repeat business that you seek. And once you launch it, make sure that your shoppers are aware of it. Put signs up in your store, post to social media, start an email campaign, and have your employees ask clients if they've signed up when checking out.

However, your work isn't done at this point—regular evaluations and adjustments are essential for long-term success. Track

participation rates, redemption patterns, and customer feedback to determine what's working and what needs improvement. A program that feels stagnant or unappealing can be refreshed with limited-time bonus rewards or new tiers to keep people engaged.

When crafted and implemented with care, a loyalty program has the potential to take your organization to new heights. Focus on these key factors, and you can create one that not only rewards your customers but also strengthens relationships and drives consistent growth. ■



# Dealing with Difficult Clients

A business coach shares his virtually foolproof tips to help you handle everything from heated phone calls to abrupt contract cancellations. BY **ANDRE RIOS**



Depending on which industry your organization occupies, tense customer interactions may seem commonplace—but they don’t have to be. Just ask **Skye Michiels**, a national real estate coach and motivational speaker and the founder of With Heart Coaching, a platform that supports entrepreneurs through incisive business guidance. Utilize his proven insights, and you’ll not only smooth over customer complaints more deftly but also boost your chances of attaining and preserving ongoing loyalty.

## ➤ Defining the problem

What, exactly, makes a customer troublesome? Michiels’s explanation is much broader than you might expect. “They aren’t just someone who’s unpleasant—they’re someone who resists trust, struggles with decision-making, or constantly shifts expectations,” he says. “They might be overly skeptical, overly demanding, or even disengaged.” But as diverse as these characteristics may seem, Michiels states that every crank shares one of two common

denominators: at their core, they either feel unheard or doubtful that what you’re offering is actually in their best interests.

Take, for example, a home-security company dealing with a tough client who makes recurring customer-service calls, claiming that they don’t understand how to utilize the system’s features. In this situation, they aren’t simply irritated but also fail to reap value from the security services, which puts them at risk of ceasing their business.



How the company handles this individual will dictate the future of the relationship. Address their demands—such as by sending a technician to demonstrate the system’s features—and it can potentially retain them. Fail to do so, and they may instead turn to a competitor. The same is true with prospects: be attentive to their needs, and you could very well add them to your client list. Otherwise, you

may struggle to close the sale and eventually hear a definitive “no.”

## ➤ Dealing with the problem

The next time you face a troublesome client, take the following steps to help build their trust and earn or retain their business.

### *Listen well*

Michiels emphasizes that you should always seek what’s at the

root of people’s struggles, which is essential for effectively meeting and exceeding their expectations. “Ask clients to tell you more about their issue, then actively listen to their questions, fears, and complaints,” he suggests. “When they feel heard, their resistance drops.” This goes beyond packaged statements like “I understand your concern.” Instead, you should communicate directly to the needs they express, such as by



stating “I apologize that our price schedule was unclear. Can I walk you through how it works so you’ll know what to expect in the future?”

#### *Speak calmly*

“Don’t match resistance with more resistance,” Michiels warns. “That only fuels the fire. The keys are staying calm and unemotional, keeping your energy steady, and avoiding taking the bait.”

After validating customers’ concerns, he recommends shifting the conversation from confrontation to collaboration. Posing open-ended questions like “What’s holding you back?” and “What would make you feel like buying today is the right decision?” could help lower their defenses. From there, ask what you can do to resolve their issues, being willing to stretch beyond ordinary customer-service practices if necessary. When people associate your organization with solutions rather than problems, you’ll increase your chances of securing their future business.

#### *Act on feedback*

“Every complaint is a road map for improvement,” Michiels says. “Instead of getting defensive, treat feedback—no

matter how it’s delivered—as free consulting. For example, if someone is frustrated about slow delivery times, ask yourself, *Is this a pattern?*”

Raise any repeated grievances with your team, and get to work brainstorming solutions for them. And once you roll out changes, announce them on your website, social media, and other marketing channels, spreading the word that you’ve listened to client reviews and are taking corrective steps. “Turning negatives into tangible action builds loyalty,” Michiels adds.

#### 🔗 Practice prevention

While it’s useful to practice good conflict resolution, Michiels insists that adopting certain tactics can help you

*Raise any repeated grievances with your team, and get to work brainstorming solutions for them. And once you roll out changes, announce them on your website, social media, and other marketing channels, spreading the word that you’ve listened to client reviews and are taking corrective steps.*



circumvent such issues altogether. “Communicate clearly so customers have realistic expectations, be transparent about pricing and timelines, and overdeliver on service,” he says. Building a brand based on trust will make your client base naturally easier to work with. Additionally, aim to answer people’s questions before they ask. “Doing this creates a feeling of security and confidence, which helps prevent difficult

interactions,” Michiels states. This could mean having your sellers tell clients at the point of sale how the fee schedule works or where to go for troubleshooting questions—whatever may head off potential confusion and frustration.

#### 🔗 Setting boundaries

While you may hope to smooth every client relationship, don’t do so at the expense of your team. For example, you

should never tolerate outright verbal abuse, threats, or customers who simply resist the solutions you extend to them. “Remember, it’s not personal,” Michiels says. “People act out based on their own stressors, not because of you.” And don’t forget the old adage of knowing when to walk away. “Not every customer is the right fit for your organization, and that’s OK,” Michiels says. In some cases, the time spent fostering an extremely problematic customer could be better directed toward converting more promising prospects or following up with existing ones to nurture their repeat business. ■

#### Take Action

Consider how you can incorporate Michiels’s advice into your team’s future customer interactions.





SPOTLIGHT

# IN TOUCH WITH THE CONSUMER

Succeeding in an industry as crowded as health and beauty requires a spritz of uniqueness and a formula directly appealing to what consumers want most. **Andrea Lisbona**, cofounder and CEO of Touchland, breaks down how her brand of hand sanitizers and other fragrant goods attracts a loyal customer base.

INTERVIEW WITH **ANDREA LISBONA**

BY **ANDRE RIOS**

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF **TOUCHLAND**



ANDREA LISBONA







## What is Touchland?

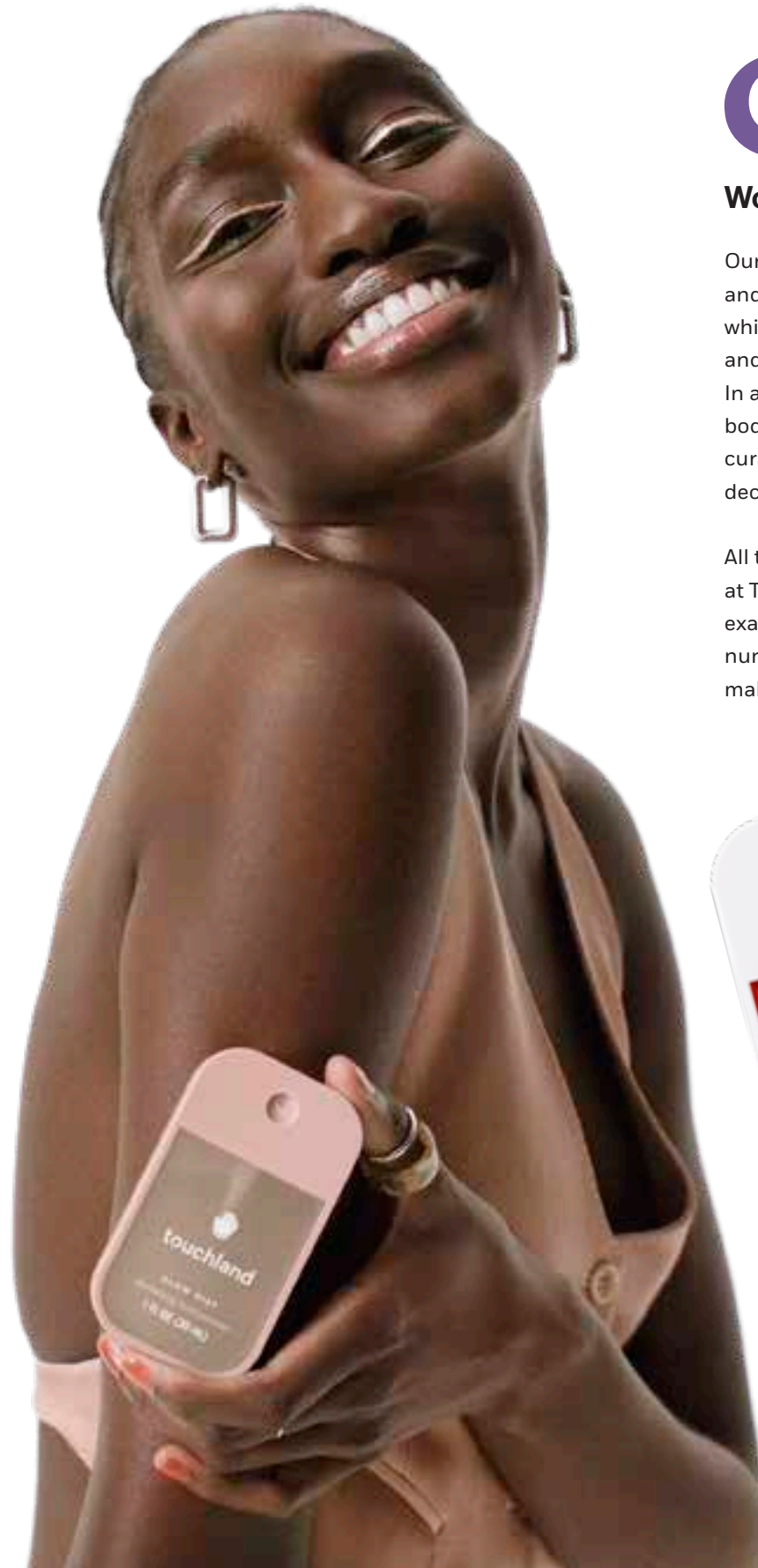
Touchland creates sensory self-care on-the-go essentials such as hand sanitizers, uplifting fragrances, and skin-care formulations that bring delight to everyday moments. We have reimagined personal care as a ritual and not just a series of simple daily tasks, empowering our users to infuse beauty, wellness, and excitement into their routines.



## What inspired you to found this company, and how did you get it off the ground?

I started this journey over a decade ago with a vision to disrupt a stagnant category with innovation, quality, and aesthetics. I was initially inspired by the idea of marrying great function with great design, so I sought to found a business that bridges fashion, beauty, and personal care all at once. I come from a family of entrepreneurs, which made me feel confident pursuing such an enterprise.

To raise funds for the project, my cofounder, Ruggero Grammatico, and I ran a Kickstarter campaign in 2018. We ended up reaching 450 percent of our initial fundraising goal and receiving more than 1,500 preorders for our initial product in just one month! In our first year of business, we enjoyed what I can only describe as immense success, which was largely driven by our community of social media followers. We also quickly caught the attention of celebrities and influencers, and the brand now counts Kate Hudson, Mindy Kaling, Kesha, Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, and many other famous names as fans. All this led to our brand landing retail distribution in over 2,500 stores nationwide, including Ulta Beauty.



## Would you tell us about your products?

Our portfolio spans a variety of products that combine health and beauty. We may be best known for our line of hand sanitizers, which include Power Mists, available in fifteen different scents, and Glow Mist and Gentle Mist, our two premium formulations. In addition, we offer our innovative Power Essence, a nurturing body and hair spray available in eight scents. We also have a curated lineup of stylish accessories like colorful mist cases and decorative pouches that we call Touchettes.

All these products provide little moments of indulgence—what we at Touchland call “microjoys”—that appeal to all generations. For example, each misting hand sanitizer features a lovely scent and nurturing sensation on the skin that lend a unique experience and make them feel exciting to use.







### What makes Touchland distinct from other personal wellness goods companies?

We don't just manufacture products; we craft beauty-meets-wellness essentials. The designs are intentional, making our products as much a visually appealing fashion accessory as a daily necessity, and we combine innovative form factors, the size and shape of our packaging, to ensure that they stand out from other hand sanitizers.

Further, we focus on creating a multisensory journey—how the product looks, smells, and feels—to create something that seems luxurious yet effortless, leading customers to feel like using Touchland products is an uplifting habit. From the misting technology that provides an ultrafine, refreshing spray to the curated fragrances that elevate the experience, every detail is designed to delight.

At the same time, our formulas prioritize both efficacy and skin care, with ingredients like aloe vera and niacinamide, a form of vitamin B3, keeping the skin hydrated. So they are not only pleasant to use but also offer results for the customer. Our hand sanitizers in particular have become customer favorites thanks to perks in them like our wrinkle-reducing Vitasource technology, which helps skin look smoother and more youthful—especially important when you're sanitizing your hands often.



### How do you express your company's brand identity in your marketing and goods?

Our packaging is sleek and convenient, which makes our products perfect for taking on the go, and our formulations are all about quality results. We want our offerings to fit seamlessly into people's lifestyles, whether they're at the office, traveling, or heading out with friends.

Meanwhile, our messaging is bold and engaging. Because our brand is playful, elevated, and always pushing the boundaries of what personal care can be, we aim to have our marketing reflect that. In other words, we want the public to get excited about Touchland products, especially when compared to less enticing alternatives like generic hand sanitizers.

A great example of this was the launch of our Power Essence line through our "Move Your Mood" campaign. The ads captured the feeling of shifting your mood with a single spritz—turning scent into a tool for self-expression and a sensory reset throughout the day. Visually, it was all about skin, motion, and the little moments that feel so important. It marked our next chapter, expanding from just hands to the whole body while staying true to our brand throughout.





### How do you gauge consumer feedback and incorporate it into your products and strategies?

Consumer insights drive everything, from the scents we launch to the packaging innovations we introduce, so we are constantly engaging with our community on social media, in reviews, and through direct feedback. For example, after countless requests for a means to clip Touchland products to a handbag, keys, or a belt, we brought the concept to life through our Mist Case accessories. Their sleek, functional design helped turn our hand sanitizers into lifestyle essentials, allowing for even deeper personalization and daily integration.

Another instance is our expansion into new categories. Consumers repeatedly asked us to apply our fragrance-forward sensibility to body care—and that feedback became the foundation of our Power Essence line. We stay closely connected to our community not only as a marketing strategy but also as a creative compass, ensuring that we deliver exactly what they want. And we apply that same listening approach to partnerships, bringing to life collaborations that excite our customers.



### Would you tease some upcoming developments?

We've been expanding into new retail partnerships with brands like Sephora and have launched collaborations with Disney and, more recently, Hello Kitty. We're always thinking about ways to push the boundaries of sensory-driven wellness. We have some very exciting innovations coming that expand on our core philosophy—so keep an eye out for them! ■



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For more info, visit [touchland.com](https://touchland.com)



# HARNESS THE POWER OF ALUMNI NETWORKS

In business, *who* you know can be just as important as *what* you know, especially when it comes to boosting your brand and accelerating growth.

BY LAUREN KIM



### YOU LIKELY ALREADY UNDERSTAND

the value of tapping into your professional sphere, but you may be overlooking another excellent avenue for new opportunities: your alumni network. Fellow grads from your college can be great resources for all sorts of business needs, from hiring qualified staff to identifying potential customers, and they may be more willing to help you thanks to your shared connection. Use this guide to discover how to get the most out of your membership.

#### > **STAY CONNECTED**

Through their alumni organizations, colleges offer their grads access to thousands of people interested in linking with and supporting one another. For instance, Penn State's association has more than

775,000 members, making it one of the largest in the country. But you can't take advantage of your alma mater's network if you aren't connected. What this entails can vary from college to college. Some associations may require registration and a membership fee, while others automatically add you once you graduate—or even after you attend a single semester of classes. (Remember, you don't necessarily need to graduate from a college to be an alumnus of it.)

Upon joining or verifying your status, ensure that the association's administrators have all your current information, such as your profession and job title, email address, and phone number. Also join related social media groups on platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, and read and contribute to your alumni magazine, perhaps by writing a column or sending updates for the Class Notes section. These actions can open the door to potentially lucrative networking opportunities.

#### > **FIND YOUR NICHE**

Alumni organizations often cultivate specialized groups based on factors like location and industry. These subsections can lead to particularly valuable connections since their members' needs and interests may align even more closely with yours. To find and join such groups, visit your organization's website, where they may

be listed, or reach out to its administrators. Additionally, you could search Facebook and other social media platforms for unofficial groups you can participate in to meet fellow grads, such as ones for fitness enthusiasts, gardeners, and parents.

#### > **ATTEND EVENTS**

Events held for alumni, including reunions, local chapter meetings, dinners, and career fairs, can be networking gold mines. At these get-togethers, you can converse with a wide array of entrepreneurs and business owners already inclined to

Alumni organizations often cultivate specialized groups based on factors like location and industry. These subsections can lead to particularly valuable connections since their members' needs and interests may align even more closely with yours.

like, trust, and be open to working with you because of your shared connection. Pick a few functions to attend this year, then prepare a short but compelling elevator pitch to use when mingling with other grads. Just make sure to ask for their contact information so you can follow up afterward with a quick text or email to continue building your new relationships.

#### > **REACH OUT DIRECTLY**

If you have a specific person you'd like to contact, a need or goal you could use help with, or simply a desire to actively grow your professional network, you don't have to wait for an excuse or an event. Alumni networks often have directories with members' contact information, giving you a way to reach out to individuals personally. You could also peruse the discussions or lists of members on your association's social media pages to find and chat with people, either by replying to their posts or messaging them. Or go to your alma mater's LinkedIn web page and click its Alumni button to get lists of fellow grads; you can even sort the results, including by year graduated, geographical location, and profession.

#### > **VOLUNTEER**

Offering your services to your alumni network can produce many meaningful ties. For instance, you could put yourself at the heart of the action by working at an associated event, making it easy to converse with numerous attendees over the course of it. Mentoring current students or fellow alums would also allow you to both support your alma mater and recruit future hires. For greater exposure, consider earmarking a portion of your marketing and advertising budget for sponsoring an alumni event, which could bring in more clients, recognition, and visibility for your brand.

It's never too late to connect with fellow alumni—and stepping back into the past can support your business for years to come. ■

**Take  
Action**

**Peruse upcoming alumni events to see how you could make the most of your college ties.**





# Unlocking Gen Z's Potential

As more Gen Z workers begin their careers, it's vital to capitalize on their fresh ideas and perspectives to keep your business moving forward.

BY **ALLISON GOMES**

**O**VER THE DECADES, EACH GENERATION has reshaped company culture and expectations, bringing distinct strengths to the workplace. Baby boomers, known for their strong work ethic, loyalty, and preference for hierarchical structures, have long been the backbone of many industries. Generation X, often seen as independent, adaptable, and entrepreneurial, bridged the gap between analog and digital work environments. And millennials pushed the envelope further, embracing technology and challenging the status quo for greater efficiency.

Now attention turns to the newest generation entering the workforce—Generation Z. Born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, these workers bring unique values, expectations, and work habits that set them apart from the rest. To attract and



Now attention turns to the newest generation entering the workforce—Generation Z. Born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, these workers bring unique values, expectations, and work habits that set them apart from the rest.

retain such talent, it's essential to build a dynamic and forward-thinking workplace that leverages their potential to the fullest.



#### **The value of Gen Z workers**

No matter which industry you belong to, technology and social media have become unavoidable necessities for marketing, branding, and customer engagement—and this generation may be the key to utilizing both successfully. Not knowing a time without the internet, they generally possess a clear understanding of what people are looking for in an increasingly digital world, keeping their finger on the pulse of what's popular. These individuals' familiarity with technology also means they're often skilled with all sorts of devices

and software. And when they're not, they're quick to pick it up and even find ways to use it more efficiently. Plus, they tend to be highly sociable, which can go a long way toward strengthening company culture.

As with any employee, though, Gen Z workers need to be comfortable in their environment to feel motivated and empowered to succeed. This doesn't necessarily mean adjusting all your practices, but by adapting in reasonable ways, you can not only appeal to and keep such talent but also potentially benefit the rest of your workforce.



#### **Embrace flexibility**

A healthy work-life balance is more important now than ever for



employees across the board, and you may find this especially true with Gen Z workers. With a strong focus on flexibility, many are seeking job opportunities outside the norm of an in-office nine-to-five. Depending on your company's needs and business model, appealing to this preference could mean offering remote or hybrid work schedules, embracing flexible work hours, providing unlimited PTO, or even moving to a four-day workweek. Whichever route you take, avoiding rigidity can help increase productivity overall—per FlexJobs, 77 percent of current remote employees believe they get more work done at home than in an office. And, as a bonus, when workers are happy with their work-life balance, they may be less likely to look for a job elsewhere, thus improving retention.



#### Create purpose-driven workplaces

Perhaps even more than flexibility, Gen Zers crave a strong sense of purpose in their careers. A 2023 Deloitte study found that two in five have actually

turned down a position because the company's mission didn't align with their personal values, whether it's a dedication to sustainability, social responsibility, or personal and professional development. As a business leader, aim to be transparent about your organization's commitments and, most importantly, follow through on them. For instance, your sustainability efforts may involve actively reducing your carbon footprint, prioritizing recycling, and only partnering with other like-minded business.



#### Leverage technology

As noted earlier, Gen Zers are arguably the most tech-savvy generation yet. Having been raised with smartphones and social media, they work best with seamless digital communication and aren't afraid to embrace any new tool that arises, including AI. Further, they value efficient work processes and, in turn, consistently challenge existing practices to seek new, creative ways to

**Beyond performance assessments, Gen Z workers also value mentorship and open communication with leaders and other team members.**



get something done in less time and to a higher standard. So when you invest in modern digital tools, streamline workflows, and foster a culture of innovation, you create an environment where Gen Z workers can thrive, leading to consistent fresh ideas and potential long-term growth for your organization.



#### Offer real-time feedback

Being so immersed in a fast-paced digital world where information is instantly available, Gen Zers seek the same level of responsiveness in the workplace. This means moving away from only offering annual performance reviews and instead adopting a flow of regular constructive guidance and real-

time recognition for their work. Providing immediate feedback, such as through weekly one-on-one check-ins, instant messaging platforms, or project evaluations, will help keep them engaged and continuously improving.

Beyond performance assessments, Gen Z workers also value mentorship and open communication with leaders and other team members. They thrive under managers who take a coaching approach rather than a directive one and enjoy being able to ask questions freely and collaborate with coworkers, embracing the chance to learn from them. Further, offering career development opportunities and encouraging continuous learning will not only

keep them motivated but also build a stronger, more dynamic team.

When integrated well, Gen Z workers present businesses with a chance for increased innovation and growth. By understanding their unique needs, you can position your company to thrive in the face of an ever-evolving workforce. ■

#### Take Action

Evaluate your company's existing policies and culture, and identify opportunities to align them with Gen Z's values to establish a more forward-thinking workplace.



# The Secret Strength of Vulnerability

Showing it as a leader may just be the key to building deeper business relationships and enhancing your workplace. BY ALLISON GOMES



**LEADERS HAVE LONG** been expected to project unwavering authority, always having all the answers and making decisive choices. However, a counterview is emerging: vulnerability. Often misunderstood as weakness, embracing it can actually enable you to foster trust, spark creativity, and build resilience for your company, ultimately unlocking greater potential for growth.

**Strengthening relationships** One of the greatest advantages of vulnerability is its ability to help you develop relationships with employees and customers. People naturally tend to gravitate toward authenticity, so when you admit to challenges, share your personal experiences, and acknowledge mistakes, you garner more trust.

For instance, being open about your own struggles or the difficulties your organization has faced may lead employees to be less intimidated coming to you for guidance when they feel stuck. On the client side, many today are eschewing companies that hide behind a faux, polished image in favor of brands that feel more human. Give them a peek behind the curtain and commit to honesty in every interaction, and you may see their loyalty grow.

## Improving workplace culture

Beyond trust, vulnerability can be a major catalyst for productivity. When you admit to the fact that you may not have all the answers, your team may feel more comfortable contributing ideas and taking risks since they know that they won't be penalized for imperfection. The result is a more collaborative and innovative environment where you can all work together to try something new and solve problems, viewing missed opportunities as learning experiences.

Be careful, though, to balance vulnerability with confidence—you don't want to overshare or appear unsure of yourself and your decisions. Rather, the goal is to be honest while also demonstrating a commitment to solutions. By adopting this mindset, you can create a business that's adaptable, relatable, and more successful. ■



Reflect on your leadership style, and assess how embracing vulnerability may strengthen your relationships with your team and customers.

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## Back of Tear Out Card 2

**01/ BE PRECISE**  
Set specific goals, such as a certain percentage increase in sales or a revenue target. From there, determine the action items that can help you meet them.

**02/ SET MICRO GOALS**  
Once you have defined your main goals, establish small weekly or monthly milestones like sales quotas or certain tasks to complete. This will give you a clear path toward your larger objectives.

**03/ DELEGATE TASKS**  
Find ways to use your employees' skills to their fullest potential. Bring your team members into your plans for the year, and assign objectives based on their individual strengths or roles.

**04/ ASSESS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR**  
Schedule monthly meetings to track your progress and assess what is and isn't working. This is your chance to review your progress toward meeting your goals by the end of the year.





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★★★★★  
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Philadelphia

Stacey is the best of the best! Our family was very pleased with her services, especially Snowball, our little pup! She listened to all of our concerns, wants, needs, and dreams. Stacey is totally awesome! I will be sharing her information with everyone that I know.



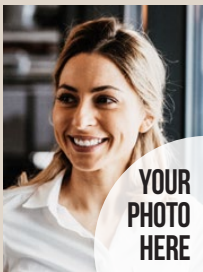
★★★★★  
*The Miller Family*  
Manayunk

Stacey was very patient with us, even though we were very picky. She knew how important it was for us to have a great experience and great service. We would definitely refer Stacey to all of our friends and family.



★★★★★  
*The Austin Family*  
Manayunk

Stacey is truly a very impressive person. She works fast, efficiently, and effectively. Her services are top of the line and we were very satisfied with her work. We love Stacey!



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