



Pessimists will always be with us

There will always be someone who rains on your parade.

When I was in my twenties I had a magical opportunity to write down the dozens of goals and dreams I wanted to achieve in my life and, I am happy to tell you that most of these actually happened. But there was one thing that stayed unfinished on my list for a couple of decades: I had written, (perhaps in a moment of slight madness,) that one day I wanted to “own my own waterfall”.

It made sense because I love nature, but I had no idea where, when or how this was going to come about.

And then in about 2005 I looked at my list again and with great sense of well being, ticked off what had been achieved. But I suddenly realised that there was still something that

I really wanted but hadn’t happened: my own waterfall.

It took me four years and a lot of backbreaking labour to build a beautiful

water feature in my garden. I spent days digging up the path for the top and bottom ponds, two small waterfalls, and a little stream that connected the whole lot together.

I took literally hundreds of photographs of rivers, streams and waterfalls all over our beautiful country, and spent days looking for just the right rocks and stones that would make everything appear natural rather than man-made.

I studied every book and article I could get my hands on, spent hours watching TV gardening programmes and YouTube videos, and did all my technical homework just to calculate exactly what the right pump specifications would be. And when I put it together the first time, I didn’t really like some of the characteristics, so I took it all apart and almost started my labour of love again.

The final result is that I built something I am very proud of, but also gave me so much pleasure in putting together. Since

then, my ponds, river and waterfalls have become a haven of relaxation and quiet time for my family and friends – right in the middle of the exciting city of Johannesburg. My estate agent friend said it has also added “a couple of hundred thousand” to the value of my home, which became my rational justification for achieving a small dream.

So when all the building and construction was finally over, we threw a “pond-wetting party,” and invited family and friends to see the final result. They all made the right encouraging noises, told me how beautiful it was, and I strutted around like the proverbial peacock.

It all went well until my mate George made a small nit-picking comment that I blew out of all proportion in my mind.

He pointed to one really small part of the stream and said it was “too square” to look like something that would exist in nature. “You should really change that,” he said, “because it spoils the whole effect.”

I wanted to give him a whack on the back of his head! Who the heck was he to make a comment like that? Had he put his heart and soul – never mind his hard labour – into building even one centimetre of my magnificent creation? Did he realise how much physical, intellectual and emotional effort I'd put in to put this all together? I was really hurt, but when I calmed down days later I realised he was right, and immediately made some more changes to my masterpiece.

However, I realised that we often get customers that are the same as my friend George. They readily criticise and pick on the smallest details to attack our businesses. They don't realise how much hard work and effort goes into just getting the basics right – and then on top of that also having to do all the things that add value, and make them feel special, loved, wanted and appreciated. They are very unforgiving when we have a "bad-hair-day," and don't understand that the reason we do things the way that we do is because we have had bad experiences with other customers in the past and need to protect our business.

That is just in the nature of our customers, and it is important to accept that we will never be able to please all of the customers all of the time. However – and this is critical – we also need to remember that we need our customers more than they need us. I wish that customers knocked on our doors and begged us to sell them something, but in fact the opposite is probably true: we are outside their door begging them to buy something.

No customer can be worse than having no customers.

So how do you handle negative and pessimistic customers? With the same respect and love you would use with your best customers. In fact, I'd go one step further and say that you need to be kind to unkind people because they are the ones who need it the most.

If they make comments like this, complain about small things, treat you with disrespect or put you down no matter how hard you've tried, then they have a problem with their self-esteem.

Look at the opposite side of the coin: If someone feels good about themselves, and sees the world as being a good and generous place, would they behave like this? No!

You certainly have other choices, but they are not ideal:

- You could just put up with it and feel hurt, but keep it to yourself. I don't like this because it does erode your own confidence.
- You could confront them aggressively and get into an argument, or you could even terminate the relationship by "firing" your customers. Bad choice, because nobody ever wins a fight with a customer.

- You could try to explain the reasons of what happened, but it would fall on deaf ears because they don't want to hear it.

The only way to deal with this is gently, with empathy, but with suitable assertiveness. "What made you say that? What did we do that is troubling you? How can we improve this so that you don't feel unhappy?" Statements like these can really help to get them on your side.

I hate mixing metaphors, but since we're talking about ponds and waterfalls, when miserable customers rain on your parade you have to let it be like water off a duck's back. Let it go and move on. After all, there are literally hundreds and thousands of other customers who appreciate your efforts.

And as for George? I made a small wooden plaque and stuck it at the new improved part of the stream. It now says "George's Nook" and he brings people to show them his corner!



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