Using the Power of “Thank You” to Get What You Want: Influencing Others Made Easier

By Kate Zabriskie

Most of us liked to be thanked, especially when the sentiment is sincere. For that reason, “thank you” is one of the most powerful phrases in the English language.

In addition to using it to recognize past acts, you can also say thank you to influence people and steer them toward a desired behavior.

A gate agent: I want to thank everyone in the waiting area for being great travelers tonight and for your patience. Your fabulous attitudes make my job easier when we're experiencing flight delays. Let me know if there is anything I can do to make the wait better for you. I'm going to keep checking for updates, and when I have new information, I'll let you know. Please feel free to visit me at the counter if I can answer any questions, and thank you again.

A hotel manager: Team, I know you understand how important giving great customer service is to the success of our business, and I appreciate how hard you work to be an exceptional staff. I want to thank you in advance for going the extra mile today. In particular, thank you for greeting our guests with enthusiasm, finding clever ways to delight them, and handling any problems promptly and professionally. If we do our job right, any surprises should be kept to a minimum. Thank you again for your effort. Now, let's get to work.

A sign at a private club: We appreciate everything our club members do to make Royal Oaks the region's best-rated pool club nine years in a row. Thank you for placing used towels in the hamper and for alerting staff members if our facility needs cleaning or maintenance. Enjoy your swim!

Why Bother

Some people will argue that thanking people for doing what they are “supposed to do” is a waste of time. Chances are, however, those same people find themselves frustrated by customers, clients, and coworkers who don't behave the way they should.

For those nonbelievers, the thank-you-in-advance method of influence is certainly worth a shot.

Why Thank You in Advance Works

Thanking people in advance works for a few reasons.

The first has to do with a sense of obligation many people feel to reciprocate after they've received something.

The second explanation for the technique's effectiveness has to do with people wanting to conform to a positive image of themselves. In other words, “I'm going to act like a good traveler because I am a good traveler.”
A third explanation for the thank-you method’s power has to do with instruction. Often, we assume people intuitively know what they are supposed to do. Guess what? Many don’t, they’ve forgotten, they’re preoccupied, or they’re simply not thinking. Offered in the right way, many people will follow a suggested course of action, because it’s the path of least resistance.

The Structure of an Advanced Thank You

To plan an advanced thank you, Use the following framework:

1. First, think about the desired result. “I want my employees to show up on time.”
2. Second, identify the type of people who typically demonstrate that behavior. “Responsible and accountable people show up on time.”
3. Third, craft a statement that identifies the people you are addressing as that group, and be specific about what you want to see.

I appreciate the fact that I have such a dedicated team. I want to thank you in advance for giving 110% this week. The hours during the holiday season are demanding, and it takes a true group of professionals to act upbeat and engaged with every visitor. This is why we hired you.

Tips and Cautions

Thanking people in advance is part science and part art. The framework offered provides a method for constructing the basics of a message. The specific words you choose, the tone in which you deliver them, and your timing are the components in the process that are more subjective. The following tips and cautions should help you get the most from the method.

1. Thanking people for good behavior should be done before you’ve observed anything particularly egregious. For example, imagine a chaotic scene where customers are pushing and shoving each other. It’s more difficult to thank them into a reverse course after they’ve gone wild. However, a little advanced gratitude offered earlier could have helped avoid mayhem.

2. Thanking people is not a substitute for confronting inappropriate behavior. For example, if an employee comes to work dressed improperly, you can’t thank your way around addressing the problem. However, you can use thank you as part of the corrective conversation. “Mary, I appreciate you listening to me this morning, and I want to thank you in advance for taking the conversation seriously. I know you have what it takes to represent our company well. I look forward to seeing you be successful here.”

3. Thanking people for everything dilutes the method’s effectiveness. “Bill, I want to thank you for coming in on time today. I know how important punctuality is to you, so thank you for parking in the employee lot and not taking a visitor’s space….” Too much of that, and Bill’s going to think you’ve got a screw or two loose. Worse still, he’s not going to believe a word you say.

4. Finally, there are some people with whom this method falls flat. They weren’t behaving in a way we wanted before we tried it, and they’re not behaving after the fact either. Fortunately, this group is small.

Perfecting the science and art of the advanced thank you takes time. The more you practice, the easier it is, and the more likely it will become a strategy your brain launches on autopilot.

I know you’ll eventually be successful in getting this to work, and I want to thank you in advance for giving the method a try. Who will you influence first?

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