

Abbott & Costello

BUSINESS STRATEGY SKILLS TRACK

Teach Business Strategy!



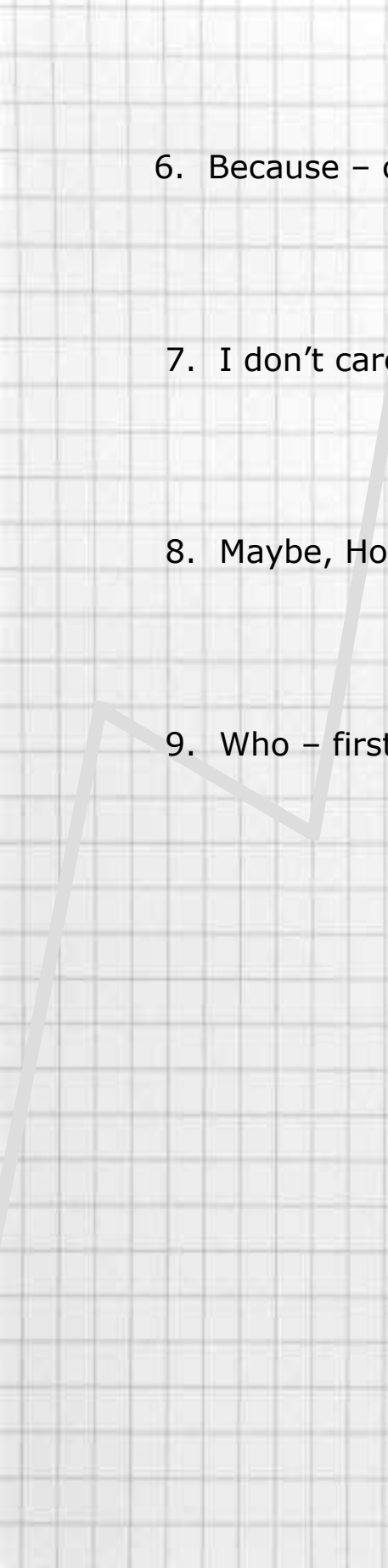
Presented
by
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Abbott and Costello Teach Business Strategy

1. What – second base
2. Tomorrow - pitcher
3. Today - catcher
4. I don't know – third base
5. Why – left field



6. Because – center field

7. I don't care - shortstop

8. Maybe, Hope, Possible, Try, Can – right field

9. Who – first base



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SOUND ADVICE FOR BUSINESS

In the mid 1930's a burlesque act of Bud Abbott and Lou Costello was formed. Of all their performances over 22 years, the one they are most famous for is entitled, 'Who's on first'.

In the routine the two performers are talking about a baseball team that Abbott is going to manage. Costello is asking Abbott the names of the players on the team. Abbott states that many professional baseball players have unusual names as witnessed by his new team.

Without repeating the masterful routine, the position and the names of players mentioned were:

First base: Who
Second base: What
Third base: I don't know
Left field: Why
Center field: Because
Pitcher: Tomorrow
Catcher: Today
Shortstop: I don't care

Listening to the Abbott and Costello routine, which you can easily find online, you will hear that Costello is confused. In asking Abbot who is playing on the team, one of Costello's first question is, 'Who's on first?' From there Abbott and Costello go back and forth as Abbott attempts to tell Costello the names of the players.

Like that confusion I see how many Main Street businesses are equally confused today. They are struggling to understand why they do not have as much business as they used to. They don't understand why they are unable to command the loyalty of the customers that their business once did. The challenge they are facing cannot be blamed solely on the current economy as this problem has been going on for more than just the past three years.

There are likely to be some businesses in your community that are working very hard to solve the challenge. There are others that are simply lost and are just remembering, 'the good old days', and there are some that are simply waiting to retire and will likely just close their doors at some point in time.

If they were to listen to Abbott and Costello, they would find the solution within that funny routine; using an analogy from baseball, these businesses don't know the position they should be playing.

As Main Street managers, staff and key volunteers, how many businesses do you have in your community that were, at one time, ones where the residents of your community did a lot of business? The business may sell a product, food, or provide a service. Regardless of what they sell, their story is likely to be the same.

The prime time of the business was many years ago. The business might have never been thought of as being progressive, but at a time when there were fewer choices for people to spend their money, the business was profitable and busy. They did all they needed to do for the business to succeed.

This earlier time, when the business was more successful, the business was known by what they sold. The strategy of a successful business could simply be to attract more market share. The additional customers could come in several ways. The business could take customers away from the competition, expand to additional locations, draw customers from a larger geographical area, or simply wait for more people to move into the town. 'What' was the second baseman for Abbott's team.



Abbott and Costello Teach Business Strategy (continued)

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SOUND ADVICE FOR BUSINESS

Simple as these four strategies may sound, they did actually work for many businesses. There were signs, much like those used in baseball, that should have given a business clues about changes that would be coming. As one that grew up in Arkansas, this writer remembers his father remarking to fellow business owners in the 1960's that there would be many changes coming.

The intersection of the highways that was previously in the town was being moved to just outside the town as the highways were being rerouted. While most people quickly associate Wal-Mart with Arkansas, they were not the first mass merchant that arrived on our landscape. I remember how there were several empty buildings on our 'Front Street'. The north side of Front Street backed up to the Arkansas River. My father's suggestion was that all of the businesses move to the side away from the river so that the riverside buildings could be leveled and free parking be provided.

'Who would want to pay for parking when they could get free parking at the mass merchant which would surely eventually come to the new intersection of the highways?', my father would ask. And when he gave away coins to pay for the parking meters on Front Street, he definitely aggravated some city fathers. My father was not the only one that saw a community that failed to look toward tomorrow, but he was one that closed his business when he felt the downtown was doomed. Tomorrow was the pitcher for Abbott's team.

Most baseball games last only nine innings, but many businesses thought today would last forever. To them, tomorrow would surely be just like today. With thinking like that it is easy to understand why there were no changes made. The exterior of the building remained the same through all the years. In the case of retailers, the only change to the interior of their business occurred as they received a new display fixture from a manufacturer.

For the insurance agent, they continued to expect that all their customers would either walk in or call to renew their policies. The restaurant thought people would forever want the same meals; no consideration was given to the changes in what Americans liked, healthy options or portions.

There were many other changes; the Internet, malls, strip shopping centers, lifestyle shopping centers, and mass merchants have changed the way business is conducted in the past half-century. 'Today' did not happen all at once, it was a gradual change that many businesses did not see coming, but now some see it. Today was the catcher for Abbott's baseball team.

Yet for some business owners when asked about how they saw their business some twenty years in the future, the answer was, 'I don't know'. Perhaps the biggest challenge the business owner had would be that of determining who would be the next generation to operate the business, but definitely the business would continue to exist. So, why has it been that so many of the next generation chose to not become a part of the family business?



Abbott and Costello Teach Business Strategy (continued)

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For an answer, think about any of the visits you have had with the owner of a business like this. Probably, not too many of the conversations have been of a positive nature. They complain about business, yet choose to do nothing about it. Now think about the child that grew up in the home of this business owner and heard these comments every day. It is not surprising why someone of the next generation would choose to do something else for a living. 'I don't know' was Abbott's third baseman.

The question that we continue to ask is, "Why?" Having seen that tomorrow became today, and today bore little resemblance to its predecessor, why haven't the businesses made changes to themselves so they will be in business in the next twenty years? Why won't they change so that the downtown can become even more vibrant? Or why won't they at least close the business so that the community can get a new business in that location to bring customers to that part of the Main Street district? 'Why' played left field for Abbott's baseball team.

There are two players on Abbott's team that we do not have the space in which to elaborate nor do we have the desire; 'Because', the center fielder and 'I don't care' the short stop. There is nothing we can do about the business owner with an answer of 'I don't care' and the part of the sentence that comes after 'Because' is not likely to be an answer that is logical.

In the routine, Abbott and Costello do not name the right fielder, but there is one position we have not mentioned; the first baseman. His name is 'Who'. This is the key to solving the problem; when Abbott said, or Costello asked, 'Who's on first?' they were sharing what has been the problem and what the solution is.

A business that identifies itself by 'what' they sell or do is likely to always be looking for customers that want their product or service. We have just observed how the 'what' has changed over the years. When the business fails to change the what, they are likely to be looking at a continually diminishing group of customers to market to.

Business is, and always should be, about the 'who'. Paying attention to the customer means the business changes as the customer changes. Think about how clothing preferences have changed for women, men and children; look at the change in the appliances, furniture and floor coverings in homes. Continue this train of thought with vehicles and how far people drive to work. Consider the choices people now want for grocery shopping. The way people entertain themselves has tremendously changed. The hours a person wants to shop is drastically different and the options of where a customer can do business has multiplied. Simply said, everything about customer's preferences have changed over the years and there is no sign that it is going to stop changing.

'Who's on first?' Name the most important factor to a customer; name the *first* consideration a business should have and the answer will always be the customer. That's who! Because who is on first.