

Uncommon Courtesy: A Note to the Wise Should Be Sufficient



Amy Grat (WTS-LA member and International Trade Education Programs Chief Executive Officer), Photos © John Livzey, 2016

Worlds turn on simple actions. But one action stands apart as being one of the simplest, most powerful, and least practiced: the handwritten thank you note. Amy Grat, WTS-LA member and International Trade Education Programs (ITEP) chief executive officer, recently expressed this succinctly in a tweet that read, “Your *thank yous* should be as passionate as your *pleases*.” But she was only just getting started.

“The tweet was actually a note to myself,” Grat explains. “That morning I had spent time contemplating a couple of folks who had gone out of their way to do something for ITEP. I thought they have given me the gift of their time, treasure, or talent, and this is my opportunity to give them the gift back of validation, recognition, and a return on their investment. But it was more than common courtesy, acknowledgement, and appreciation. They have given me the gift of their time, treasure, or talent, and this is my opportunity to give them the gift back of validation, recognition, and a return on their investment. But it was more than common courtesy, acknowledgement, and appreciation. *Not*



“I’m a person who believes in thank yous by any means necessary. It doesn’t have to be a physical note, although if you’re trying to distinguish yourself a handwritten note means a lot more. In fact, it’s unparalleled. Unfortunately, we’re shifting away from that kind of Emily Post-like belief. Communication is so immediate and informal these days; I feel like I’m swimming against the tide when I tell young people they should take a moment to acknowledge a gift or favor. If I communicate that it’s tradition or proper, they don’t internalize that. But if I position it as being a continuation of a relationship or an essential part of a professional skillset, that works. So I tell them that their thank you is an open door to another opportunity.”

Grat knows well of what she speaks. As ITEP CEO, she runs a non-profit organization that connects the international trade business community to classrooms to help develop over 4,500 career-ready, college-prepared high school students. In partnership with ports, transportation, logistics, and related industries, ITEP develops innovative programs that integrate internships and career mentoring with education. Grat

manages relationships with everyone from students to teachers to CEOs to wealthy donors, and she sees the gratitude equation from both sides of the table.

“In hiring people, I wait until I see the thank you before I follow up. If you don’t send me something, *you will not get* the second interview. And there are reasons for that. In my business, I have to hire people with a service orientation. I have to hire people that are effective in making volunteers feel special. And if they can’t muster up a thank you note at the front end of the job, they’re not right for me or ITEP. I also look at a thank you note as closely as I do a cover letter. The thank you is a proving ground for the candidate; it shows that they absorbed something from the time I shared with them. I’m particularly impressed with thank you notes that reference a conversational topic discussed during the interview.”

Grat also holds herself to the same standard.

“We’re expecting well over 700 supporters, partners, educators, and students at our annual scholarship dinner this year, and every one of our guests will receive a thank you from me. I drive my staff crazy wanting to personally sign every thank you note that goes out of my office in my particular blue ink. And I won’t have it any other way. Everyone gives according to what they can and they each deserve my acknowledgement for it. Donations of time are particularly important to recognize. Volunteering is so important to non-profit organizations that I place a very high priority on acknowledging it. Time is more valuable than money and must be properly acknowledged. In truth, our entire scholarship dinner is a thank you to all of the people who support ITEP. And I still send thank you notes ...”

Grat also believes that a thank you note is always more than just a thank you.

“When you send out a thank you note to an important person—let’s just say a senior vice president at Metro—that’s networking. You are connecting with that person in a very positive and memorable way, particularly if it is a handwritten note on business stationery. What many people never quite understand is that a thank you note is a calling card as much as it is evidence of gratitude.”