

The Lost Art of Thank-You Notes

by Professor Randy Pausch

Showing gratitude is one of the simplest yet most powerful things human beings can do for each other. And despite my love of efficiency, I think that thank-you notes are best done the old-fashioned way, with pen and paper.

Job interviewers and admissions officers see lots of applicants. They read tons of resumes from “A” students with many accomplishments. But they do not see many handwritten thank-you notes.

If you are a B+ student, your handwritten thank-you note will raise you at least a half-grade in the eyes of a future boss or admissions officer. You will become an “A” to them. And because handwritten notes have gotten so rare, they will remember you.

When I’d give this advice to my students, it was not to make them into calculating schemers, although I know some embraced it on those terms. My advice was more about helping them recognize that there are respectful, considerate things that can be done in life that will be appreciated by the recipient, and that only good things can result.

For instance, there was a young lady who applied to get into the ETC (Carnegie Mellon’s Entertainment Technology Center) and we were about to turn her down. She had big dreams; she wanted to become a Disney Imagineer. Her grades, her exams and her portfolio were good, but not quite good enough, given how selective the ETC could afford to be. Before we put her into the “no” pile, I decided to page through her file one more time. As I did, I noticed a hand-written thank you note had been slipped between the other pages.

The note hadn’t been sent to me, my co-director Dan Marinelli, or any other faculty member. Instead, she had mailed it to a non-faculty support staffer who had helped her with arrangements when she came to visit. This staff member held no sway over her application, so this was not a suck-up note. It was just a few words of thanks to somebody who, unbeknownst to her, happened to toss her note to him into her application folder. Weeks later, I came upon it.

Having unexpectedly caught her thanking someone just because it was the nice thing to do, I paused to reflect on this. She had written her note by hand. I liked that. “This tells me more than anything else in her file,” I said to Don. I read through her materials again. I thought about her. Impressed by her note, I decided she was worth taking a chance on, and Don agreed.

She came to ECT, got her master’s degree, and is now a Disney Imagineer.

I’ve told her this story, and now she tells it to others.

Despite all that is going on in my life and with my medical care, I still try to write handwritten notes when it’s important to do so. It’s just the nice thing to do. And you never know what magic might happen after it arrives in someone’s mailbox.

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