

Tactic 17: Strategic Generosity

Give First. Give Well. Give Without Apparent Expectation. Then Watch.

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Category I — The Reciprocity & Obligation Unconscious

Give First. Give Well. Give Without Apparent Expectation. Then Watch.

There is a study that I have shared with more salespeople than any other in this book, mostly because the reaction it produces is so consistent and so revealing.

Researchers Dennis Regan ran an experiment in the 1970s where a confederate — let's call him the actor — would offer unsolicited cans of Coke to participants during a break in what they believed was an art evaluation study. No explanation. No context. Just: here, have a Coke, I got one for myself so I got one for you.

Later, the actor asked participants to buy raffle tickets — at 25 cents each — to support a cause. Nothing fancy. Just a small ask.

Participants who had received the Coke bought significantly more raffle tickets than those who hadn't. Roughly twice as many. For a gift they had not asked for, did not particularly need, and probably hadn't given a second thought to since finishing it.

The Coke cost about 10 cents. The raffle tickets bought in return averaged about 50 cents. The ratio of reciprocity triggered to the cost of the trigger was approximately five to one.

And here is the part that I find most instructive: participants who disliked the actor bought just as many raffle tickets as those who liked him. The reciprocity drive did not care whether they felt warmly toward the person who gave them the Coke. It fired regardless. Because reciprocity is not an emotional response to a person. It is a compulsive social mechanism triggered by the act of receiving — independent of how you feel about the giver.

Think about what that means for every relationship you are currently building with a buyer. Every time you give something valuable — before asking for anything in return — you are depositing into an account the buyer's unconscious is keeping whether they know it or not.



Let me be clear about something before we go any further, because this chapter could be read as a manual for calculating generosity — working out exactly how little you need to give in order to trigger the maximum reciprocal response, like some kind of psychological arbitrage.

That reading would be both accurate and completely wrong.

Accurate because the research does support the calculation: small, unexpected, personalised gifts produce larger reciprocal responses per unit cost than large, expected, generic ones. The mathematics of strategic generosity are interesting and we will get to them.

Wrong because calculated generosity — generosity deployed as a technique, without genuine intention to help — is detectable. Not always consciously. But at the level this book operates at, which is the level of the unconscious mind, inauthentic generosity has a different texture from genuine generosity. It feels like a setup. And the buyer whose unconscious detects a setup does not feel grateful. They feel managed. And managed people do not become advocates. They become cautious.

The strategic generosity in this chapter works most powerfully when the strategy and the genuine care are the same thing. When you give because

you want to help and because the act of giving happens to serve the relationship. That combination — real intention expressed through deliberate action — is where reciprocity becomes one of the most durable forces in any business relationship.

The most powerful gift is the one that costs you attention, not money. And the most powerful attention is the kind that tells the buyer: I was thinking about you when you weren't in the room.



The Science — Why This Feels Compulsive

Reciprocity is documented across every human culture studied by anthropology. Every single one. This is not a coincidence. It is an evolutionary adaptation so deeply wired that it predates language, probably predates complex social organisation, and certainly predates the modern sales profession.

The evolutionary logic is straightforward. Human beings survived by cooperating. Cooperation required trust. Trust required a mechanism that allowed individuals to give without certainty of immediate return — because if every gift required immediate reciprocation, no cooperative behaviour could ever get started. The reciprocity drive provided the mechanism: receive a gift, feel the obligation to return it, create the expectation that gifts will be returned, build the cooperative network that allows the group to function.

The drive is so fundamental that it fires even when people know about it and would prefer it didn't. In one study, participants who were explicitly told that the gift they were about to receive was intended to make them feel obligated still felt obligated after receiving it. Knowing the mechanism does not neutralise it. It just adds a layer of mild irritation on top.

Cialdini Reciprocity Research (Regan, 1971 / Cialdini, 1984): Waitstaff who left a single mint with the bill received a 3% tip increase. Two mints:

14% increase. One mint, then a return with a second ‘especially for you’: 23% increase. The personalised, unexpected second gift was three times more powerful than the simple two-mint gesture — because it activated both reciprocity and the feeling of being individually noticed. Both are powerful. Together, they are disproportionate.

What the mint study tells us — beyond the slightly depressing implication that our sense of gratitude can be activated by approximately 4 cents’ worth of confectionery — is that the specific form the gift takes matters as much as its existence. Personalised and unexpected beats generic and expected by a factor of roughly three to one. And the reason is not the mint itself. It is the signal the mint carries: someone thought about me specifically and acted on that thought.

That signal — I was thinking about you specifically — is the most powerful element of any gift in a reciprocity context. More powerful than the monetary value. More powerful than the timing. It activates not just the reciprocity drive but the social belonging system, the identity recognition response, and the trust circuits simultaneously. Which is why a timely, specific, personalised observation or introduction can produce stronger reciprocal engagement than an expensive but generic gift could ever achieve.



The Three Laws of Strategic Generosity

Law 1: Give before you ask.

This is the foundational law, and it is not negotiable. Reciprocity only works in one sequence: give first, the obligation is created, then the request lands on prepared ground. Giving after asking is not generosity. It is payment. And payment does not create obligation — it settles it. The gift that creates reciprocal pull is the one that arrives with no visible string attached, before any request has been made.

In practice: A relevant article sent to a prospect two weeks before a scheduled meeting. An introduction made to a useful contact with no mention of the upcoming conversation. An unsolicited observation about something you noticed in their market that they would find useful. All of these arrive before the ask. All of them deposit into the account.

Law 2: Make it unexpected and personalised.

The expected gift — the brochure, the generic follow-up email, the standard meeting confirmation — creates no reciprocal pull because it is not experienced as a gift. It is experienced as the normal cost of doing business. The unexpected gift — the thing the buyer didn't ask for, didn't anticipate, and could not have predicted — activates surprise, which amplifies the reciprocity response. And personalisation — the signal that this was made or chosen specifically for them — multiplies the effect further. Both elements together produce the disproportionate response the mint study documented.

In practice: Not 'I thought you might find our latest white paper useful.' That is generic, expected, and self-serving. Instead: 'I was reading something this morning about the regulatory change happening in your sector in Q3 and thought of your situation specifically — sharing it without any agenda, just in case it's useful for something you're already thinking about.'

Law 3: Give what costs you attention, not just money.

The highest-leverage gifts in B2B relationships are almost never the expensive ones. An introduction to exactly the right person, at exactly the right moment, costs you a five-minute email and perhaps some social capital. A relevant insight delivered at the moment it matters costs you the attentiveness to notice it and the thoughtfulness to pass it on. These acts of attention signal genuine care — which is rarer and more valuable than any physical gift. The buyer who feels attended to, over time, develops a trust and loyalty that no amount of corporate hospitality can manufacture.

In practice: Noting that a buyer mentioned a particular challenge in passing three weeks ago — and following up with something relevant when you encounter it, without being asked. The cost is attention. The return, in terms of relationship depth and reciprocal commitment, is disproportionate.



The Generosity Ladder — From First Contact to Long-Term Relationship

Strategic generosity is not a single gesture. It is a sequence — a set of deliberate giving actions that build compounding obligation and deepening relationship across the entire arc of a sales process and beyond.

Here is what that sequence looks like in practice.

Before the first meeting: Send something useful with no sales angle attached. A market observation, a relevant article, a specific question that signals you’ve done your homework about their world. The goal is to arrive at the first meeting already having given something — so that the relationship begins in the positive column, not at zero.

At the first meeting: Give before you take. Share a relevant observation from your broader experience before you begin asking discovery questions. Not as a pitch — as a contribution. ‘Before we get into what you’re facing, I wanted to share something I’ve been observing across organisations in similar situations, because I think it’s relevant context for the conversation.’ You are showing up as someone who came to give, not just to gather.

In the proposal: Include something useful regardless of whether they buy. A framework, a benchmark, a piece of analysis that is valuable in itself — not contingent on the deal proceeding. The buyer who receives a proposal containing something useful even if they don’t proceed has experienced generosity, not sales. That experience changes how they think about you.

Between meetings: The value-add follow-up. Not a check-in. Not a ‘just wanted to see where things stand.’ Something useful — an article, a connection, an observation — that makes the buyer glad they picked up the phone. Every between-meeting touchpoint is an opportunity to deposit into the account. Most salespeople make these touchpoints withdrawals. Make them deposits.

After the close: The unexpected post-close gesture. The thing you do after the deal is signed that has nothing to do with the contract. A handwritten note. An introduction you promised and followed through on. A personal check-in three weeks in to ask how the team is finding the transition. This is the gesture that transforms a transaction into a relationship. It tells the buyer — in a moment when they are most alert to whether your interest in them was genuine or merely commercial — that you are still paying attention now that the money is settled.



The Ben Franklin Effect — The Gift of Being Asked

Here is something about reciprocity that is counterintuitive enough to deserve its own section, because most salespeople would not think to deploy it.

In the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin was having a difficult relationship with a member of the Pennsylvania state legislature who was openly hostile to him. Rather than trying to charm the man or demonstrate his own worthiness, Franklin did something unexpected. He sent a note asking to borrow a rare book from the man’s personal library.

The man sent the book. Franklin returned it with a polite thank-you note. And from that point forward, the legislator was markedly warmer toward Franklin — eventually becoming a genuine ally. Franklin later reflected in his autobiography that a person who has done you a favour is more likely to do another than someone you have done a favour for.

The Ben Franklin Effect, as it became known, has since been replicated in laboratory settings: people who are asked to do a small favour for someone end up liking that person more — not less. The unconscious mechanism is self-perception: if I helped them, I must like them. The favour produces an internal rationalisation that makes the relationship warmer.

The sales application: asking a buyer for something small — their honest opinion, their professional perspective, their advice on a question you genuinely have — is not a sign of weakness. It is a reciprocity trigger that runs in reverse. The buyer who feels their opinion was sought and valued becomes, without either party necessarily realising why, more favourably disposed toward the person who asked.

‘Before I put the proposal together, I’d value your perspective on something — you know this market better than I do, and I want to make sure I’m not missing something obvious.’ That question does three things simultaneously: it acknowledges the buyer’s expertise, it signals that you are paying attention to their specific situation, and it activates the Ben Franklin dynamic. The buyer who has given you something — their insight, their time, their honest assessment — has already begun investing in the relationship. Investment, as we covered in Chapter 14, creates its own pull toward continuation.



When Generosity Backfires — The Manipulation Detection Problem

I said this at the start of the chapter and I’ll say it again here, because it is the most important thing in it.

Calculated generosity — generosity deployed as a technique, with visible expectation of return — does not produce reciprocity. It produces reactance. The buyer whose unconscious detects that the gift was a setup feels, not gratitude, but a mild desire to resist. They don’t always know why. They just find themselves slightly less trusting, slightly more guarded, slightly more interested in keeping some distance.

How do you know if you've crossed the line? The simplest test I know: would you give this gift if you knew with certainty they would never buy from you?

If the honest answer is no — if the gift is contingent on the possibility of a sale — then it is not a gift. It is an investment in the expectation of return. And investments in the expectation of return are not invisible to the unconscious mind. They have a transactional texture that genuine generosity does not. The buyer will feel it before they can name it.

If the honest answer is yes — if you would still send the article, still make the introduction, still follow up with the observation three weeks later even knowing there would never be a commercial outcome — then the generosity is genuine. And genuine generosity, expressed with strategic timing and attention, is one of the most powerful forces in any long-term business relationship.

The test is not whether you hope for a return. Hoping for a return is human and entirely reasonable. The test is whether the giving is conditional on that return. Unconditional giving, strategically timed — that is the sweet spot. Warm, genuine, and deliberately placed. And powerful for all of those reasons together.



The Tactic in Summary

Reciprocity is one of the oldest and most compulsive drives in the human social nervous system — documented across every known human culture, firing automatically upon receipt of a gift regardless of how the receiver feels about the giver. The Coke study demonstrated that a 10-cent gift produced a 50-cent reciprocal response. The mint study demonstrated that personalised, unexpected gifts produce three times the reciprocal pull of generic ones.

The three laws: give before you ask, make it unexpected and personalised, and give what costs you attention rather than just money. The generosity

ladder sequences deliberate giving from first contact through post-close — building compounding obligation and deepening relationship at every stage. The Ben Franklin Effect adds a counterintuitive dimension: being asked for something small activates the same relational warmth as giving something.

The foundation of all of it: the generosity must be genuine. Calculated generosity has a transactional texture that the unconscious mind detects and resists. Genuine generosity, expressed with deliberate timing and genuine attention, produces the kind of reciprocal pull that no amount of calculated giving can replicate.

Three Questions Worth Sitting With

- 1. For each of your five most important current prospects, what have you given them — before asking for anything in return? Not sales collateral. Not meeting prep. Something that was useful to them regardless of whether they ever bought anything from you. If the answer is nothing, you know where to start.**
- 2. Think about the most generous thing a salesperson has ever done for you — something that made you feel genuinely attended to rather than sold to. What was it? What did it produce in you? That experience is the one you are trying to create for your buyers.**
- 3. Apply the test: for the last three things you gave to prospects — articles, introductions, insights — would you have given those things if you knew with certainty the person would never buy? If the answer is no, what would genuine generosity look like in those situations?**

THE EXERCISE

Before your next five significant prospect meetings, identify one useful thing you can give each prospect before the meeting — something personalised to their specific situation, unexpected, and with no visible sales angle. Not a white paper from your marketing department. Something you found, noticed, or created specifically because of what you

know about this particular person's world.

Then observe — honestly — what happens to the energy of those meetings compared to meetings where you arrived with nothing. The difference will be visible. And once you've felt the difference, you will find that deliberate giving becomes less of a practice and more of a habit.

Which is, of course, when it becomes most powerful. The salesperson who gives habitually — who sees the world through the lens of 'what would be useful to the people I'm building relationships with?' — is not deploying a technique. They are being the kind of person that buyers want to work with. And that, ultimately, is what all twenty tactics in this book are building toward.

Next: Tactic 18 — Vulnerability as Influence

We've just talked about giving something. Now we're going to talk about something more counterintuitive: showing something. Specifically, showing the parts of yourself and your offer that are imperfect. And why — done correctly — this is one of the most powerful trust-building moves available to you.

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