Like a fish out of water

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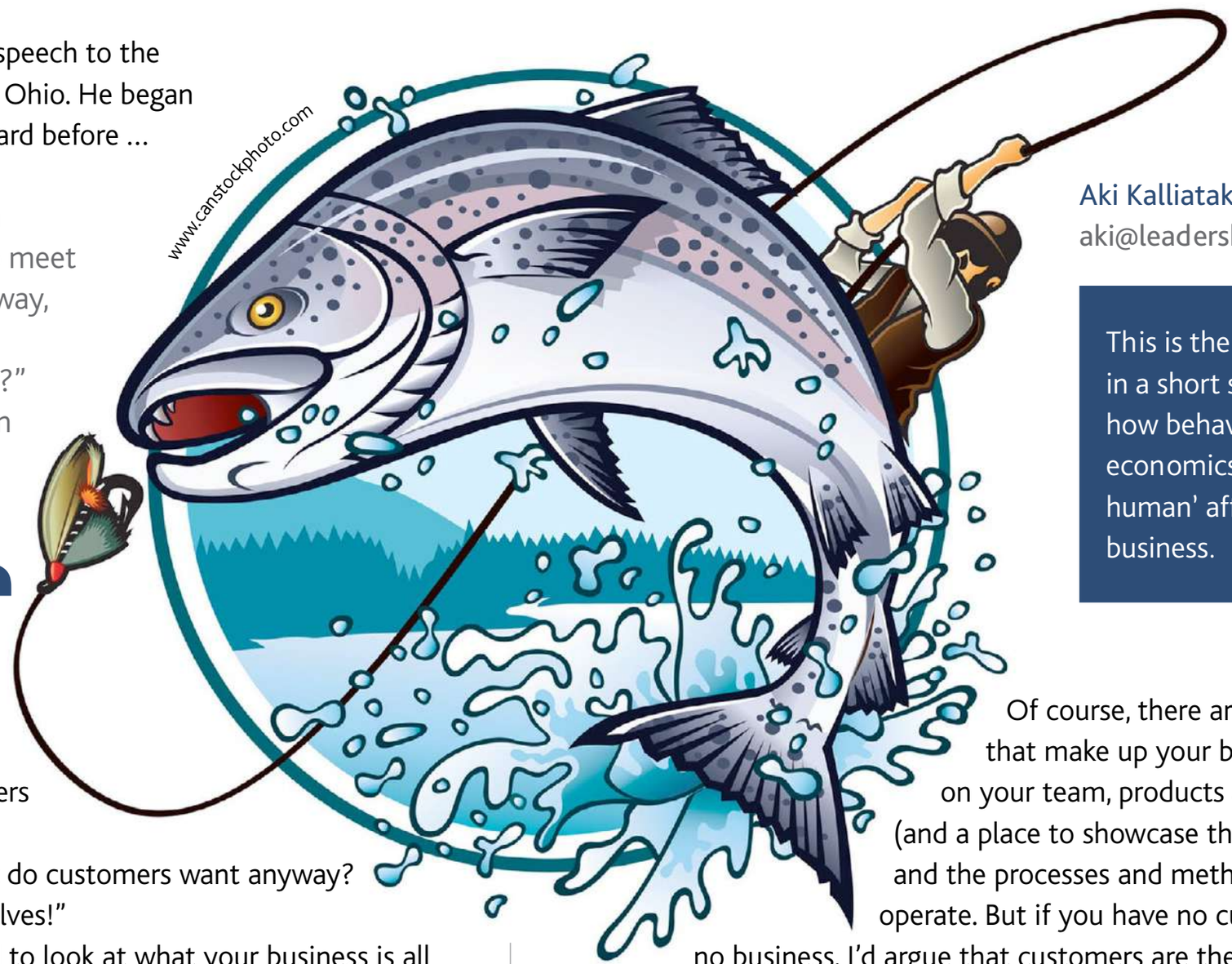
This is the next article in a short series on how behavioural economics and 'being human' affects your business.

In 2005, author David Wallace gave a speech to the graduation class at Kenyon College in Ohio. He began with a story that you probably have heard before ...

> "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"



Wallace went on to state that the most important and obvious realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. In business, customers are the water.

Businesspeople always ask me, "What do customers want anyway? So often, they don't even know themselves!"

But if we take one step back, we need to look at what your business is all about. In what is often misquoted, management guru Peter Drucker defined a business as ...

> "A social group that differs from other social groups in only one way: businesses must have customers ... The purpose is to create and keep its customers."

Of course, there are many other parts that make up your business: people on your team, products and services (and a place to showcase those products) and the processes and methods by which you operate. But if you have no customers you have no business. I'd argue that customers are the most important.

Customers are everything. They are (hopefully) around us all the time. They are the water of business. They are the purpose behind all actions and communication, and we'd better have a strategy to take care of them – even when they don't know what they want!

On the one hand, the water analogy is great because without water we die. But, just as the two fish in the story are so submerged in water that

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they struggle to see it, businesses are so immersed in customers that they can't make sense of it. Naturally, many leaders don't consider customer care the best use of time. But leaders must choose the success factors of the business where they want to focus.

Some justify their hesitation – they say that trying to affect the water all around doesn't make sense. But if you think about the impact of an oblivious and unintentional approach to customer experience, designing it with little purpose and unable to understand how it affects your business's success, of course you will end up in trouble. One only has to look at retailers that no longer exist to see the path of destruction wreaked by unconscious customer strategy.

What about the fact that customers don't know what they want?

In the movie Men in Black, my favourite scene is when Jay (played by Will Smith) as a cocky newbie, has his first encounter with aliens. He turns to his senior Kay (Tommy Lee Jones) and asks why they don't just tell the world that aliens exist. After all, "... people are smart, they can handle it." Kay responds ...

> "A person is smart, but people are dumb, panicky, dangerous animals, and you know it." And then he added: "Fifteen hundred years ago, everybody knew the Earth was the centre of the universe. Five hundred years ago, everybody knew the Earth was flat, and 15 minutes ago, you knew that people were alone on this planet. Imagine what you'll 'know' tomorrow."

This idea perfectly captures that even though we people can intellectually comprehend something new, it's often difficult for us to believe and accept new ideas and make normal and coherent changes. In psychological terms, we call these 'cognitive biases', and there are hundreds of them.

Take an example: How many times have you heard someone saying, "But isn't this just so obvious?" Indeed, how many times have you said this? We say it when we grasp that some request or recommendation you thought you delivered wasn't acted on. This is called the 'Signal Amplification Bias' and, not to put too fine a point on it, people believe they said a lot more than they did in reality. It explains how most miscommunication occurs. We habitually fail to realise how little we actually communicate with others.

I'm willing to put money on it when I say that you probably see the effects of this hundreds of times a day. You can understand why it happens. You deal with this dozens of times a day. You see how your store is planned, where items are placed, and why, and you work with the processes like payment by credit card, for example, or ordering a customised braai pack for a customer's order.

But for your customers, this may be the first time. Not only that, but their lives outside of your business are probably overwhelmingly filled with too much complexity. "I just don't have the time to figure this all out!" they say to themselves, and then suddenly it all explodes in frustration when one small innocuous spark is lit.

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A customer management strategy's entire purpose is to improve the quality of the water – the customers' experiences. You cannot do it in a self-centred way. You need to be aware of the greater context of their lives and listen to and observe the obvious and not so obvious clues they give you about what they need, want and desire.

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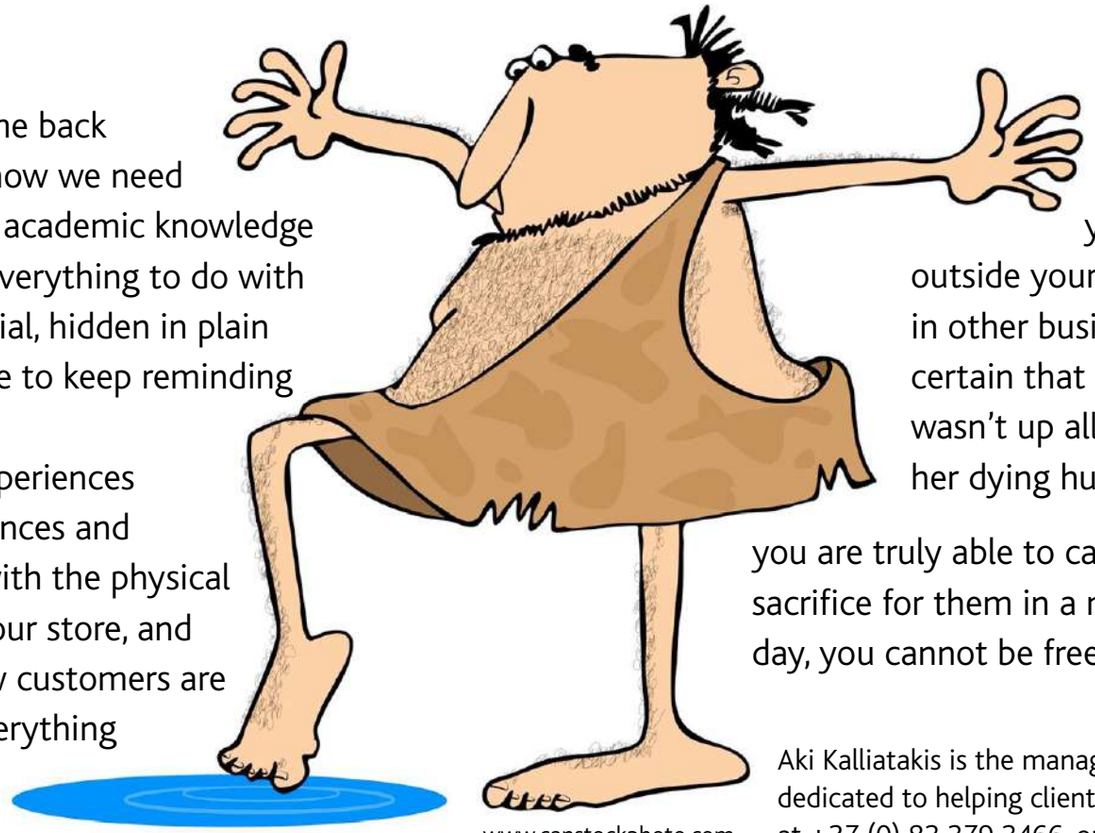
To end his graduation speech, Wallace came back to the fish-in-water story. He spoke about how we need to value things like our education – not the academic knowledge that we accumulate and regurgitate – but everything to do with simple awareness of what is real and essential, hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, and we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: "This is water."

I'd translate that thought for customer experiences this way: The real value of customer experiences and customer care have almost nothing to do with the physical layout, processes, people and products of your store, and everything to do with the awareness of how customers are essential, how their experiences connect everything around us that makes up the business.

We need to move away from our worship of ourselves and our businesses and live in the real world of our customers. Unless you know for sure what they experience outside your store, at work, at home, on the roads, and in other businesses, you cannot be free. Unless you are certain that the tired woman who snapped at your staff wasn't up all night for three nights in a row holding her dying husband's hand, you cannot be free. Unless you are truly able to care about others, reach out to them, and sacrifice for them in a myriad of petty, and unsexy ways, every day, you cannot be free.



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