

It's Always Just Three Things by Mark Matteson



I was riding in a car with a client on our way to lunch. He was very happy with the training we had just conducted for his company. He said, "I like the way you got everyone involved right away this morning. Even though you covered everything you and I had discussed, you found a way to pull them into the learning."

"Thanks," I said. "As you observed, I begin every seminar with a simple question, 'What do YOU hope to gain today?' and proceed to list them on a flip chart." "Why do you do that?" he asked. The answer was simple, "It's not about me."

Later, I reflected upon our conversation. I have asked that question—"What do YOU hope to gain today?"—hundreds of times and become a sponge, a generalist, in response. I can talk about almost ANY topic, in part because I have been an inveterate reader of books (over 2,500 since 1986) for over 25 years. Crazy, huh? Guess what I have learned from all those books and seminars? The common denominators of achievement and causes of success are always just **Three Things!**

Another friend of mine recently called me "**The Three Things Guy**". It was a compliment. He said, "You consistently take a convoluted issue and make it simple, turning complex challenges into actionable items that lead to results." Pausing, I replied, "So it's always just three things?"

Smiling, he said, "Evidently."

I guess because I am lazy, I pursue actions that lead to results. I want to have balance in my life. I want to be effective, more results in less time.

As we were driving, he said, "Okay, what are the three things a new *salesperson* needs to know?" Without missing a beat, I outlined them: "One, ask well-thought-out, open-ended questions. Two, dominate the listening to understand the pain. Three, offer a choice of yeses in tiers of solutions."

Impressed, my friend asked, "Okay, you recently lost forty pounds and ten inches off your waist. What are the three things in *wellness*?"

Smiling, I replied, "One, eat small portions, five times a day, think palm of the hand. Two, improve the quality of the food—*real food*, not too much, mostly plants. Three, choose an exercise you can and will do six times a week—walk, swim, weights."

Now we were on a roll. "*Marketing*," he yelled. I said, "Keep strict accounts, leverage technology, and stay in touch!"

Our conversation became very animated. I felt like a contestant on a game show. Now he was trying to stump me, "*Time management!*"

I responded, "One, on paper, write down five goals for this next year and choose one that is the most important. Two, plan your day on paper during the first thirty minutes of your day. Three, do first things first, one thing at a time, and finish what you start!"

"How about *writing*?" he challenged.

"Books, special reports, e-newsletters, articles, blogs, it's all the same. What is most important is to choose a topic you are passionate about, write as well as you can every day, three pages or two hours, whichever comes first, and finish what you start."

"*Parenting*," he exclaimed.

I replied, "Develop empathy—go back and remember what it was like to be 10 years old—and listen to your children. Affirm where they CAN be, not where they are. Reward the behavior you want repeated, progress not perfection."

Now he was laughing out loud. Determined to trip me up, he yelled out, "*Attitude!*"

A favorite subject of mine, I replied, "Be grateful for what you have, make a list. Be mindful of two things: books and people, people and books. It's not about you; take action serving others without any thought of reward."

"That's amazing" he said. "It really is just three things isn't it? What if an audience stumps you on a topic you don't know about? Has that ever happened?"

"Yes," I replied somberly. "In that situation, I ask the audience. We capture it on a flip chart. We vote on the top three. Simple. Who said I had to have all the answers! Those flip chart notes end up in my journal."

"Two more," he said. "*Leadership.*"

"Personal or business?" I asked. "*Business!*" he replied.

"Okay, business: Where is this bus going? Who is on the bus? Are they in the right seat on the bus?"

"How about *customer service*?" he asked. "You mean, KEEPING customers?" I questioned. "Yes," he replied.

"Okay, well I would say: Actively listen to an angry customer, echo their emotions, and then thank them for their feedback and get to work on solving the challenge."

"So when you give a talk, whether that's a keynote or all-day seminar, do you use the Three Things as an outline?"

"Yes," I said. "Most audiences are looking for simple solutions to complex and challenging issues. I try to keep it simple. The takeaways are more inclined to be applied when you do."

He continued, "I know your kids play basketball, one overseas professionally and the other at the university level. What are the three things for that sport?"

"Well, as you know, THAT is my favorite topic. High school, college, pros, it's all the same. The Three Things for hoops are defense, free throws, and rebounds. Whoever does a better job in those three areas will win ninety percent of the time. As Pete Carril of Princeton fame said with the title of his book, *The Smart Take from the Strong*."

We finally arrived at the restaurant for lunch. "What are you going to order?" he asked.

I responded, "Whatever I order, IT'S ALWAYS THREE THINGS: real food, not too much, mostly plants!"

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