

Hugh's Rackspace Book

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A CARTOONIST'S PERSPECTIVE

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gapingvoid press • Miami, FL

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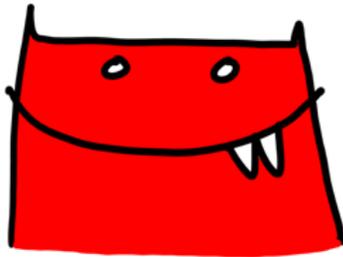
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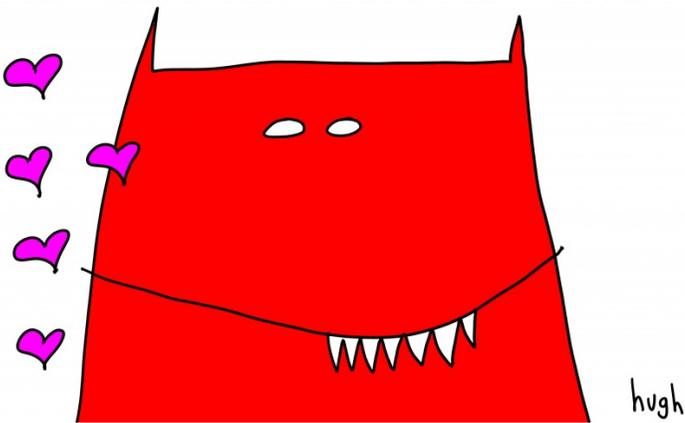
hugh's Rackspace book

-a cartoonist's perspective



by hugh macleod @gapingvoid

We love startups...



[Of all the cartoons I drew for Rackspace, this is my sentimental favorite...]

INTRODUCTION

How does a company go from zero to a market cap of seven billion, in only a decade... just by being social?

In 2010 Rackspace, the large cloud computing company from Texas, hired my company, gapingvoid, to draw some cartoons for them. It's been one of the most rewarding and interesting gigs I've ever had.

Note that I said they were "large." A decade before that, they were a small company. It took them only about ten years to go from "tiny" to a billion dollars in annual sales. That's pretty amazing by any standard, even more

so when you consider they're from sleepy ol' San Antonio, not Silicon Valley.

There are already plenty of business journalists, bloggers and MBA-types out there who have written about how Rackspace got so successful so quickly.

I wanted to add to that conversation, from an artist's perspective.

Work is not just about making money. We were put on this earth to grow, to better ourselves, to be expansive. In this regard, art and business have a lot to teach each other. The reasons we get up every morning and dedicate our lives to a task is just too important a subject to be interpreted through a single filter.

I hope this helps.

1. "IT'S THE CULTURE,
STUPID."

FANATICAL.

(kiss any hope of ever leading a normal life goodbye.)

hugh

Rackspace.com

The one thing I learned from working with Rackspace, is how instrumental the culture of a company is to its success or failure.

It sounds obvious, but not everybody pays attention to it.

I like how this “Fanatical” cartoon above came about. It all started in the very earliest days of the company. Here’s how I remember the story being told to me:

In 1998 three young San Antonio techies, Dirk Elmendorf, Richard Yoo and Pat Condon started a web hosting service in order to handle the hosting needs of the software apps that they wanted to build for their clients. They got the startup capital from a local San Antonio investor, Graham Weston. All well and good.

The trouble began when one of their customers tried to get some online support from them and failed miserably. Ticked off, the customer somehow managed to find Graham Weston’s contact details, and sent him a very irate email.

Aghast, Graham immediately tried to nip this problem in the bud, and phoned up David Bryce, who managed support for the company.

David Bryce knew that just answering the phone wasn’t good enough, they had to be *fanatical* in their support, or else they really didn’t have a business...

So ever since then, the “Fanatical” idea stuck, somehow. It became what’s called a cultural cornerstone. It would inform everything they did from then on.

And that’s what culture is:

Culture is the thing that informs behavior in the absence of rules. It is the thing that tells you how to behave, when there’s no one or no instruction manual telling you what to do.

So when Rackers (the name Rackspace employees use to call themselves) are required to go the extra mile, they don’t need to ask permission first, they just do it. Having “Fanatical” in their cultural DNA has already given them the clear.

But it has to be real, it can't just be lip service. Otherwise it's just empty and hypocritical.

And yes, it also means letting them know that there's a price to be paid. Like giving up the easy life and the easy answers, forever.

2. CULTURAL OBJECTS



[Rob La Gesse](#) is the groovy cat at Rackspace who first hired me and the gapingvoid team.

He's also the guy who hired my friend, [Robert Scoble](#), their startup liason officer, a year or two before that.

He's a lot like me and Scoble, i.e. very much his own man, very much an individual. I suppose that's why we always got along.

Above is a t-shirt idea I designed for Rob. The first time he saw it was when I posted it live on my blog, i.e. the same time everybody else first saw it.

He may have liked it, he may not have. That's how Rob and I always worked together. Like I said in a recent blog post, "He lets me just post stuff without getting pre-approval. We like doing it that way because it lets him see the work for the first time in the wild, which keeps the thinking fresher, somehow..."

The thing is, there's a method to the madness. If the idea fails, hey, it's just a little cartoon on a blog post. We can quickly and easily try something else the same day. It's not like we blew money on a Superbowl ad that ended up bombing...

But if the idea works, it works REALLY well. The idea gets emailed around, both inside and outside the company, to employees, shareholders, customers and non-customers alike. It suddenly takes on a life of its own, completely on its own merit.

In other words, it suddenly becomes a cultural object (i.e. a [social object](#) that articulates the company culture), as opposed to just a usual piece of commercial, "*Here's-why-you-should-give-us-your-money*" messaging (You know, the kind that nobody actually cares about).

Rob and I never planned it this way, we just started talking and this is kinda how it evolved. That's kinda how we both roll.

Which is why, after a couple of decades of working with clients, Rob is one of my all-time favorites. Rock on.

3. "WHY ARE YOU HERE?"



This is one of the earliest cartoons that I did for Rackspace, and one of my favorites.

It was an internal message, aimed at Rackers, designed to be turned into posters and hung up on cubicle walls (Everyone at Rackspace works in cubicles, even the President and CEO).

It tries to say, “Everybody has to eat, sure, everybody has bills to pay, sure, but that’s not the only reason for being here. And if it is the only reason, if you’re not driven by other, higher things, you may not fit in here long-term, sorry.”

It turned out that not everybody at Rackspace liked the cartoon.

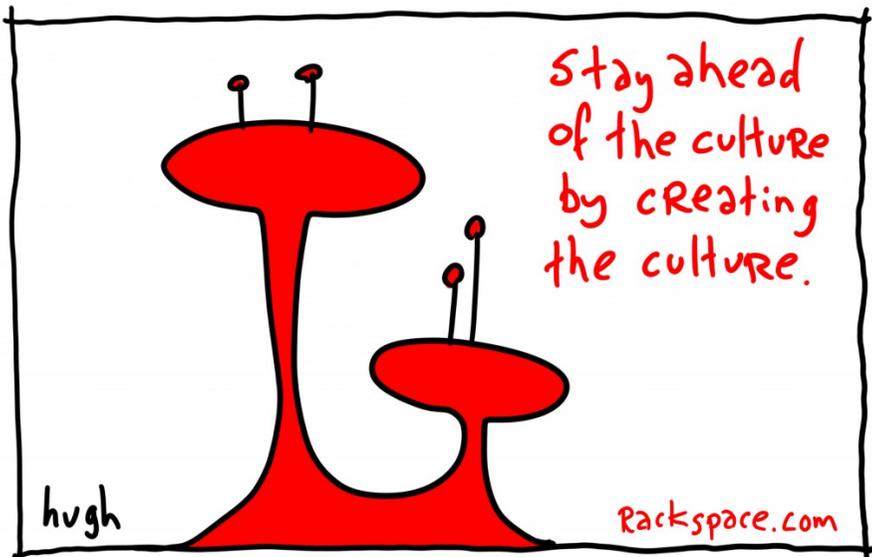
I thought that would get me in trouble. Far from it.

Rob La Gesse told me that just by showing people the cartoon and gauging their reaction to it, he could immediately tell *exactly* what kind of employee they were: The people who were just here for the paycheck HATED the cartoon, the people who were at Rackspace for higher purposes LOVED the cartoon.

Again, the cartoon has no big selling point, no “*Here’s why you should be happy to work here*” message. The cartoon simply expressed a sentiment deeply held within the actual culture.

Which is why, of course, it works.

4. REMEMBER THE CULTURE



From my earliest days of working for Rackspace, I saw what a big deal “Culture” is to the company, even if it isn’t always that obvious to everybody working there. So I wanted to draw them a cartoon that reminded them of that.

The thing to remember about Rackspace is, the thing they're selling (web hosting) is not only pretty much a commodity, but a commodity also sold by very, very big competitors like Amazon, Google and Microsoft.

In other words, their competitors can theoretically beat them on scale and price, so there's no point fighting them on that. In other words, if you're going to fight Goliath, *don't let Goliath choose the weapons.*

What Rackspace DOES have, however, is their unique culture of "*Fanatical Support.*" That is their secret weapon that nobody can take that away from them.

5. THE POWER OF EMPATHY



This was a t-shirt I did for the Rackspace booth at the [2011 SXSW trade show](#). Professionally, it's one of my fondest memories.

For the project, I wanted to create a message that actually resonated with the people attending SXSW, that actually worked on a real, emotional level.

So instead of just making the usual t-shirt with a company logo on it (or, heaven forbid, a sales message), we got rid of the logo altogether. In fact, we put any mention of Rackspace to side, right there on the bottom, almost out of site.

Instead, front and center was the message, *"Life is short, make it amazing."*

It expressed a sentiment that a lot of SXSW attendees could relate to.

As can a lot of Rackers. It was *an expression of mutual empathy*, not a message of potential mutual benefit.

I guess the idea worked. We had printed up about four thousand shirts, we were thinking of giving about half of them away during the four-day event, with the rest left over to give away at other events.

Wrong. All the t-shirts pretty much were gone within twenty four hours. The line almost went out the door. It was a stampede.

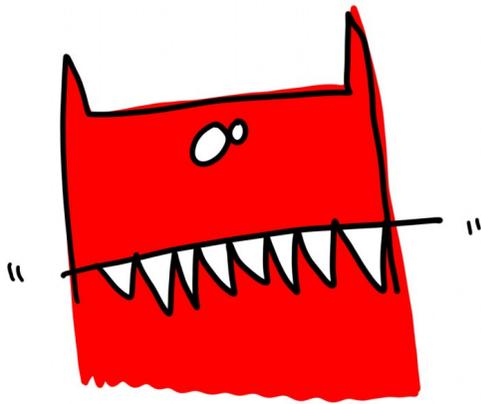
I was so proud.

Lesson from the story: If you tell your story in terms of real human needs, real human emotions and empathy, you will tap into something far more powerful than any objective, price-based value proposition.

We all know "cheap." Wal-Mart, Amazon and Chinese manufacturing have taught us that already, but what we're actually hungry for is something else:

Connection, meaning, purpose, mattering... and yes, *love*.

6. "WE'RE HUMAN.
SOMETIMES WE GET IT
WRONG."



we screwed up...

[Rackspace.com](https://www.rackspace.com)

The idea for this cartoon was to send out a postcard to people, if and when we wanted to tell them that that we (Rackspace) had messed up. A little piece of snail mail telling them that yes, we had gotten it wrong and yes, we're sorry.

No company is perfect. A little humanity (and humility) goes a long way when events painfully remind us of this.

This little red critter is named "Rex"; he's Rackspace's little mascot that I invented rather randomly one day.

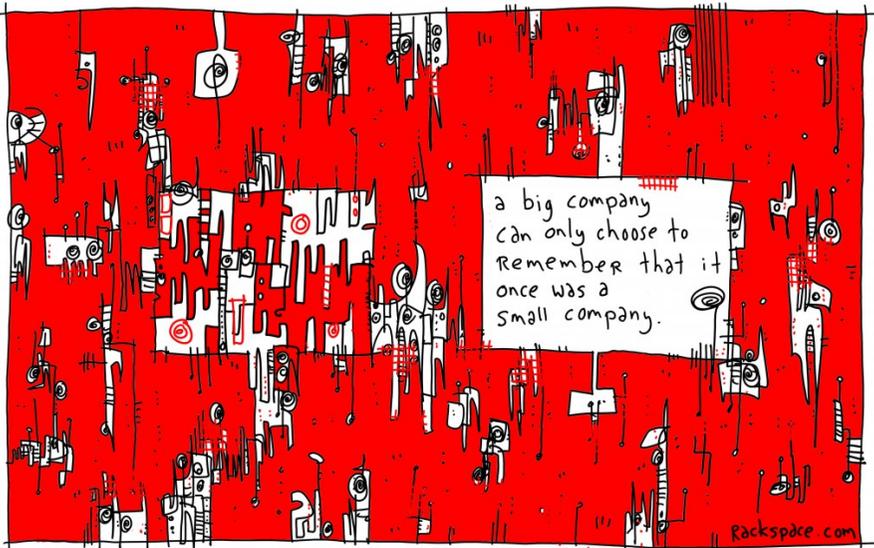
Why did I invent a little mascot? No idea. It was kinda random, but it just seemed to work, somehow.

The critter doesn't actually matter, per se. What matters is the emotions and the ideas that the critter embodies. Rex does a pretty good job at that. He's nice enough *without being too nice*, he has enough of that mischievous quality that makes you think he represents something genuine.

A lot of cartoon critters out there are just happy and nice because they want to be liked and be perceived as non-threatening. I was more interested in creating something that was able to express actual feeling, empathy and... well, reality.

The amount of emotion that swirls around any business, large or small, is pretty intense and varied. I wanted Rex to be able handle all that intensity from the very beginning.

7. "REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE."



It's easy to forget where one has come from, especially if one has come from there very quickly.

Rackspace went from a small startup in sleepy ol' San Antonio to a billion-dollar global company in only a decade. Incredible growth by any measure.

A lot of companies, once they get big, start thinking that they're invincible.

A friend of mine, Ty Mitchell, is a cowboy living out in West Texas. He's tall and skinny. If you were a big-muscled guy, you could easily fool yourself in thinking you could take him in a fight.

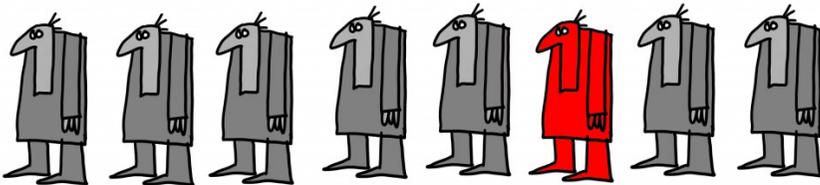
"Fool" would be the key word here. Besides being able to rope a steer and ride a bull, Ty served in the Navy Special Forces. Though a gentle and cordial soul, he's also a trained killing machine. Picking a fight with Ty would be a really bad idea.

"A lot of big guys think that being big is the same thing as winning a fight," says Ty. "But it ain't. Knowing how to be bigger than somebody is not the same thing as knowing how to hurt somebody."

Metaphorically, this happens to a lot of companies as well. They get so used to winning by throwing their weight around, they forget that the little guy may have a few tricks up his sleeve.

So how do large companies avoid this fate? Like the cartoon implies, they do it simply by choosing not to. That's all. It's a philosophical and moral decision, not a business decision. It's something that can't be faked.

8. "DON'T BE NORMAL."



not everybody's cut out for "normal".

hugh

The cartoon above reads, "Not everybody's cut out for Normal".

Ever since we were kids and put into the industrial battery farms otherwise know as the public school system, we were conditioned to fit it, to conform, to do what we're told, to be "Normal."

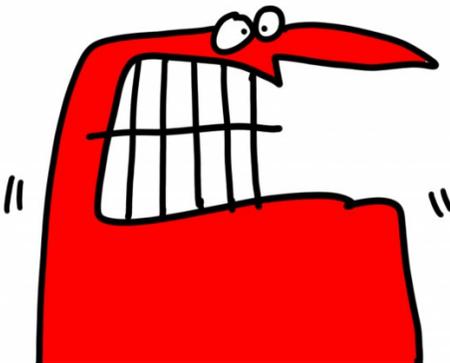
Which might work if you just want to be a pen-pushing worker-bee your whole life, but if you want to build a world class company, eh, not so much.

I wanted the cartoon to express the idea that “Lack of Normal” is where greatness originally comes from, that Rackspace recognizes this.

Does anybody actually want to hire people who just want a “normal,” boring career, whatever that means? I don't. I want people to be on fire.

9. INCREDIBLE CUSTOMERS

We live in incredible times.
and we want customers who concur.



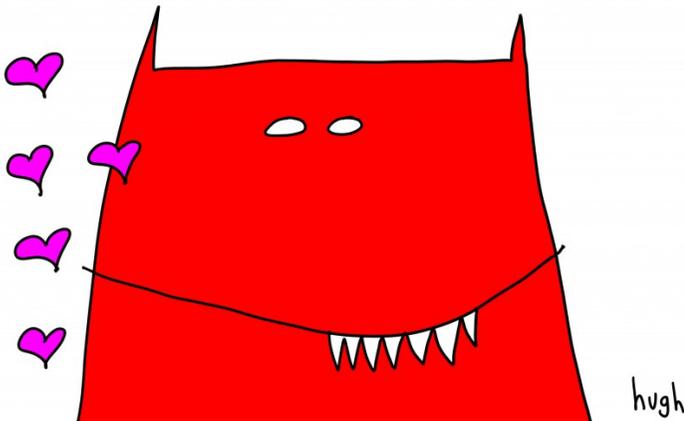
Rackspace.com

A simple enough idea: Instead of saying, “Here’s why you should become our customer”, it says, “*This is the kind of customer we like to have.*”

Going for the emotional connection. Simple, direct and honest. The good customers will get it, the bad customers probably won't, not so much. Rackspace is OK with that.

10. **WHO DO YOU
LOVE?**

We love startups...

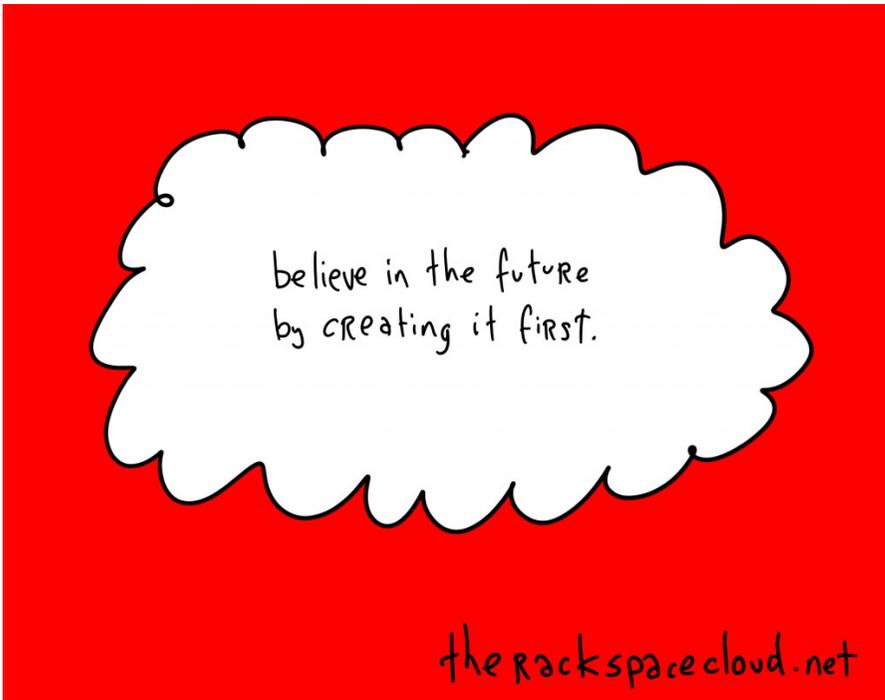


Rackspace started life out as a very small startup, not that long ago. Startup sensibility is still very much in its DNA. Even though it now has thousands of employees, its muscle memory still feels the startup twitch.

Which is why it spends so much time reaching out to small startups. It's not just because they want their business (they do), it's because it's a world they still relate to strongly.

I tried expressing this with a simple drawing and three little words. I think it got the point across.

11. THE CLOUD



Though “The Cloud” is still a relatively new idea, its premise is simple enough:

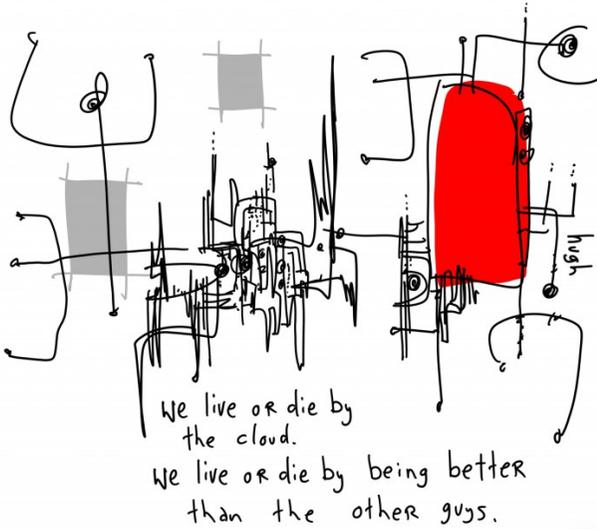
That by having all this vast amount of big data instantly available via The Cloud, you will be able to spend less time worrying about doing work that isn't actually creative.

The Cloud makes it easier to create a world that we actually want to live in. It's an optimistic thought that not everybody buys into, certainly.

But hey, not everybody wants to be optimistic, either. Some people don't want to create anything meaningful, either. It's a choice.

I drew this very simple picture of a nice, white fluffy cloud with a quite powerful statement inside it, to convey this idea. The juxtaposition of "soft and fluffy" and "powerful" is what makes it work, somehow.

12. LIVE OR DIE



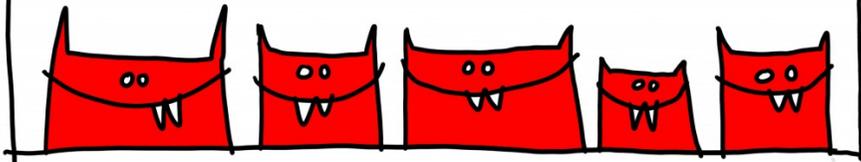
Rackspace.com

I drew this other cloud-related cartoon to kind of nail down what Rackspace bet its future on- The Cloud, plus being better than the other guys.

Notice how I said, “Being better than the other guys”, not “Service”. The former actually sounds like how people talk.

13. SMALL TEAMS, BIG
IMPACT

if we didn't think
we were going to
change the world,
we wouldn't be here.



#smallteamsbigimpact

Rackspace.com

“Small Teams, Big Impact” is a central idea to Rackspace – that major change comes from small teams, whether they’re working inside big companies or inside small companies.

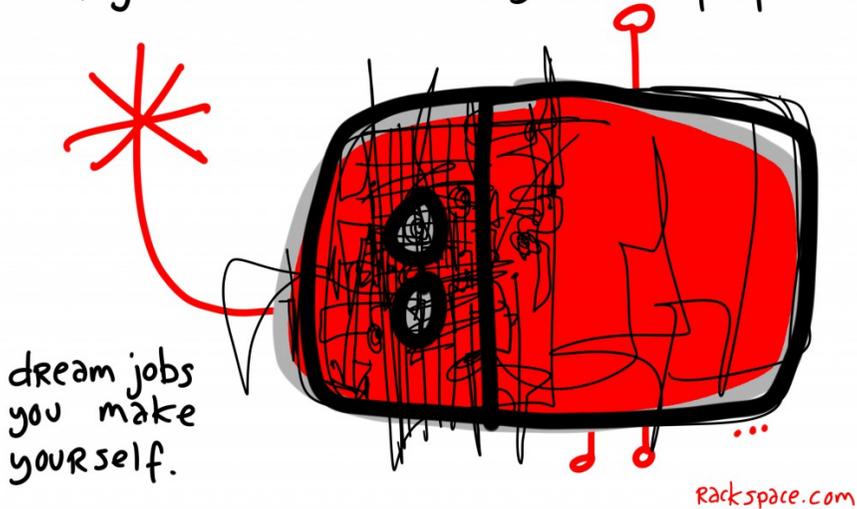
And what I’ve noticed over the years, is that these big impacts are rarely made unless there’s a lot of personal motivation driving the equation; motivation that’s bigger than, and more transcendent of, the job description.

The people at the top of the company can’t command people to be motivated, they can only allow people to feel motivated.

It’s not rocket science...

14. "DADDY, WHERE DO
DREAM JOBS COME
FROM?"

crap jobs are created by other people.



A smart employer doesn't try to create dream jobs for their employees out of thin air. A smart employer tries to create opportunities for its employees that are allowed to turn into dream jobs.

And it's equally smart to let the employees know that this is how it's done.
Not by command and control, not by decree, not by office politics.

15. LOVE MATTERS



@Rackspace

This is another t-shirt idea I did for them.

I know it embarrasses the grown-ups to say this, but... Love matters in business, as much as anywhere else. Rackspace knows this as much as any client I've ever worked with, large or small.

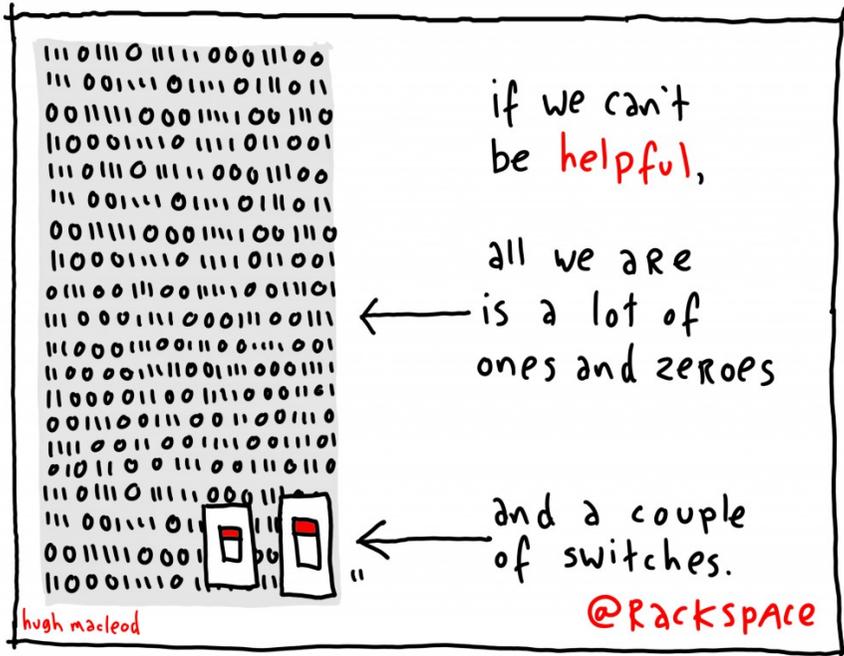
It's nothing to do with romantic love, of course. Love equals passion, equals care, equals real meaning and good work etc.

Nothing wrong with connecting 'Love' with \$1 billion in sales... Without Love, their whole "Fanatical Support" thing (something they built their whole company around) would be impossible. And I doubt there are any high-ups at Rackspace who would disagree with me.

It's too easy for any business large or small to get so busy with the making and the selling (i.e. normal stuff) that it forgets why it exists in the first place. It's too easy to forget the higher reasons.

But it's the higher reasons that make us more successful in the end. Like I said, it's easy to forget.

16. OLD SCHOOL



This was the last cartoon I drew for Rackspace, before I started writing this book. To me, it sums up the Rackspace ethos pretty well.

I got the idea for it when Rob La Gesse told me this story:

Rob was in a meeting with some MBA marketing types. Smart, good people, all great at their jobs.

They were talking about something or other, one of the MBA's asked, regarding some technical detail, "What is the R.O.I. on that?"

Rob, who hadn't had his morning coffee yet, suddenly snapped. "If you say 'R.O.I.' one more time, I'm walking outta here. Don't tell me about R.O.I. Tell me about how this is going to be HELPFUL to our customers."

Rob grew up in small-town West Texas, surrounded by ranchers and real cowboys, spurs and all. Out there, you don't get successful by talking about R.O.I. You get successful by being helpful, by keeping your word, by being polite, and perhaps most importantly, by being nice. As somebody with a house out in Alpine, Texas, I know this to be totally true.

Rackspace is one of the most successful tech/Internet companies in the world. Their astonishing success is the result of many things, certainly, but as far as I can tell, these old-school values have a lot to do with it.

When the so-called marketing gurus say, "Be Social", it's too easy to think of it just in terms of Facebook likes, Twitter retweets or whatever.

When really, what it comes down to, what it came down to for Rackspace, was just *plain ol' good manners*. Even though Rackspace is one of the most dynamic companies in the tech sector, like I said, this stuff is old school.

Something worth thinking about...

17. "WE WILL REMEMBER WHO WE ARE"



This is a sketch for a planned mural to go up at the entrance of “The Castle”, i.e. the Rackspace World HQ in San Antonio.

The entire message is about “remembering who they are”, remembering where they came from and, more importantly, remembering just what it was that made them successful.

*We are an incredible company
And what made us incredible
What made us our first billion dollars
is the same thing that made us our very first dollar
That insane need of ours
to remain human
to feel human
to our customers
and to ourselves
To not treat them like mere metrics
by first not treating ourselves
like mere metrics
In a world of sameness and commodity
In a world of spreadsheets and numbers
against all odds
We will be unique
We will remember who we are*

At some point during their lifespan, every person or every group has to make the decision whether to keep one’s soul, or not. Keep the fire alive, or not. Remember where they came from, or not.

It’s an easy enough fire to extinguish; all it needs is a convenient excuse and a few external influences in order to douse the flames.

Convenient excuses are a dime-a-dozen, that’s why they’re called convenient.

Rackspace commissioned this mural because they never want to forget who they are. Exactly.

About Hugh MacLeod

Hugh MacLeod (@gapingvoid) has published three books, including *Ignore Everybody*, a Wall Street Journal best seller. His blog Gapingvoid was one of the very first blogs, listed often as one of the hundred most popular in the world – you can sign up for a free Cartoon of the Day [here](#).

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, MacLeod spent his formative years in Scotland, where he claims to have acquired his acerbic wit and keen intuition for what makes people tick. He began drawing cartoons in his teens, later popularized on the back of business cards, and today MacLeod's work hangs in the collections of major corporations around the world including Intel, HP, SAP and several others. gapingvoid ltd works with companies around the world helping them define and articulate cultures, transform work spaces, and create marketing campaigns.

About gapingvoid

gapingvoid was founded by Hugh MacLeod (CCO) and Jason Korman (CEO) to effect change in business using Hugh's distinct style of art. The company offers bespoke services (including gapingvoid CultureMail), which you can read more about on the [gapingvoid homepage](#).

Clients include Rackspace, Intel, Cisco, Roche Pharmaceuticals, Babson College, TechCrunch, Dewar's Whiskey etc. Gapingvoid also has a daily cartoon newsletter that makes a lot of people happy.

People ask Hugh, as an artist, why are you so obsessed with the office? And he answers, "because that is where the action is, that is where we all need the most help. Sure, there are other places where the human drama takes place: homes, bars, restaurants, schools, shops, the street etc. But considering how central business is to our lives, I find it odd that more people don't understand how important art can be to the work environment."

So gapingvoid is on a mission to help them understand this better.

About Rackspace

Fanatical Support® has made Rackspace the service leader in cloud computing. We deliver enterprise-class [hybrid cloud](#) infrastructures to businesses of all sizes and kinds around the world. We started in 1998 and we host more than 205,000 customers worldwide. Rackspace combines [public cloud](#), [private cloud](#), and [dedicated bare metal computing](#) to provide the perfect infrastructure for each customer's specific needs. And, the Rackspace Hybrid Cloud is powered by OpenStack® and backed by Fanatical Support.