

or to watch our kids for a few hours, or to take in our mail when we're out of town. What's the best way to motivate our friends and neighbors to help us? Would cash do it—a gift, perhaps? How much? Or nothing at all? This social dance, as I'm sure you know, isn't easy to figure out—especially when there's a risk of pushing a relationship into the realm of a market exchange.

Here are some answers. Asking a friend to help move a large piece of furniture or a few boxes is fine. But asking a friend to help move a lot of boxes or furniture is not—especially if the friend is working side by side with movers who are getting paid for the same task. In this case, your friend might begin to feel that he's being used. Similarly, asking your neighbor (who happens to be a lawyer) to bring in your mail while you're on vacation is fine. But asking him to spend the same amount of time preparing a rental contract for you—free—is not.

THE DELICATE BALANCE between social and market norms is also evident in the business world. In the last few decades companies have tried to market themselves as social companions—that is, they'd like us to think that they and we are family, or at least are friends who live on the same cul-de-sac. “Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there” is one familiar slogan. Another is Home Depot's gentle urging: “You can do it. We can help.”

Whoever started the movement to treat customers socially had a great idea. If customers and a company are family, then the company gets several benefits. Loyalty is paramount. Minor infractions—screwing up your bill and even imposing a modest hike in your insurance rates—are accommodated.