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Business approach too simple to help solve a family issue

First published: Sunday, September 24, 2006

I learned a very valuable lesson in humility a week ago. To tell you how, I need to take you back in time.

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I was born in a town called Burns, Ore. At the time, the population was 4,850; it's probably nearer to 3,500 now, since the log mill went out of business. My hometown had one radio station (dedicated to country music) and one gas station.

The boys I grew up with prided themselves on their tight Wrangler jeans, cowboy boots and

the permanent Skoal impression in their back right jean pocket. The girls aspired to marrying the aforementioned cowboys and competing at rodeo in "Powder Puff Cattle Roping." Shortly after my birth, my father abandoned my mom and me; she was only 18 at the time. My grandparents helped us out, and my mom worked a series of low-paying, part-time jobs. We lived in a few trailer parks and periodically were the recipients of other people's kindness during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday seasons.

My mother met the man of her dreams when I was 12. They married and we moved. This became the turning point in my life and the reason I had to eat humble pie last week.

We moved to bigger and bigger cities, and I was exposed to different cultures, ways of life and, most importantly, to the quintessential value of education. I was the first college graduate in my family and certainly the first to get a master's degree. I've traveled the world and had enviable experiences. My grandmother is very sick and has recently been hospitalized. During the process of deciding on her care, I did some research into her condition and into the workings of Medicare and Medicaid. After all, this is how I approach a problem: primary research, consult experts, identify risks and then -- well, I'll leave the last step to the next paragraph because it's related to the humility part.

I talked with several physicians, a lawyer, Medicaid specialists in Oregon and followed a number of other leads. I found several potential inaccuracies in her diagnosis and in the proposed regimen for treatment. Moreover, I found a huge



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snag in the Medicaid process that if ignored could end up costing my grandmother thousands of dollars.

Here's where the "last step" mentioned above comes in: devise and communicate an action plan.

I talked to my mom; she understood everything and was ready to help. I talked to my uncle and got a markedly different response. He was immediately confused and, frankly, belligerent.

I sent an e-mail to my aunt and my life was threatened. OK, I'm exaggerating a bit here, but not much. The exact words were: "I'd like to slap the stuffing (expletive deleted) out of you." How's that for "Thank you so much for your heartfelt concerns"? It took me only an hour to figure out my disastrous misstep.

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