

Understanding and Developing Your Sales Force

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An important ingredient in the successful retail or service business is good selling. Without it, many sales are lost sales that may mean the difference between success and failure. This publication tells how you can train yourself and your employees to become creative sales people.

To many customers, the salesperson is the business. Therefore, if the sales personnel are bad, then so is the firm. Although important to all business, effective sales personnel are especially important to small business to compete with the big firms on things like assortment, price, and promotion. Selling effort, on the other hand, is one place where the small product or service retail business can compete with larger competitors and win.

Effective selling does not happen by accident. The small entrepreneur must work to achieve a high level of sales effectiveness in his or her business. In order to work toward this goal, the businessperson should be aware of the different types of salespersons, the selling process, and the attributes of effective salespersons. Applying such knowledge to a business situation should result in the desired goal of effective sales personnel the competitive advantage.

Types of Salespersons

There are three main types of sales personnel: (Classified by Level of Creative Effort)

Routine Effort _____ Creative Effort

Order-Handler Order-Taker Order-Getter

Figure 1. Types of Retail Sales Personnel

Order-Handler

The ticket-taker at the concert, the checker at the food store—these salespeople are working in a routine selling environment. But due to the nature of their jobs, they will be asked numerous questions by customers as well as hear complaints about prices and service. A knowledgeable person with a pleasant personality is especially needed for this job because this is usually the person who is dealing with the customer when the customer's money (payment) is received.

Order-Taker

As noted above, more creativity is found in this job as compared to the order-handler. The counter attendant at the fast food restaurant may take the order and then suggest that the customer might also wish to buy a hot apple turnover. Pleasant personality, fast service, and suggestion selling on the part of the order-taker can result in many additional sales.

Order-Getter

For many businesses, the heart of the selling process rests with the creative selling efforts of their salespeople. Of course, one of the greatest problems is that there are numerous order-handlers and order-takers in selling positions that should have order-getters for optimum selling effectiveness. Clothing, furniture, jewellery and appliances are just some of the many items that call for order-getters (a person who can handle a transaction, take an order, and most importantly, get an order). As for services, the home security salesperson, for example, who calls on a prospect because it is observed that the house has no dead bolt locks, is making that special effort to be an order-getter.

Even though all selling situations do not call for order-getters, all salespeople will be called upon to sell creatively from time to time. It is for this reason that all sales personnel need to have a working knowledge of the creative selling process.

Creative Selling Process

The creative selling process consists of eight steps, none of which is less important than any other if the process is to be effective. It should be emphasized to all employees that all steps are vital to the achievement of all effective selling.

Pre-Customer Contact

A smart builder would not attempt to build a house without a good foundation. Likewise, a businessperson should not place people on the sales floor or telephone until these people know the business, merchandise, services and customers. Before any contact is made with the customer, every salesperson should know:

Policies, Procedures, and Rules. Have these in writing for all employees to see and know.

Operation of Equipment

No matter whether the register is electronic or mechanical, the time to learn how to work it is not after a sale while the customer waits for change.

Target Market Knowledge

The best salesperson knows something of the likes and dislikes of the firm's primary customers. The business operator should tell all sales personnel about the business' customers and their life-styles. Tell the salespeople about customer's interests and ability to buy.

Product Knowledge

A salesperson gains confidence by knowing about the products and services he or she is selling. If a person sells shoes, it helps to know the merchandise as well as how to fit them. If a person sells building materials, the selling job is probably more effective if the salesperson can also help answer questions about home repairs.

It helps the person who sells clothes to know something about fabrics and current fashions. If the person is in the lawn service business, that person should know about lawn care. Most sales personnel will not take the initiative to acquire product knowledge. Management should make such knowledge available to them.

Prospecting

Although not appropriate to every selling situation, prospecting should be used whenever possible. Essentially, prospecting involves not waiting for the customer to show up at a store or to phone about a service. It is concerned with taking the initiative by going to the customer with a product or service idea. Prospecting may be two types: new or regular customer prospecting.

New Customer Prospecting

A salesperson sees that a person is getting married. Action is taken on this knowledge by contacting the person and telling her about appropriate items (or services) that might be of assistance to a new bride. By using newspapers and personal contacts, a salesperson can take the initiative to contact and create new customers.

Regular Customer Prospecting

A firm's best prospects are its current customers. A salesperson should make a practice of calling regular customers on a periodic basis to tell them about products or services. "Hello, Mrs. Anderson, I just wanted to tell you about the new shipment of dresses that we received today. As I unpacked them, I saw several that made me think of you". Prospecting with regular customers works! All salespeople should be encouraged to prospect by phone and in-person whenever they see regular customers. A word of caution must be emphasized. Don't go to the well too often. Prospecting with the same regular customer on a frequent basis can make prospecting lose the special feeling that it can create in customers. Do not overuse it.

Initial Contact

The most effective way to close a sale is to open it on a positive note. Unfortunately, most sales do not open this way.

The typical initial store contact begins in this manner:

Clerk: "May I help you?"

Customer: "No thank you, I'm just looking."

This ritual leaves much to be desired. Why? It is an automatic statement that shows no creativity on the part of the salesperson. Also, because the customer has heard the statement many times, his or her response is usually given without thinking what was said. Every salesperson should be challenged to treat each customer as an individual by responding differently to each customer.

Initial contact also means responding to customers when they enter the sales areas even when they cannot be waited on immediately. Salespeople should be instructed to tell waiting customers that "I'll be with you in a moment". Such actions will reduce the number of customers who leave without being served. When the employee is free to help the waiting customer, the initial comment should be "Thank you for waiting". A courteous, creative initial contact with the customer can go a long way to promote sales.

Presentation of Merchandise

In presenting merchandise (or service) to the customer, the salesperson should use product knowledge to the best advantage. How?

Buyer benefits

Although it is good to talk about the lawnmower's 3 1/2 horsepower motor, customers may be more interested in hearing about how fast the lawnmower will cut the grass. Product knowledge is important but the salesperson must remember what makes the customer buy. Clothes may be made of durable fabrics but it is also important to stress the implied benefit.

Customer Involvement

Product knowledge can be used to get customer involvement. Show the customer several features of the digital watch and then have the customer put it on and work it.

If the interest is there, it will be hard for the customer to take off the watch so that the salesperson can put it back into the case. The best way to present many products is to get involvement. Want to sell dance lessons? Get the customer on the dance floor and let the fun of

dancing do some of the selling. The same is true with clothes, perfume, sports equipment and almost anything else.

Limit the Choices

If during the sales presentation more than three items are in front of the customers, the chances of a sale are reduced while the possibility of shoplifting is increased. If, for example, the salesperson continues to carry dresses into the fitting room for the customer to try without removing any, the customer will likely not buy any because of the inability to decide from among so many choices. Also, with so many items under study, the clerk may lose track of how many items are in the fitting room. It is possible that some may be put on under the customer's clothes while the clerk is not present, thereby resulting in an expensive experience for the store. Likewise, if a travel agency attempts to sell a customer a Caribbean cruise, the chances of making the sale will diminish if too many trip options are presented. Unless there is a definite reason for an exception, the rule of three (never show more than three choices at one time) should be followed whenever merchandise is presented. Limited choices have been found to promote sales.

Use Showmanship

In presenting merchandise to the customer, encourage all personnel to be creative. Be enthusiastic about the merchandise. Hold the necklace up for the customer to see it. Make the portable baby crib "look" easy to work. Lay the different pieces of the cookware set before the customer in an attractive, easy-to-see everything manner. Ask your salespeople to think like a customer. If I were a customer, what would I like to see?

Message Adaptation

A knowledgeable salesperson should know about the products being sold. Message adaptation involves deciding what information is needed to sell a particular customer and how that information should be presented to that customer. Canned sales presentations do not allow for adaptation. The effective salesperson will make an effort to adjust the presentation to the customer.

If the customer knows about gardens and lawns, the person selling a lawn service should adapt the sales presentation to the level of the customer's expertise. Don't bore the customer with known facts. It could lose a sale.

Handling Objections

Remember, if objections are present, progress is probably being made on the sale. Most salespeople are afraid of objections. Stress to all employees that objections are a natural part of the selling process. They do not mean that the sale is lost. In most cases, all that is required to overcome an objection is more selling on the part of the salesperson.

Common types of customer objections that are faced by salespersons are:

- Product: "That dress looks out-of-date";
- Store: "You never have the right merchandise";
- Service: "If I believe what I hear, I can't get good service from you";

- Price: "It is just too expensive";
- Salesperson: "Are you sure these shoes fit right?"

These and other objections can be met by the salesperson in several ways. Using the above product objection as an example, these methods include: Yes-But: "Yes, it does look out-of-date, but it is the latest." This approach begins on a positive note by agreeing with the customer and then moves on to answer the objection.

Counter-question. "Why do you feel it's out-of-date?" the counter-question puts the ball back in the customer's court. By asking "Why?" the real reason of the objection may become known.

Restate Objection. "You feel that the dress looks out-of-date." By restating the objection, the customer may respond by saying, "No, I mean it just doesn't look right on me", or something of a similar nature.

This approach tends to reduce the magnitude of the objection in the eyes of the customer.

Direct Response. "The dress you have on was first shown at the market this season. It is the latest thing." Although offensive to some, this approach may be necessary if the customer is not going to buy unless the untruth can be corrected. Tact is important when using this approach.

These four approaches for handling objections are not meant to be all-inclusive. These and other approaches do point out, however, that objections should and can be answered by the salesperson; unless objections are overcome to the satisfaction of the customer, it is questionable that the sale will be made.

Closing the Sale

In various ways, the salesperson can assist the customer by helping him or her to make the buying decision. Closing techniques that can aid in this effort include:

- Offer a service. "Let us deliver it to you this afternoon." A "Yes" implies purchase.
- Give a Choice. "Do you want the five-piece or eight-piece cooking set?" Either choice implies purchase. Note that "No" was not one of the choices.
- Offer an Incentive. "If you buy now, you get 10% off the already low price." If you wait, you don't get the 10% discount.
- Better Not Wait. "If you want this refrigerator, better get it now. It's the last one in stock." Note: it pays to be honest. If the customer buys and then comes by the store the next day and sees that the store did have another one, this closing technique may have made the sale but it could lose the customer.

Suggestion Selling

The customer has made a purchase. Now what? Encourage your sales personnel to make a definite suggestion for a possible additional sale. For many businesses, sales can be increased by 25 percent through positive suggestion selling. Please note that statements such as "Will there be something else?" or "Can I get you something else?" are not suggestion selling. They do not make a positive suggestion. When a customer buys a lamp, what about a light bulb to go in it? If a picture is purchased, what about the necessary hardware to hang it properly? If a suit is bought, what about a new blouse or shirt that goes well with the colour? Where appropriate, the creative salesperson will actually get the suggested item and show it to the customer. Or if a person brings in a watch to be repaired, why not also clean it while it is taken apart? This type of initiative usually results in more sales. It should be emphasized that most customers like to receive a valid suggestion. In some cases, suggestions may even permit the customer to avoid another shopping trip to pick up that needed item that they had not thought about. Good suggestion selling makes sales and builds confidence in the firm's business.

Sales Follow-up

Although not apparent to many salespeople, follow-up is a part of every sale. The closing statement, "Thank you for shopping at (name of store)," is a form of sales follow-up if done with enthusiasm. Unfortunately, just making the statement in an automatic manner is about as effective as the other worn out phrase, "May I help you?" If done correctly, however, it allows the customer to leave on a positive note, thereby increasing the chances of repeat business by the customer.

Follow-up may also concern itself with checking on anything that was promised to the customer after the sale. If delivery is supposed to take place on Friday, the salesperson will check to make sure that the promise will be met and, if not, will notify the customer of the problem. Good sales follow-up will prevent the type of situation that occurs so often when the customer calls on Friday asking, "Where is the delivery truck?" A business with a reputation for sales follow-up is going to obtain additional business because of its concern about the sale.

Sincere sales follow-up is good business. Imagine the impact that can be had on a customer when the carpet cleaning service telephones the customer 48 hours after cleaning her carpets to be sure that everything is satisfactory. Sales follow-up builds goodwill and repeat business.

Attributes of a Creative Salesperson

In addition to having personnel who understand and apply the creative selling process, an organization should try to have salespeople who possess certain attributes that can make them more effective in their jobs. These attributes, which can be grouped into mental and physical categories, merit further discussions.

Judgment

Common sense, maturity, intelligence—these and other terms are used interchangeably with judgment. A salesperson knows that it does not pay to argue with a customer. The salesperson also knows that the firm should never be "cut" in front of customers. These situations reflect the use of good judgment on the part of the employee. Please note that the term maturity is sometimes used in place of judgment but that it is not necessarily a function of age. Many older people do not use good judgment while some younger employees have a high level of common sense.

Tact

If an employee has a keen sense of what to say and do, many problems can be overcome before they are created. Many employees give little thought to the impact of their actions. A child playing with toys in the toy store is told in a blunt manner to "quit playing with the toys and go find your mother." While all this is going on, the mother is standing behind the salesperson. Was a confrontation with the child necessary? No. Could it have been handled differently? Yes. How do the child and mother feel about the store? The feeling is not good. This salesperson lacked the ability to know what to do and say in order to maintain good customer relations. Be tactful.

Attitude

A good salesperson will have a positive attitude toward customers, merchandise, services, and the business. A good attitude means that an employee is willing to accept suggestions, to learn and to apply the steps in the creative selling process, and to not be afraid of work. A salesperson with a bad attitude can create unnecessary problems. A bad attitude is contagious. If an employee is otherwise competent, management should work with the employee to develop a positive attitude. Positive attitudes can result in sales.

Word of Caution

Mental and physical attributes of salespersons are important. Management must continue to observe sales personnel in regard to the desired traits. Either mental or physical attributes of individuals may change over time relative to desired attributes.

Management must be aware of this possibility and attempt to correct any deviations from desired norms before problems are created.

A business can greatly enhance its probability of success by stressing the creative selling process, giving special attention to the desired mental and physical attributes of a creative salesperson. Good creative selling can provide the competitive edge.

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