

Growing People

Training For The Salesperson

Understanding their customers' bottom lines makes better salespeople.

by **JIM PALUCH**

WE all know sales are important. Without them, companies can't survive. And we also know that sales are merely a byproduct (and a wonderful one) of successful business relationships. People buy from people they like, trust and enjoy doing business with. When people put others first, addressing their concerns, answering their questions and sharing their experiences, sales follow naturally as an extension of shared confidence.

What then makes this process so frustrating at times? The problem is that salespeople are taught to sell a product or service. Guess what? Your customers already know you can provide these things. What they want is an experience. Customers want you to keep them informed of innovations and ways to adjust to their market's demands. They want you to bring excitement, energy and fun to their company.

A good salesperson understands that as soon as he's satisfied his customers, he's out the door. Clients can find their satisfaction requirements anywhere. Ask your sales team what else it brings to the experience. If

they're not sure, perhaps some brainstorming is in order. A wholesale grower needs to develop long-term relationships with landscape contractors. These contractors can get their materials from a myriad of growers or distributors. Ask your salespeople what sets your company apart from the rest of the pack.

It's crucial that your salespeople are passionate about pursuing what their clients' expectations are. When a client's level of expectation isn't met, then the sale, despite the financial transaction, is a disappointment. And disappointed clients lead to disappointing sales, disappointing profits and a disappointing career and business. However, when the sales experience exceeds clients' expectations, they are delighted, ecstatic and energized. They'll want you to come back to deliver more.

Discuss these ideas with your sales team. Get them on board to discovering how important it is to deliver a sales experience like no one else can. If your customers believe you have their best interests in mind, then your sales will climb. The idea is to connect their anticipated experience with the actual products and services you provide.

Ask yourself what your challenge is. What is your career passion? What drives your desire to sell? Are you

merely doing a job or are you living an incredible career that has a positive effect on every aspect of your life? Chances are good that if you're bringing passion into your work, then you're interested in putting your customers' needs in front of your hopes to make a sale. You're building relationships that will increase your financial success.

Sales As Customer Service

Kevin Van Dyke, chief operating officer of Skinner Nurseries, in Jacksonville, Fla. has a staff of 300 employees with 70 salespeople. He believes in the value of an educated sales force trained to sell an experience. His sales crew participates in the annual JP Horizons Sales Jam conferences as part of an ongoing education effort. But he also believes that an effective force is equipped with knowledge of how customers make their money.

"We do all kinds of sales training," Van Dyke says. "Sales Jam is a good primer. It helps us focus on creating a good attitude. It reminds us that behind every sale, there's a personal component that can't be overlooked. We also train in different processes such as setting appointments, profiling customers, qualifying prospects and managing time. We want our sales team to know how to recognize opportunities and then make the most of them."

Confusion between sales and customer service is an ongoing issue at



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Skinner Nurseries and one that Van Dyke is keenly aware of. "These two jobs are not mutually exclusive," he says. "It's important for our salespeople to know that if they don't properly service existing customers, then we'll lose them along with referrals for new business. Yet we still have to get out there and cultivate new clients, so we train our staff to be proficient at understanding what our current customers want, as well as on how to recognize what new clients are looking for. Good salespeople understand the balance."

In the last five years, Skinner's sales skyrocketed from \$12 million per year to \$92 million. That's right. Van Dyke says sales training is definitely a piece of the puzzle. He cites upselling and getting better orders as components to his company's success.

"I don't think we could have done it without attention to sales training," he says. "Our commitment to training and treating sales people as professionals helps us attract the best people in the business. I don't want anyone to think we've cracked the code. We haven't. But new customer acquisition is strong. We're growing faster than our competitors, and part of it is because of how we treat our sales staff. A lot of it comes down to respect and professionalism – the concepts that JP Horizons teaches."

Know Your Customer's Business

Understanding how customers make money is another area where Van Dyke says training is crucial. "Next to bona fide sales training, we train our staff to understand how our customers reach their bottom line," he says. "There are many people out there to get a 3-gallon shrub from, and most of these choices are cheaper than us. Why should they choose us? If we can teach our staff how to rationalize with customers about why they should do business with us, then we will get the business. To do this, our staff has to know how our customers make their money. We sell service."

Skinner Nurseries sells the ability to save customers time and money by getting plants from point A to point

B better and faster than anyone else. Everything else supports service. "We have high standards for our plants, but that's not what's most important," Van Dyke says. "We look at the difference between lifestyle decisions and business decisions, and then help our customers realize that with our help, they'll be able to make the best, most informed choices. Our customers want us to be honest, to honor our commitments and have expert support that is convenient and available. We do our homework, which helps us sell."

Recognizing what's important to clients translates into the professional phone personal service. "Some customers could care less about knowing us," he says. "These people just want us to deliver our orders on time and do our jobs. But there's a whole other group that wants to talk with us on the phone every day and who will ask questions about they types of plants we work with and soil conditions and other things. We can't afford to have flunkies on the phone. You never know when someone will want information and when we'll have to provide it. We have to have people who are passionate about plants and who want to work with others. Customers know if we're faking it. These aren't easy jobs, and we pride ourselves on having a passionate, motivated, intelligent staff. We sell an experience."

The Skinner philosophy is not optional. The company takes the time to train its sales force to create the best possible outcomes for its customers' continued success. And it works.

Companies that continue to sell on price, proclaim the best quality and fax proposals to faceless names only drive uninspired employees who are not having fun. Those companies are on the road to extinction. You are a decision away from a transformation that will set you apart from the competition by enabling you to link clients with the actual experience they anticipate. Sell the experience! **GG**

About the author: Jim Paluch is president of JP Horizons, a group of training professionals that has been helping green industry companies develop a culture of learning for more than 15 years; Jim@JPHorizons.com.