

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



wear pinstriped three-piece suits, and make million dollar decisions with someone else's money.

Right?

Not quite. Whether you know it or not, you're involved in marketing every day. And the most important part of knowing your market is knowing your customers and their needs.

Someone threw an old photocopy of quotable quotes about marketing on my desk this morning. It's surprising how many of them deal directly with the customer as a part of the marketplace. But some of these one-liners seemed a little misleading. So let's have a little fun at the professor's expense and add some qualifications of our own to these oversimplified bits of wisdom:

- **"The customer is always right."**

Nonsense. Nobody is always right, except my wife, of course. This one should have been worded, "Give the customer what he really needs, at a fair but profitable price, and make him think it was his idea all along."

- **"If the customer wants vanilla, give him vanilla."**

This concept is usually a good one. But if the customer wants vanilla, and you think he might like chocolate if he tried it, make the suggestion—especially if you make a better profit on chocolate, or just ran out of vanilla! Who knows? Maybe the customer didn't know there was a choice in the matter, but you'll never know unless you ask.

If the customer still insists on vanilla, get it for him and do it in a hurry.

- **"There is no such thing as a small customer."**

There are, however, good and bad customers. It's a shame that some businessmen think that all small dollar purchases are made by bad customers. Many customers like to start small with the amount of their purchase, just to see how you handle things. This doesn't mean you need to work for free and promise to marry the guy's ugly daughter. It just means that you can build a good customer relationship with good service on small but profitable sales, as well as you can on the big ticket items. Acorns and mighty oaks . . .

- **"The existence of a market does not ensure the existence of a customer."**

We ought to spend a moment with this one. The fact that there are a lot of cars in this country that break

on a fairly regular basis is no guarantee of business success. Adopting the attitude that you are doing the customer a favor just talking to him is a sure way to blow him out the door.

- **"Above all, keep the customer talking."**

It seems fairly obvious that the character who wrote this one never had to work behind the service desk and deal with a customer conversation that resembles a runaway stagecoach. Maybe this one should say, **"Learn how to get the most out of discussions with your customers by controlling the conversation, and learning to listen as well as you hear."**

We don't mean to make this sound easy, because it is anything but easy. Since each customer is a little different, you have to size each of them individually, make some decisions about how to handle runaway mouths, and then tug on the reins just hard enough to keep them in line.

A brief, open, and effective exchange of information is far better than a marathon discussion that never gets to the point.

- **"No matter how good the deal, the customer is always skeptical."**

There's no denying that skepticism is one of the toughest obstacles for any businessman to overcome. But assuming that all customers are skeptical all the time about everything is a little too pessimistic for my taste.

It may help to remember that many of your customers have been burned before, and didn't like it. What the heck, you've been burned before and didn't like it either. You are a consumer too. So stop and think about what you look for and admire in a sales or service person. Have you ever been impressed with someone's ability to make you feel good with your purchase? What techniques did that person use to satisfy you and convince you that you had spent your money wisely?

Steal those ideas and techniques shamelessly.

- **"Unless constantly nurtured, nothing is as short-lived as a good customer."**

I'm glad they said "good customer" here. Bad ones are easy to keep, and require no watering or cultivation whatsoever. They are the weeds in your garden. But the good customers, the cash crop so to speak, are easy to forget because they don't fuss and cry—right up until the time they stop darkening your door.

- **"Bad business is no business at all."**

Or worded another way, **"It is better not to sell at a high price than it is not to sell at a low price."** You have the right to make a profit and to have a healthy pride in the success of your business. Don't apologize to your customers for charging a fair price for your services.

Being busy and broke is no fun.

—By Ralph Birnbaum