

CARSIDE MANNER

REAL-LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOMER RELATIONS



What makes a good salesperson? What do you think of when you think of salespeople? Is it a flattering image of professional, trained individuals, eager to satisfy you as a customer? Or do

you think of some smooth talking character with a cigar and slicked back hair whose mail is currently being forwarded to a suitcase with a post office box number?

If the less favorable image is the one floating about inside your head at the moment, it's probably because you've been exposed to any number of incompetent, indifferent, inconsiderate, or just plain dishonest salespeople yourself.

So how do your customers view you?

I was recently exposed to both extremes in a single night. The issue wasn't car repairs, but carpeting. That's right, carpeting. What I know about carpeting will fit comfortably on the head of a pin. But I had promised to take my daughters shopping for new carpeting for their rooms.

There's one born every day.

A Thundering Juggernaut

At the first place we stopped, the sales guy literally slithered up to us, shook my hand hard enough to fuse all my knuckles into a single mass of marrow and mangled cartilage, and launched into the most frantic sales pitch in my memory. This guy reminded me of a 110 volt bulb in a 220 socket. He was so busy telling us what we did and didn't want, which colors matched our eyes, and how lucky we were to have stopped during the "store-wide" sale, that he ended up with four customers in a state of shock. We stood there, eyes wide, breathing through our mouths in amazement.

And get this—no payments 'til January!

"When do the dog and ponies show up?" my wife whispered.

I faked an attack of appendicitis and we went to the next stop on the list.

Tips From an Old Pro

We entered the second store timidly, eyes darting here and there like cavalry troopers about to be ambushed by Geronimo. An older gentleman approached slowly, smiled broadly, and in a calm, even tone offered his assistance. My older daughter trembled less violently in response to this more civilized approach, and I could feel my younger daughter's death grip on my right arm relax slightly.

I offered a brief explanation of our needs. The salesman asked us several questions about preferences and price range. Then he listened to us and answered our questions—all ten thousand of them. He was as patient as Job with all three of my girls and dutifully explained the features and characteristics of each potential choice.

It wasn't long before we were all chatting comfortably, laughing, and having a good time. Unlike the king of sleaze at the first store, this fellow obviously knew people, knew his product, and was more interested in matching the customer and the customer's needs than he was with simply making a sale.

Cars and Carpeting

As noted, I don't know zip about carpeting. So I was very relieved to find someone willing to educate me without making me feel like a blithering idiot. Most of our auto repair customers are the same way. Many are reluctant to admit they don't know about auto repair lest it be taken as a sign of weakness.

And if it is true that "There is one born every day," most people will go to great lengths not to be today's example. Nobody likes being fair game when some salesman declares open season. As a result, our jobs as salespeople will always be more difficult when a customer is ignorant and fearful—and as a result very insecure.

Here are a few quick notes on why I found the second salesman so effective.

- **He listened.** It's common knowledge that true listening is a rare and vanishing art, but this man actually listened, and gave the impression that he was interested in what we had to say.
- **He knew his product.** None of these vagaries about "state of the art this and that." He knew which products on his racks struck a reasonable compromise between preferences and price.
- **He was patient.** And patience in this case meant answering questions he'd probably answered for a career full of customers over the years.
- **He made logical suggestions.** Some salespeople try to intimidate or bully their way through a sale by belittling a customer's choice. They screw their faces into a mock sneer and say "Oh no, you don't want that." But this fellow never put us down. Instead he gently steered the girls to an equally acceptable choice, and let the facts speak for themselves.
- **He was honest.** How do I know that? I don't really. But I left the store, purchases made, with the feeling that we had been treated fairly by a capable, honest salesperson. And the biggest reason I believe he was honest, was that he didn't need to lie to make the sale.

In the end, we left feeling that he hadn't made a sale, but that we had made a purchase. Cars or carpeting, it's all the same thing when it comes to selling.

—By Ralph Birnbaum