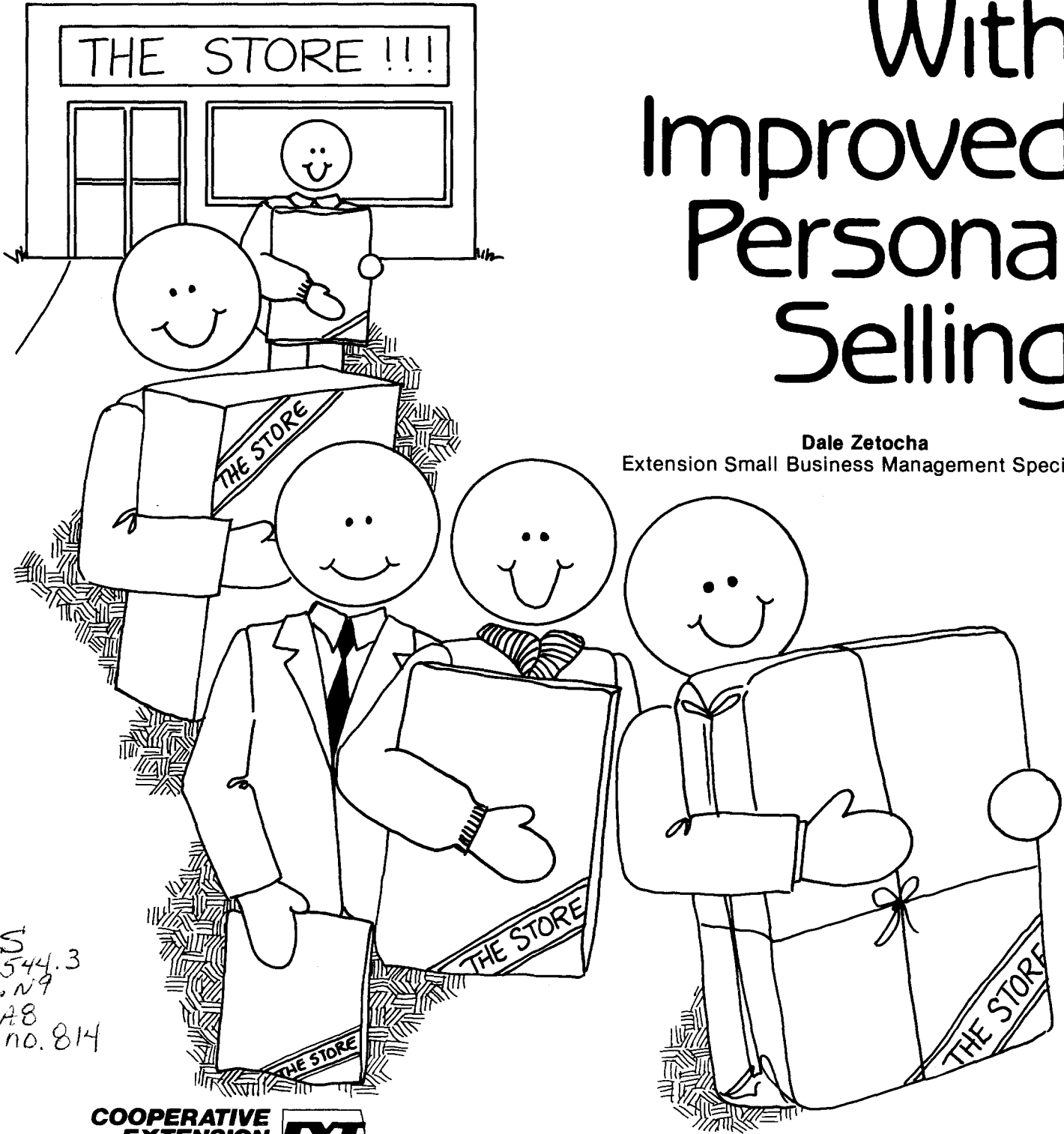


Good Customer Relations With Improved Personal Selling



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Many business firms are emphasizing with renewed vigor the importance of customer relations. In general, the maintenance of good customer relations has suffered during the past two or three decades. The rise and success of numerous consumer protection movements attests to this.

Customer relations is that function of business management concerned with how customers feel about a place of business — its personnel, products and services. Any firm that truly views the customer as the most important person ever to walk in the door of the business is on the right path toward good customer relations. Too often business activities are aimed at making things easy and convenient for the employees of the firm rather than focusing on the convenience and satisfaction of the customer.

Why are the customer relations becoming more important? Rapid changes in transportation and communication have made customers more mobile than they were 20 years ago. On the average, these customers possess a higher level of education, are more discriminating in their purchases, and are more willing to try new products and services.

Customer traits are constantly changing. Firms that fail to keep abreast of such changing customer demand are missing sales opportunities. To be successful a business person must adapt to the needs and wants of customers, including staying open at hours which suit customers and offering the kinds of goods and services that will attract them.

Without properly trained employees, the sales potential of the best goods and services will not be reached. Salespeople provide the day-to-day contact with the consuming public and the impression made and image presented will shape the store's image. Their actions and attitude speak louder than words. Therefore, it is important to maintain good personal selling techniques.

Employee indifference _____

Customers discontinue patronizing a retail or service business for a variety of reasons. Experience indicates that 68 percent of the customers do not return because of the indifferent attitude of an employee, 14 percent because of product dissatisfaction, 9 percent because of competitive reasons, 5 percent shop at a friend's establishment, 3 percent move away and 1 percent die.

Indifference by employees can manifest itself in many ways. For example:

—The sales clerk informs the customer that the store does not carry that particular brand but fails to

offer to show the customer the brand which the store does carry.

—Failure to show customers a variety of styles that are available.

—The salesperson's attitude of showing impatience (verbal or nonverbal) while waiting for the customer to make up his or her mind.

—Two or more sales clerks visiting with each other rather than offering to assist customers.

—Conversely, in a quality restaurant customers may be annoyed by "chatty" waitresses when they want a quiet evening dining by candlelight.

The reasons salespeople let opportunities for making profitable sales slip by are lack of product knowledge, improper training, indifference to their work and lack of concern for customers. However, the main reasons for missed sales opportunities often lie with the owner/manager. First, the manager may not be aware of these opportunities. Second, he or she may hire people who are not capable of being developed into salespeople. Finally, the manager may not insist that the people they hire actually try to sell.

Know yourself and how others view your business _____

Many times the owner/manager is not aware of opportunities for additional sales. Some have become conservative and cling to old viewpoints and methods because that is the way they've always done it. This philosophy is generally transmitted to employees.

The manager should review his or her attributes and determine whether he or she is a part of the problem or part of the solution. If a manager has a personality that is full of enthusiasm and leadership, a sympathetic understanding of people and an adequate level of technical and managerial knowledge — then that person can be part of the solution. The owner/manager must work diligently and continuously on improving personnel management capabilities.

The owner/manager should know how employees, customers, associates and the community view the business from their perspectives. The business's objectives, policies, rules and procedures must foster a climate of cooperation. Poor cooperation can often be traced to improper communications. In some cases a change in style of operation may be needed to ensure that people will want to work with you.

Improving personal selling _____

The owner/manager must establish policies that foster good customer relations. The salespeople should reflect the image that is being portrayed, so it is important to train employees to be good salespeople. Employees will be as good or as bad as employers allow them to be.

The salespeople a customer encounters in any retail or service establishment often form more lasting impressions than the merchandise, decor, prices or any part of the store image. Poor treatment at the hands of a salesperson, receptionist, hostess or cashier can be instrumental in the loss of a customer. Good treatment does not insure that the customer returns, but it will go a long way in creating a favorable inclination to do so.

Categories of sales jobs _____

There is a tendency to lump all people concerned into one category — salespeople. To do so is incorrect because many sales jobs are different from one another. Some people may be hired as clerks who are primarily involved in the buying function, i.e. ringing up the sale. A salesperson is involved in the selling function, i.e. showing merchandise. Sales jobs differ because of the type of merchandise sold.

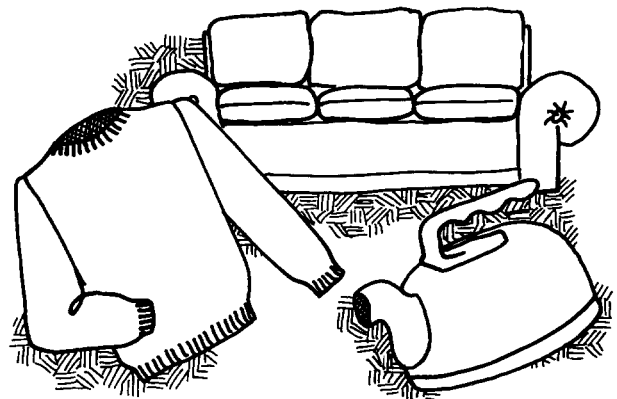
Merchandise (goods) can be classified into three broad categories: convenience goods, shopping goods, and specialty goods.

Convenience Goods — Selling involves dealing with customers who buy such goods as food, drugs, gas and impulse items. These goods are purchased at frequent intervals and with as little effort as possible (convenient). It is understandable, therefore, that salespeople and clerks handling convenience goods are not required to enter the customers' lives as much as in the other categories. But in those stores where customer service is paramount, even the simple selling process necessary for convenience goods can be more meaningful by courteous attentive service.

Shopping Goods — Selling involves those goods that customers usually shop around for before buying. Customers will be more careful and give more thought to purchases such as clothing and accessories, home furnishings and housewares, and similar items. Salespeople who sell in stores or departments which contain shopping goods need to

have a good background of merchandise information because many customers will be relying on them for assistance and advice.

Specialty Goods — Selling is the most difficult for these goods because it usually involves the purchase of merchandise that is higher priced and more expensive than other merchandise. This category includes such items as furs, higher priced apparel, furniture, major appliances, equipment, valuable jewelry, etc. Needless to say, customers for specialty goods must frequently exert considerable shopping effort and give serious consideration before they buy such goods, many of which could be once-in-a-lifetime items. Customers expect that specialty goods salespeople will give them considerable merchandise information and advice. Customers have a right to expect that such sales personnel will have merchandise knowledge in depth in their field. Interestingly enough, while nationally branded merchandise plays an important role in the specialty goods field, the customer's confidence in the seller (the store, the department, and the salespeople) frequently plays an equally important part in such sales.



Salesperson represents the business _____

A salesperson represents the business to the customer in the following ways:

- As an information source — being knowledgeable about the store's merchandise and policies.
- As a fashion and value counselor — to assist the customer with value comparisons with items in the store or possibly competing brands.
- As a public relations representative — the salesperson represents the business to the public or to customers.

—As a mover of stock — to assist in turning over or selling the inventory which is the primary objective of the business.

—As a seller — to assist the customer in making a decision to purchase the store's merchandise.

Whether you have experienced salespeople or hire new ones, it is important to provide adequate sales training for the following reasons:

—To teach salespeople to sell skillfully to realize maximum sales and profit from each customer attracted to the store.

—To advise customers using good selling suggestions that will improve customer satisfaction and build sales.

—To assure that the customer's needs are met so that returned purchases are held to a minimum.

—To develop a loyal following of customers who will return to your business and who will recommend it to friends and associates.

Merchandise knowledge_____

The salesperson should be encouraged to take the initial step in selling by being involved in the store and learning about the merchandise. The salesperson should know:

—What styles, brands and types of merchandise are carried in stock.

—Where the merchandise is located in the store.

—Features of the merchandise regarding use, quality, care, price, and guarantee.

—What's available or in demand through the retail market served.

The salesperson should be enthusiastic about the product and know as much about it as possible.

How to study the customer_____

When a customer enters a store, the salesperson should cease any other activities such as personal conversation, stock work, paper work and house-keeping work. The salesperson should observe the customer's manner to determine if he or she is hurried or relaxed so as to become tuned into the customer.

It is important to listen to the customer to determine preference for quality, quantity, color, size and

price. By asking questions, the salesperson can get a complete picture of the customer's wants and choose the selling point that works best. The salesperson must show an interest in the customer and be able to help the customer decide by talking about his or her pleasure, comfort, profit, pride, etc.

Approaching the customer_____

The salesperson's approach is intended to immediately interest the customer in the products or service and let the customer know you are there to help them. The longer the customer waits for acknowledgement the less willing that customer is to wait for service. The first few seconds are critical for the salesperson to acknowledge the customer and establish good positive interaction.

Salespeople fail to approach a customer for a variety of reasons which include:

—Collecting in groups and carrying on conversation.

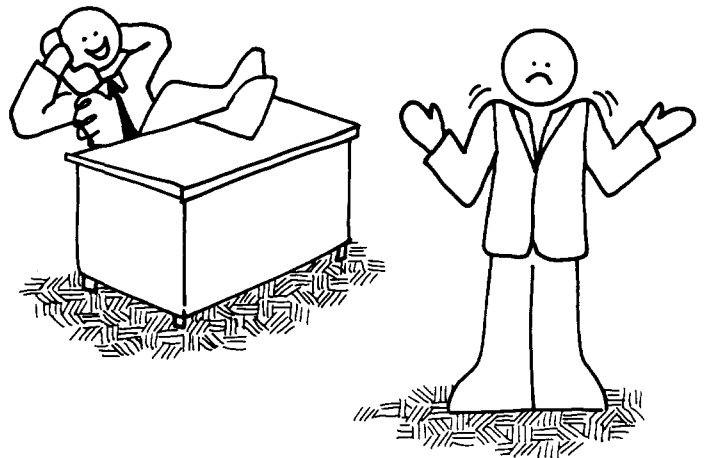
—Overattentiveness to stock duties and display at the wrong time.

—Fear to begin a sales conversation.

—Assisting another customer and ignoring the newly arrived customer.

Any or all of these telegraph a message to the customer that what the salesperson is doing is more important than the customer. Customers have pride and their remedy to this kind of reception may be to shop elsewhere.

In addition to being prompt, the salesperson should show a sincere interest in the customer's needs and display self-confidence about the merchandise and the store.

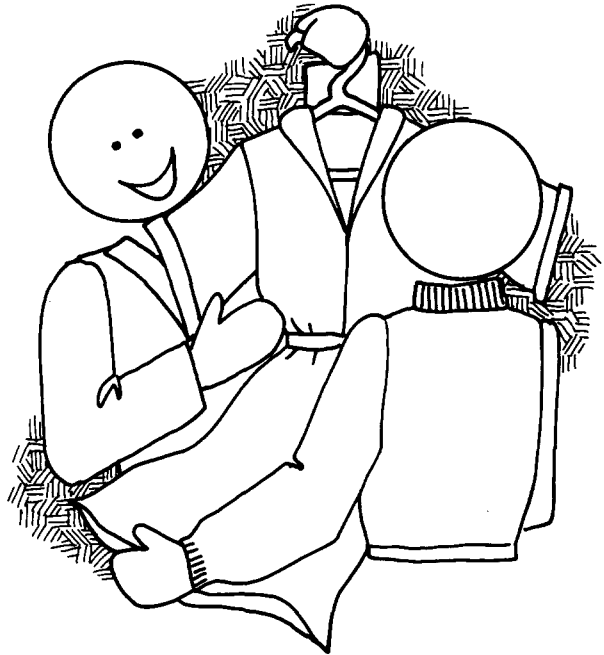


Greeting the customer _____

Customers can instantly perceive whether you are interested in helping them. The way something is said is just as important as the words used in saying it.

There are several types of greetings which a salesperson can use such as asking a question which cannot be answered by the word "no;" stating a fact about the merchandise; a friendly personal greeting, especially if you know them; or conversing about local items of interest, especially in small towns.

Whichever greeting is chosen, it should be natural, courteous, short, and require no major mental decision on the part of the customer, be affirmative, and emphasize a desire to "serve" rather than a desire to "sell."



Show and tell _____

A customer is interested in acquiring an item for what the item can do for him or her. A salesperson must always relate the product to the customer to get the customer into the act.

Depending on the type of merchandise in the store, the salesperson may either tell about the product or show the product. Whenever there's a choice between showing and telling, showing is recommended. The best demonstrations involve:

- The customer being comfortable physically and emotionally.

- Concentration of awareness — it is advantageous to eliminate distractions by working within 4½ feet of the customer. Holding the customer's attention is like landing a big fish — don't pull too hard on the line. The customer needs time to think about what he is seeing and what you are saying.

- Start with the end results, such as how the product will be used.

- Get the customer involved: a good way is to hand the product to the customer for his or her examination.

do not buy the merchandise for itself, but rather for the benefits they can derive from it. Salespeople should stress the benefits, which are what specific features of the item will do for the customer.

A feature is an outstanding or primary quality or characteristic of a product or service. Examples of **product features** include:

- An **electric** knife makes meat carving more efficient.

- This pan is coated with **silver stone** which is easier to clean.

- These shoes are **light weight** and durable.

A benefit is defined as anything that is advantageous for the buyer, which improves a condition for the buyer or promotes the buyer's welfare. Examples of **product benefits** include:

- An electric knife makes meat carving **more efficient**.

- This pan is coated with silver stone which is **easier to clean**.

- These shoes are light weight and **durable**.

Features vs. benefits _____

To succeed in selling a product, it is important for the salesperson to know the difference between product features and customer benefits. People usually

Sales resistance _____

The normal sales transaction always has two sides. The customer not only must spend money to get some specific article, but must also sacrifice other pleasures or satisfactions which that money would buy. This logical weighing of satisfactions

may exist when the choice is between unrelated possibilities such as merchandise and a vacation as well as in choosing between two competing brands of goods. The customer naturally wants to purchase the article that gives the most value for the money. Sales resistance is really the customer's normal way of weighing values.

Excuses vs. objections _____

Sales resistance can be classified as either an excuse or an objection. Excuses are insincere reasons offered by the customer who does not want to become involved with the salesperson. Objections represent honest points of difference between the customer and the salesperson.

Excuses

Excuses frequently occur (a) early in the sales process when the customer is only looking or when a salesperson attempts to sell merchandise other than that asked for by the customer and (b) after the selling points have been made indicating either that the salesperson failed to arouse interest or that the customer has some hidden objection.

Excuses are raised in order to:

- Prevent the salesperson from properly showing the merchandise.
- Avoid a feeling of obligation to the salesperson.
- Procrastinate, defer, or put off a decision to buy.

A few examples in which excuses are expressed by the customer are:

- "I really haven't got time to look now."
- "I don't think I'm interested."
- "I'll think it over and come back later."

Objections

Objections indicate a desire on the part of the customer to learn more about the merchandise. They are honest reasons for not buying and show a direct relationship between a desire to satisfy a need and a natural reluctance to sacrifice money.

Customers may object to the merchandise, the manufacturer or brand, related store services, whether they need the merchandise and the price of the merchandise. Most customers have definite price limitations and form price habits in buying. Therefore, if something is priced higher than they are accustomed to paying, they want to know why.

Common objections often heard result from five situations in which the customer:

- Was not listening when the salesperson covered the point.
- Is unfamiliar with the product but does not want to admit it.
- Does not believe the salesperson.
- Cannot afford the price, but will not say so.
- Never intended to buy — but was shopping for information or companionship.

Salespeople should welcome real objections because they are an indication that the customer is interested and/or that the customer is attempting to justify the purchase. In fact, there is an old adage which states, "The sale does not begin until the customer says no."

Three rules are suggested for handling objections:

- Recognize the right of the customer to have them. Do not counterattack, but rather acknowledge the customer's point of view before making your own point.
- Listen to what the customer is saying. Is the customer offering a logical explanation, acting out of doubt and uncertainty, in need of further explanation or information, or unable to relate the merchandise benefits to his or her needs?
- Maintain flexibility so that you can show the customer merchandise of a different price or quality.

Suggestive selling _____

Suggestive selling is one of the best ways we can increase sales. Suggestive selling may be used to start a sale, while demonstrating a product or at the end of a sale. Displaying and/or demonstrating related items together helps the customer visualize the functions or qualities of the merchandise and assists in suggestive selling. Suggestions can also be made by informing customers of items in other areas or departments of the store, by promotional cards or letters and by telephone. Suggestions should be positive and explain or relate the merchandise to the customer or other merchandise.

The types of merchandise that can be suggested include:

- Compatible merchandise — related or accessory items which enhance, accentuate, contrast, or can be used with other merchandise.
- Fashionable merchandise — newest or latest styles, fads, best sellers, and quality merchandise.

—Promotional or stand merchandise — items marked down, special price or value items, larger quantities or seasonal merchandise.



Closing the sale _____

Closing the sale is getting the customer to make a commitment to purchase the merchandise. It occurs when the customer seems ready to buy — when you have finished demonstrating the merchandise and all of the questions have been answered.

If the customer does not indicate that he or she will purchase the merchandise, the salesperson can offer to close by suggesting additional merchandise or a question such as “Is this cash or charge?”

Customer service _____

For many customers, the purchase of the merchandise is not the only consideration nor the end of the transaction. Customer service is important throughout the selling process as well as after the sale.

Customer service entails sincerely doing something extra for the customer so that he or she can see by your actions that you are willing to help. After the sale, customer service requires listening to the customer to determine the course of action to be taken. It is recommended to focus on what “can” be done for the customer rather than what “cannot” be done for them. It’s also a good idea to keep a notebook or record of promises and dates when you are to follow through. For more information on handling customer complaints see Extension Circular EC-813, Retaining Customers By Handling Complaints.

Summary _____

Good customer treatment by salespeople does not insure that the customer will continue patronizing your establishment, but it will contribute in creating a favorable inclination to do so. The customer should be made to feel comfortable and important because he or she is the reason for you being in business. A cardinal rule in your business should be that “customer service takes precedence over any task in the store.”

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