

Finish the Job

A little creative questioning can save your customers valuable time and help drive sales of related items.

by Phil Sasso



There are three guaranteed ways to grow your business—sell more products to your current customers, sell more profitable items to your current customers, or get more customers.

The first option is the cheapest and easiest—taking the customers you already have and selling them extra or add-on items they might not have been thinking about when they walked through your doors.

Add-ons can be items that customers didn't realize you carry, or products they aren't even aware of that will help make their task easier.

They can be a real convenience to shoppers who will be grateful for the one-stop experience. And selling add-ons will help you increase your average ticket and your overall profits.

The key to selling add-ons is listening. That may sound simple—but it's not easy. You need to ask good questions, and in some ways play detective to figure out how to best help your customers.

Here's an example of what not to do:

Recently my wife, Beth, and I decided to repaint our old wooden glider. I ran out to a small neighborhood hardware store. On a clearance table outside were two cans of redwood stain. I explained my project to the owner and asked which one he thought would be better for my job.

"Either one," he replied. Keep in mind one was twice the price of the other.

I questioned him again. "This one says stain and sealer. Is that better for what I'm doing?"

"Maybe, if you want to seal it. Will that be all?"

My impulsive response to that question is, "Yes."

I had to stop myself to remember this was a very spur-of-the-moment project. I didn't know if I had anything to paint with. The shop owner brought me a couple of inexpensive nylon brushes.

"Will this be cash or charge?"

"Charge. Uh, does this clean up with water?"

"You'll need paint thinner. Do you want a can?"

I took my purchases and went home, wondering how much more I would have bought if the owner had asked me a few helpful questions: Did I need a scraper? Stripper? Drop cloth?

There was definitely an opportunity there for add-on sales.

Suggestive Selling

You can make a lot more money with a little suggestive selling. It's a lot like when the cashier at the fast-food joint asks if you want fries with your burger.

Only it's much more sophisticated and requires more in-depth product knowledge.

Perhaps a better analogy is the black-tie waiter at a white tablecloth restaurant suggesting a wine to go with your meal.

A lot of people think selling is a dirty word. It's probably earned that reputation from pushy salespeople who tend to annoy their customers more than aid them. Good selling is helping your customer achieve his goal. It's a win-win proposition.

One way to do this is to ask meaningful questions to determine your customers' needs.

I have a client that sells rebuilt cylinder heads nationwide. His telephone reps are diligent about asking if the customer needs a head gasket, head bolts and other add-ons.

Why? It doesn't just add a few dollars to each sale; it makes for a more satisfied customer in the end. And that adds up to repeat business and referrals.

I hate being in the middle of a job and not having everything I need to complete it. Especially if I'm working on my car and my wife is out with our other card.

So, do yourself and your customers a favor and ask if they

need anything else. Be specific because they may not be thinking of the whole process and your questions can be more helpful than you realize.

Remember, you're an expert in what you sell. Don't be afraid to share your knowledge in a helpful way.

Here are some questions to ask yourself or your customer before they leave your store:

Have you done this job before?

This will tell you how to approach all your other questions. First-timers will really appreciate your advice. This can also be a good chance to sell them instruction manuals or spec books.

Experts are usually open to learning new tricks to make the job easier. Or, they may teach you a trick or two that you can share with the next customer.

What tools are needed?

You may not stock every wrench or screwdriver required to do the job, but you might have specialty tools that will make common jobs easier.

Often it helps to be specific, such as; "Do you have a gear puller? It really makes this job go smoother."

What will make the job safer?

Items such as safety glasses work gloves and jack stands cost little compared to the injuries they prevent every year. One of my clients has built his entire business developing tools that make repairs easier and safer.

Are there any chemicals needed?

Making sure your customers have everything from gasket sealant to fluids to lubricants can save them a return trip. Even something as small as asking do-it-yourselfers if they have hand cleaner to wash up after a particularly dirty job can be a welcome reminder.

Will new fasteners make the job less stressful?

I can't count the number of times I've broken a bolt, clamp or hanger doing a job at home. And I always resent the counter-person for not offering to sell me \$5 in hardware to save me the headache of creating makeshift solutions from bailing wire and duct tape.

Are there accessories that will make the results better?

This question separates the true professional from the order-taker. This is where you sell the customer all the bells and whistles.

Or you could offer a slightly more expensive, better product. But that gets into upselling, which is topic for another discussion.

These questions were designed primarily for stores helping DIY customers. But the same technique with a few minor modifications can also be used when dealing with professionals who buy from you.

The real key is to remember your goal is to be genuinely helpful and not to sound like you're just trying to sell more stuff. Becoming a respected professional will help your business immensely down the road.

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