

How to pull a customer into a sale

BY PHIL SASSO



A few years ago, when PJ was about six, he and I were playing wiffle ball in our backyard when he popped a homerun “over the ivy” (the neighbor’s fence). I lifted him up and sat him on our fence to go get his ball. He froze.

“Jump down,” I said.

“I can’t,” he said sitting there stiffly. “I’m afraid.”

“Doesn’t it hurt just sitting there?” I asked. “Aren’t you more afraid of falling off the fence? If you jump, you’re in control.”

He wouldn’t budge an inch.

Does that scene remind you of one of your customers sitting on the fence about a purchase? Their indecision is almost painful, yet they refuse to make a decision.

It could be a “staller” (see “Selling The Staller” in the April 2007 *Professional Distributor*) who’s been thinking about buying a five-gas analyzer for months, but can’t decide. Or it could be a “waster” who makes you late to your next stop by being indecisive about an inexpensive worklight.

Are you seeing more and more fence-sitting in these rocky economic times?

You can’t just let your customer sit on the fence. The longer he sits there, the more likely he is to get comfortable and the less likely you are to get a sale.

The solution? You need to knock your customer off-center.

That image may bother you. The idea of knocking a customer off-center can seem risky. You’re probably thinking: “If I push him away he won’t buy from me!”

Don’t be pushy

But you really don’t want to push your customer any more than I’d have wanted to push PJ off that fence. Pushing is dangerous. Because when you push, a customer is very likely to end up on the other side. You want to gently coax

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your customer to your side.

Pushing is being pushy. The more pressure you put on most customers, the more likely they are to dig in their heels. In fact, being pushy can also build distrust.

For instance, a salesman recently called me about signing an agreement.

"I'll stop by and pick up the contract this afternoon," he said.

"I just opened the e-mail. I need more time. I'm a slow reader," I joked. "I'll fax it when I'm ready."

"OK, I'll stop by first thing tomorrow morning."

"Whoa," I said. "Who do you think you are? Jeff Gordon? This isn't NASCAR."

His rushing sent up red flags. I'm glad it did. I found his "too good to be true" deal was not quite true. I ended the deal immediately.

Many sales trainers will tell you that creating a sense of urgency is always good. I couldn't agree less.

Time-pressuring a customer when there's no reason to may work on a few rare occasions. But even if they do buy from you, it can create resentment.

Lying is even worse. Pretending your price is going up tomorrow or that this is the last SKU in your inventory — if it's not true — can come back to bite you. You risk losing long-term trust just to gain a quick sale.

Being pushy could also nudge your customer over to a competitor. Or the customer might just decide to do without the tool, borrow it from the tech in the next bay or keep using his out-dated equipment for another year.

Pull the sale to you

So, how do you knock a customer off-center? The best way is to pull them off.

When you pull a customer off the fence, they are much more likely to end up on the same side you are on. Pulling is about using a carrot, not a stick. Especially in tough economic times, it can be a powerful sales strategy.

Everyone is price sensitive today. But you don't necessarily need to lower your price to nudge your customer off-center. It all starts with having a good relationship

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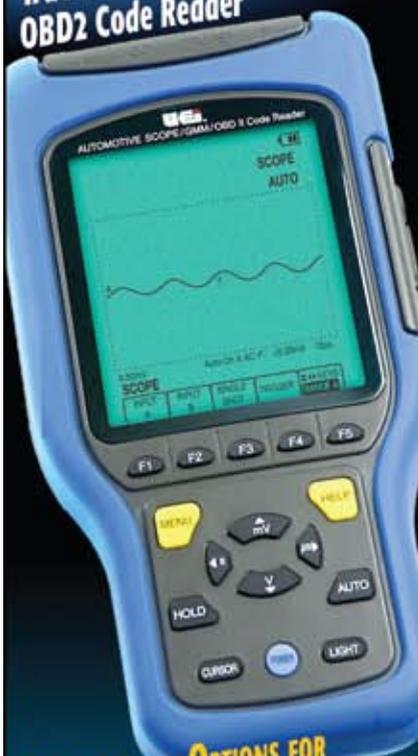
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with your customer before the sale. Instead of pushing, take a minute to listen to your customer. Pull information out of your customer to get to his fears and concerns.

If he says there are too many choices, try to help him narrow his choices. Reduce the pressure he's feeling by taking options off the table. Less is often more.

If he's uncertain about product quality, remind him that you stand behind everything you sell. Show him the warranty. Remind him how responsive you are to warranty issues. (This is where your relationship with the customer can instill confidence.)

I talked to one dealer who occasionally offers a 30-day, moneyback guarantee to close a deal. When I questioned his sanity, he said only one guy ever took him up on it in his whole career. But he only offers the guarantee to close a stalling sale, and only to the guys he feels wouldn't take advantage of him.

If price is an issue, try using an incentive to sweeten the pot rather than slash your price. Feel out your customer. Offer to give him extra chances in your weekly drawing. Or offer a free training class. Or throw in a free accessory or some hand cleaner. Be creative. See what value-

added perk will motivate him to buy.

This summer, I bought a used sports car from a private party. From test drive to title-in-hand took less than 20 minutes. Why so quick? The seller didn't pressure me. He didn't threaten me with other buyers. In fact, he offered to personally fix a broken turn signal. That cinched the deal. It made me confident he was being honest, took the repair out of my hair and raised my comfort level.

Next time you have a customer that's on the fence, try coaxing him down instead of shoving him off.

Finally, after a little coaxing, I was able to help PJ ease himself down the fence. He threw me his wiffle ball. Then, as he stood there staring up at me, I realized I'd never thought about getting him back! I looked at the gate and my stomach sunk. There was a padlock on it.

Good thing I have a good relationship with my neighbor — he's my uncle! ■

Phil Sasso is president of Sasso Marketing Inc. (www.sassomarketing.com), a technical marketing agency specializing in tools and equipment. Subscribe to his free marketing tip at philsasso.com/blog.

