

Be all you can be to beat the recession

Staying positive during tough times can still bring your customers back

BY PHIL SASSO

Let's not sugarcoat it: The economy stinks. And selling tools and equipment in this economy can stink, too. But, despite the economy, some mobile dealers are doing well. Exceptionally well, considering.

How? And what can you do to survive — or even thrive?

If you want to succeed in this recession, you may need to be ready to rethink the way you do business. You need to be willing to assess what you're doing and make some dramatic changes, possibly some uncomfortable changes. But it boils down to this: Do you want to be comfortable or profitable?

Let's look at your self-image. I'm not talking about some Stuart Smalley psychobabble about being good enough, smart enough or having people like you. My question is: Do you consider yourself a retailer, an educator or a salesman?

If you thought the answer was any one of those things, think again. It was a trick question. If you said all three, you've aced the quiz.

new every week or two. Keep the cooler full and the candy ready. If your truck looks good, customers will feel good about buying from you.

But if you think of yourself exclusively as a retailer, you're probably too passive. You need to be more than just an order taker in these tough times. Just being friendly and approachable won't cut it. You need to actively promote your offerings like a good salesman. You need to ask for the order.

Getting customers out to your truck lets you show off your full range of offerings. That's good. Breaking the ice with small talk is fine. But, you need to get down to Tool Talk as soon as possible. Complaining about the weather and analyzing the Big Game won't put money on your books. You need to pitch your products. Do a quick 60-second product demo,

and then ask for the order. Not every demo will make the cash register ring. Only a fraction will turn into an order. But, I guarantee if you show fewer products, you'll sell fewer products.



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Reinventing retail

To succeed in this economy, your truck needs to be in top retail condition. Your shelves need to be fully stocked, your inventory needs to look fresh and tidy and you need to rotate your tools often so your customers see something

Overhauling education

You may not think of yourself as a teacher, but your customers look to you as one. They count on you to learn about the latest and greatest tools and equipment — whether or not you have a background as a technician. After all, you are the tool-and-equipment expert.

So how do you educate your customers without a textbook or blackboard? This is where Tool Talk comes in. Spend a few minutes on each stop finding out what your customers want to know more about. Then tell them about it in one of your next visits. Have a demo/training DVD or CD you can show them or leave behind to educate them. Bring along literature that explains all the details. Have a list of helpful and informative websites you can hand out.

It's easy to put education on the back burner when your customers are not buying a lot of big-ticket items.

But if you're the dealer that's known for educating your customers, you'll likely be the first they think of when they're ready to buy — whether it's in a few days or a few months.

Stay motivated

If you're a selling-focused mobile dealer, you're on the right track. But be sure you don't neglect the other areas. Although salesmanship is paramount, minding your store and educating your customers are also very important.

How can you keep your selling skills sharp? I'm not going to give you some one-size-fits-all, no-fail sales technique or tell you to participate in on-going training. (I'll assume you read my March 2008 *PD* column, "Invest In Yourself.") In tough times, the most important thing a salesperson can do is to keep motivated. And that's a big task.

Remember, your customers will sense your attitude and will feed off of it.

Although you'd probably never say, "You don't want to buy this new pneumatic blow gun, do you?," that's exactly what your customer will hear. If you don't expect them to buy it, they won't.

You need to strive to do more than just go through the motions every day. Making every stop on your route without running over a customer shouldn't be the greatest accomplishment of your day. You need to face every stop with energy and enthusiasm. Not a fake cheerfulness, but a real determination.

I realize that's not as easy as it sounds. Trust me. I'm not a high-energy optimist. I'm as easily de-motivated as the next guy. I often think my travel mug is half empty — even when it's full. In fact, the only thing about me that's always positive is my blood type.

But attitudes, good or bad, are as contagious as a yawn. If you're overwhelmed by all the bad economic news, here's my advice: Avoid it. Don't watch the news. Turn off news briefs on the radio. Stick to the comics and sports pages. I'm not saying live with your head in the sand.

But news people aren't known for being optimists.

Overall, if you try to be the best retailer, educator and salesperson you can be, you'll make it through this downturn. To paraphrase the old adage: Tough times don't last, but tough mobile dealers do. ■

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