



Mobile lessons from the Depression

A lot has changed ... a lot hasn't

BY PHIL SASSO

My great-grandfather, Pa, was a mobile dealer. Sort of.

I remember summer afternoons when I was a boy. Just he and I would sit in his backyard. The aroma of cheap cigar smoke wafted around my head as this 80-something-year-old man told me exciting stories about haggling, finagling and crashing his truck — more than once.

In 1935, Pa bought two used Ford Model B trucks and took to the streets of Chicago with a couple of his sons to squeak out a living and feed his big Italian family. To be fair, he wasn't selling tools and equipment. He was selling fruits and vegetables. But the principles Pa taught me are as true of selling tools and equipment today as they were for a street peddler in the midst of the Great Depression.

Pa died when I was 13. So, I don't know which part of the stories I remember are true, what's an old man's exaggeration and how much is my youthful imagination. But, here's some of the timeless wisdom I learned on those lazy summer afternoons.



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Buy smart

Pa would set out at the crack of dawn to the South Water Street Market and haggle with the vendors in the storefronts and horse-drawn wagons lined up there. He'd do whatever it took to get the best deals he could. He knew the vendors. He knew produce. And, most importantly, he knew his customers.

"People will only buy crap once," he'd tell me. (I paraphrase. Pa's language was often more colorful.) He knew he wasn't the only peddler in town. He realized if he sold a bag of bruised tomatoes, his customers would remember. So, he always tried to buy the best balance of quality and price.

Similarly, the most successful dealers I've talked with negotiate for the best prices and quality that they can. Many step up to buy and inventory popular products to get volume discounts, save on shipping and/or get in on limited-time promotional pricing.

Work your route

Keeping on schedule was just as important then as it is for a mobile dealer today. His customers would expect him the same day of the week at the same time. Many would be outside hanging laundry on their washline or sitting on

their back stoop waiting for him to roll down the cobblestone alley. Others would shout their orders down from their second- or third-floor tenement windows. His youngest son would run the order up, sometimes collecting a penny or two more for the service.

In the same way, your customers are checking their watches looking forward to your arrival. That's why it's important to stay on schedule. There is nothing better than a customer who is eager to buy. It's also important that you tote-and-promote. You won't add as many new customers by waiting for them to come to you as you will by bringing tools to them in their bay.

A neat store sells more

Pa rigged a canopy and floodlight on the back of his truck so he could shade his customers on a hot summer's day or show off his produce after dark. He'd polish his apples and be sure the lettuce was kept fresh on ice.

You've heard it a million times before: keep your truck clean and tidy. Don't leave boxes lying around. Dust often. Rotate your inventory. And keep it fully stocked. People will buy more if your truck looks inviting.

Upsell any way you can

My great-uncle first helped his dad as a peddler when he was nine. He remembers running orders, cleaning and even driving the truck!

More than once, Pa would use him to cross-sell items that he'd overbought.

"A lady would shout down for a bag of oranges," my uncle said. "The old man would have too many apples, so he'd send me upstairs with a bag of apples. The lady would see the bag, and yell at me. She wanted oranges. So, I'd go back down and tell Pa. He would send me back up with the oranges — and the apples. They'd usually buy both."

Although I'm not a fan of sneaky sales tactics, I must admit it's a funny story. But the point is you need to keep

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cross-selling, upselling and selling add-ons. If each customer buys just a little bit more, the incremental sales can make a big difference in your bottom line.

What you can't sell, you eat

In Pa's case, that was quite literal. He'd bring home all the wilted lettuce, bruised apples and squished squash he couldn't sell that day and his family would eat it. So he had to work extra hard to sell everything he could or he'd end up with more leftover than even a family of 10 could devour.

Which brings me back to the first point: buy smart. If Pa wasn't careful about his purchasing, he'd end up with too much inventory or too many of the wrong items. And not only would that tie up his cash, his inventory would perish.

Your inventory won't spoil, but it can become obsolete. So it's important that you promote your products aggressively. And you need to really get to know your customers' buying patterns so you aren't stuck "eating" too much inventory, returns or a lot of skips.

In some ways, selling tools and equipment is much harder than being a street peddler in the '30s. Pa never had to deal with receivables, shipping or computers. But there is a certain kinship of the "merchant on wheels" and a great freedom in being your own boss.

Someday you may find yourself telling your great-grandkids all your old mobile stories, too. ■



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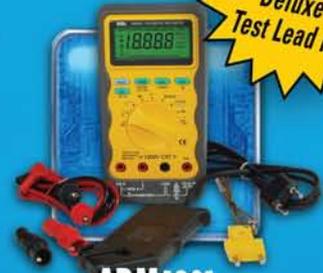
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