

What to do when things go wrong

BY PHIL SASSO

It's inevitable: a SNAFU will happen. Maybe you'll miss a delivery date, misquote a price or order the wrong tool. Sometimes it's all your fault. Sometimes it's the manufacturer's or your WD's mistake.

It doesn't matter who's to blame — you're still the one who has to face the customer, explain the situation, and find some way to make things right.

It can be a pain to deal with. But better to deal with it head-on than deal with the result of avoiding it. A big enough mistake can cost you a customer. But, handled with care, solving one problem can do more to earn a customer's respect and loyalty than dozens of good transactions that go smoothly without any hiccups. When things go right, it's easy for a customer to take you for granted. It's when things go wrong that you've got a chance to prove yourself to your customer.

So, how do you tactfully face the problem, make good and salvage the customer relationship?

When bad things happen to good mobiles

Ogden Nash gives some great relationship advice: "To keep your marriage brimming, With love in the loving cup, Whenever you're wrong, admit it; Whenever you're right — shut up." Great advice for any married couple.



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It also works, in part, for a mobile dealer. Especially the "admit it" part can go a long way to build solid customer relationships. It takes courage to admit you've dropped the ball. But that's the kind of action that can earn a customer's long-term trust and respect. Actions speak louder than words.

How you deal with your mistakes is what separates you as a Professional Distributor from the Other Distributors. A Professional Distributor is proactive, sometimes even acknowledging the problem before the customer knows there is one. The Other Distributors tend to be defensive and shuck the responsibility of making good on a bad situation. I assume all the readers of this publication strive to be Professional Distributors.

It's easy to want to deal with an uncomfortable situation by blaming others, lying and/or avoiding the problem and hoping it will go away.

Resist the temptation.

Don't pass blame: It only makes you look bad. Even if it is your supplier's fault, you need to take responsibility and apologize for

the situation.

"I'm sorry, the delivery didn't ship on time. It's not my fault — but it is my problem. I have the tracking number for it now, and I'll check on it. I'll call you as soon as it comes in."

People are likely to forgive you if you take ownership of the situation and ask for forgiveness. In fact, I've been told this works in marriage, too. (But I've never been wrong, so, I've never needed to try it.)

Don't cover it up: Lying only has the potential to put you in a deeper hole. Maybe you transposed a part number or forgot to place the order in the first place. Resist the temptation to cover it up.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how it happened, but I must have lost the note with your order on it and forgot to place the order last week. I'll place the order right now. Do you want me to call you tomorrow and give you a delivery date or just bring it with me next week?"

If you get caught in a lie, you'll lose some, if not all, of your customer's trust and respect. They'll think twice before ordering from you. I'd personally much rather deal with an honest, forgetful salesperson than a dishonest one with a good memory. Wouldn't you?

Don't bury your head in the sand: Ignoring the problem won't

help. It won't go away by itself. You'll only risk ticking off your customer more by not acknowledging something is wrong.

"I know I quoted you \$39 on this set of crow's feet last week. But the price is actually \$59. I'm sorry. I must have misread the price book. Do you still want it for that price or should I return them?"

Don't wait for the customer to bring up the problem. If you know there's a problem, be upfront about it. Admit to the problem and let them know that you're sorry it happened.

Making amends makes friends

Once you acknowledge the problem, you need to decide if it warrants some action to make up for the mistake. My rule of thumb is if it's a

small problem that doesn't cost the customer anything (like downtime) a sincere apology is often enough.

But if it's a big problem or big purchase, you may want to consider making it up to the customer in some way like a discount, a free tool or accessory or a gift certificate good on a future purchase. Ask yourself: "If I were in my customer's shoes what would I expect?"

The length of your customer relationship can also help you determine if you should do something to make up for the mistake. You may feel a longtime customer deserves better treatment and give him a bigger makegood. While a first-time customer may have no track record with you, a discount on their next purchase works in the hopes of keeping them as a customer.

One of the best approaches I've seen happened to me personally. After a SNAFU, the salesperson asked me: "What do you feel is a fair way to deal with the situation?" When the weight was on my shoulders, I looked at the situation a little differently. The word "fair" made me realize that there were two sides to the sales transaction and it was an honest mistake, not willful dishonesty. I didn't ask for anything but a fast resolution. I felt satisfied that the salesperson had admitted to the problem and he agreed to make good on it quickly.

Everyone makes mistakes. It's how we deal with our mistakes that shows our true character and makes the difference between the Professional Distributors and the Other Distributors. ■

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