

Boosting Up Sales In A Down Economy: Service as Salesmanship

By Phil Sasso

The key to running a successful shop is not doing good work. Unfortunately, often the sale doesn't go to the best technician, but to the best salesperson.

Not that doing good work isn't important — it's *essential*. But doing good work alone will not grow your business. It's important to build relationships with your customers and create the kind of customer satisfaction that generates tons of referrals. One way to generate more repeat business and referrals is to focus on service as salesmanship. This will work to help you boost sales in a good economy or a bad one.

"Too many [shop owners and managers] are selling me right from the moment I get to the counter," says Sales Coach & Leadership/Management Training Consultant Orrin Rudolph of Vital-Life Communications (www.orrinrudolph.com). "And that is so off-putting ... it's so irritating."

Your customer is thinking: "Hear me first. Solve my problem. Show me you can solve my problem," continues Rudolph. Then, by listening and helping your customer you'll earn their trust and their long-term business.

"You don't want to start selling from the beginning," says Rudolph. "Ask questions. Get

them talking. Engage them in conversation. If you do this, they won't feel sold since they've done all the talking. They've sold themselves, but you've steered them."

Sell the sizzle, not the steak

Some of the seemingly minor things you do will influence your customers more than the actual quality of your workmanship. That's because they often cannot see or don't understand how to measure the quality of your workmanship. You're the expert, not them.

A few months ago, Beth and I were deciding where she should take our minivan for an oil change. She wanted to take the van to a shop several miles away in an industrial area. I suggested she try a nearby shop instead.

"I like my shop," she said. "They vacuum the car when they're done."

"You want to take the car to a shop because they vacuum it?" I asked. "You can vacuum the car yourself. Why don't you try that place over on North Avenue?"

"Why?" Beth asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Its close—and they have free popcorn and pop."



“So, you want me to take the van somewhere because they have free popcorn?” Beth laughed. “And that’s better than choosing a shop because they vacuum your car?”

“But it’s really good popcorn,” I joked. “And don’t forget you can get a free Coke, too ...”

I’ve been doing automotive aftermarket marketing for over two decades. Yet, even I’m sometimes swayed by the insignificant. Actually, my decision isn’t really based on just proximity and popcorn. They provide quality service — but so does the “vacuuming shop”. Customers may seem fickle. But you can learn what they want just by asking them.

For example, shops with a neat and clean waiting room tend to get more repeat business than those that don’t — especially from female customers.

Customers and prospects are making decisions about you and your shop from the minute they walk in the door, says Rudolph. Be sure that everything about your shop creates the kind of impression you want a customer to have.



Grease the squeaky wheel — before it squeaks

Avoiding comebacks is important to any shop. Obviously part of that is doing the job right the first time. Another is knowing your customer’s expectations. Again, this is where asking good questions can help.

“You want your customer to say to himself, ‘Hey this guy’s listening to me. He’s not just here to sell stuff. He’s actually heard me. I’m not just another number on his list,’” says Rudolph. “Ninety per cent of a salesman’s job is listening.”

About twenty years ago, I took my car in for a brake job to a franchise shop. As I sat in the waiting room thumbing through old magazines, I asked the owner what the most important thing he’d learned at franchise school was.

“Be sure the brakes don’t squeak,” he replied.

“Pardon me?”

“You need to lubricate the brakes so they don’t squeak,” he reiterated.

“Why is that so important?” I asked.

“If their brakes squeak, they’ll come back — even if nothing else is wrong,” he explained. “And once they become a comeback, the chances are you’ve lost a customer.”

The average customer doesn’t know a good brake job from a bad one. So, a squeaking brake isn’t really as much a technical issue as a marketing issue. That franchisee learned to see every step in the service process as marketing. That shop is still open two decades later.

Show And Sell

One way to sell add-on products and services is to visually show your customers the benefit of the product or service. Remember, many of your customers are not as mechanical as you are, says Rudolph. Try using analogies and visual aids to help communicate to your customer.

Last month, I brought the car in to replace the water pump. I ended up needing a new head gasket instead. The

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technician showed me the leak. I gave him the go ahead to do the job.

The next day the technician called and asked me if I could stop by on my way home from work. I thought to myself “Uh oh. He’s going to try to sell me an overhaul or something I

don’t need.”

When I arrived, he showed me the disassembled engine, pulled out the blown head gasket and demonstrated the work he’d done on the head. He told me I didn’t need a new serpentine belt as he originally thought and gave

me his estimated time I could pick the car up the next day.

As I got into my minivan and was driving away I was stunned. He hadn’t tried to sell me anything. Instead, he wanted me to understand how much work was going into the project. In doing that, he convinced me he was honest and hardworking.

In the end, he earned my respect and likely my future business. By taking the time to show me what he was doing, he sold me on his value and his integrity.

“Often, when you get a call from a garage, it’s to sell you something,” says Rudolph. That tends to put people on the defensive every time they get a call from the shop. Rudolph suggests you make the time to call customers to tell them things are going well. Much like my technician showing me his progress, it serves to build a bridge rather than a wall between you and your customer.

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**If you aren’t listening,
you aren’t selling**

Overall, if you really listen to your customers you’ll find that they will tell you a lot, says Rudolph. In essence, they’ll tell you both what they want to buy and how they want to be treated. Listen carefully to what they’re saying. And ask good questions so you understand their expectations.

All in all, if you sell the sizzle, anticipate issues, and show and sell you’ll have a happy customer that will tell all his or her friends about your shop. In the end you may even find yourself with more business than you know what to do with.

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