

What's a customer look for in a tool dealer?

With the start of a new year, get a refresher on the basics of your business.

BY PHIL SASSO

Q I've been a tool man for several years. I think I know my business. But I don't want to fool myself into thinking I know it all. So, tell me something new: What are customers really looking for from a Tool Dealer?

A Good question. That's right up with the big ones like "What's the meaning of life?" and "What do women want?" It almost merits a book more than a column. After 30 years of research, Freud couldn't answer that last question (but it's probably not tools). However after 20-plus years in the tool and equipment market, I've come to understand that, while any customer can be fickle, most of the time most of them are looking for the same things.

INVENTORY – Obviously, you should keep your truck neat, organized and, most importantly well-stocked. You can't sell what you don't have. Customers

in *PTEN*. Maybe he's thinking about an item in your flyer or that you toted and promoted last week. Now you're pulling up to his shop and he wants that product. It's like Pavlov's dogs -- he sees your truck and he wants to buy something. Sadly, if you don't have what he wants, he may just ask the next dealer.

RELATIONSHIP – It's not just about your inventory, it's also about you. You're not selling tools. You're selling yourself, first. If you can't sell yourself, you won't sell much of anything.

It's no secret that most technicians have one primary tool dealer. They may buy from others, but they will tend to stick with one for most of their purchases. It may be just to make bookkeeping easier, but you and I both know it's more about the relationship. You want to be that go-to dealer.

Once a customer feels a connection with you, they'll tend to do more business with you. Don't take that for granted. As I said earlier, customers can be fickle. One SNAFU and their loyalty may shift.

PRICE – In this economy, your price is important. But price isn't the end all and be all. Today, your customer could choose to buy online, at a big box store, or even at their parts supplier. That might save them a buck, but most technicians still prefer to buy from a mobile. Why? There are a lot of reasons, but service, not price, is at the top of most people's list.

QUALITY – My great grandfather used to say: "People will only buy crap once." That's as true today as it was in his day. Your customers are buying from you because they want good, quality tools and equipment. If you sell them something sub-standard you risk losing their

trust. Focus on top-drawer products. If a customer asks for something cheaper, it's okay to step down a level, but be sure he knows what he's getting.

FINANCING – More than a decade ago, strategy and management consulting firm Booz Allen described Snap-on as combining "the top-drawer cachet of a Louis Vuitton, the credit philosophy of a Wells Fargo and the convenience of the Good Humor Man." I think that description fits most successful mobile dealers: they offer quality products and to-your-door convenience, but I think the real breakthrough in this business model is financing. There's only one place your customers can buy professional tools on credit: a mobile tool dealer.

CONVENIENCE – Time is money. That's another reason the mobile business works so well. A tech wants to get his tools and get right back to work. Be on schedule. Make sales, collections and warranty transactions as quickly as you can. Be sensitive of your tech's time. If you're backed up with paperwork, offer to bring the receipt to your customer in his bay.

SERVICE – Sure, you can sell some tools if you pull up to a shop and just invite guys to walk around your truck. But to be really successful, you need to provide excellent customer service. What's that mean? There are probably as many different definitions of good customer service as there are customers, but the top attribute in the tool business is reliability.

Customers want to buy from someone they can count on. They ask themselves: Will he be here on time next week? What if something goes wrong? Are warranty issues handled promptly? Does he

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will only special-order certain tools and equipment. If they want something common, they want it now. They don't want to wait.

Much of tool selling is about being prepared for the impulse buy. Maybe your customer hit a snag in a job and a specialty tool would have made it easier. Maybe he just read about a cool new tool

follow through on his promises?

You answer these questions by the way you run your business. It isn't about your words, it's about your actions. Get this right and you'll have loyal customers. Fall short of it and it will be an upward battle. In either case, word will get around. Trust is built over time. So, be consistent, persistent and patient.

RESPECT – Customers like to deal with people they like. But more importantly, customers want to buy from someone they respect – and who respects them. Earning respect is more important than making friends. In an either/or situation, I'd rather deal with someone I respect over someone that tells a good joke. You likely feel the same way.

I once asked a wise businessman about building respect. He said, "Don't treat people the way you want to be treated." I stared at him in shock. "Treat them the way *they* want to be treated." That made me stop and think.

Some customers want you to chit chat, while others are all business. Some talk about hobbies, others are all about current events or family. Some want to trade harmless jabs. Some don't. Follow their lead. But under it all, respect them. It will shine through.

EXPERTISE – Customers don't expect you to know everything about every SKU in your inventory. But they do expect you to have a certain level of expertise. Keeping up-to-date on the most popular new products will help you position yourself as an expert tool consultant.

Many customers will ask your advice. Smart ones will take it.

Recently I realized the importance of taking advice. I had lunch at AAPEX this year with *Professional Distributor* Editor Jacques Gordon and Managing Editor Erica Schulz. For dessert, Jacques and Erica took the waitress' recommendations. I didn't. I chose a graham cracker gelato. Which was just a step up from the olive oil gelato. (Really. They sold oil-flavored ice cream!) They were delighted with the choice the waitress recommended. I was not delighted with mine, but I could only blame myself for not listening.

As a dealer, some customers will take your advice and some won't. But if they don't, they can't blame you if they're unhappy with their decision.

Speaking of advice, if you've ever tried olive oil gelato, let me know. I'm curious what you think. ■

What do you think?

Want to add something something? Set me straight? Have question? Email me at phil@philsasso.com, or leave me a voicemail at (847) 250-7445 or send a fax to (815) 550-1670.

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