

GETTING an EARFUL

While marketing and store design can play a big part in developing customer loyalty, the thoughtful act of listening to your patrons may be most important.

By Dan Mann

More than 90 percent of retail sales associates NEVER do this at work. What is it? The answer is surprisingly simple. Most sales associates don't listen to their customers.

If you are a business owner, you probably can't believe this is true. But if you think of this as a consumer, you KNOW it is.

The focus here is on the interaction between your staff and your customers. The great opportunity for us is to maximize that interaction and make it memorable. Think about this: for most of us, we can go all day without being truly listened to! Your co-workers, employees, service people, even your spouse and children frequently don't listen. What if it was different in your store? What if your customers were really listened to by your staff?

It would be a gift. It would be uncommon. It would be memorable. You should do it. There are several reasons why you should:

1. Listening helps us truly learn the customer's need.
2. Listening opens up possibilities for everything the customer needs from us — and sometimes they don't even know what they need.
3. Listening builds rapport.
4. Listening builds credibility.

Listening Builds Rapport

Too frequently, we view the salesperson who knows all the technical data about your product as the best salesperson. But this is not always the case. I recently took my son's iPod into my local Apple store for a repair. In the back of the store is the Genius Bar. It's where all the tech gurus work.

You bring your product to the "genius/guru" and they fix it. Typically you might be expecting to feel like a fool (Why couldn't I figure this out on my own? Or, it's so simple!) But no, when I approached the counter, my expert had a T-shirt on that read, "I know people." I loved that. Not "I know computers" or "I'm really smart" ... just, simply, "I know people."

That's what it takes for us to deliver a memorable customer experience. And you don't need a T-shirt — just the right attitude. By the way, he totally solved my problem — because he was a guru!

Customers tend to buy when they have a logical reason to buy AND when they have an emotional reason to buy. To create that possibility, your sales person must be an expert at asking questions.

By asking the right questions the sales person gains credibility. As the customer answers, we listen and respond appropriately. The sales person should attempt to talk half as much as the customer.

When we listen and let the customer do most of the talking, we build rapport. Gaining credibility helps us deliver that logical reason to buy ... while gaining rapport helps us develop the emotional reason to buy.

What's beautiful about this is that both can be developed with skillful questioning and listening.

But mostly, the customer has a delightful experience, where she is front and center in your world and we have enough information to then respond with the right product to meet her needs. I assure you, this might be the first time she was listened to in a retail store in quite a while.

Hire the Curious

How do you create this in your business? First — and most importantly — hire curious people. You want a staff that is interested in helping people ... and move toward your customers. They'll do this automatically if they are already naturally curious. Next, you must show your staff what you expect. Demonstrate this behavior.

Let them see it in action. Help them learn the questions that provide the insight into the customer's need. Questions such as, "What will you be using this for?" and "What are your goals?" and "What experience do you have?" and "Where will you be using this product?"

The competition for customer loyalty and memorable customer experience is fierce. Some will attempt to win the battle with marketing and store design. While important, these are relatively easy compared with the opportunity we have to provide the one thing customers crave: to be listened to. **LGR**



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THE POWER IN A QUESTION

Asking your customer the right question focuses the attention on them.

Just imagine the impact your business would make if you could actually focus your attention on your customers. I promise you it would be a rare experience for them.

Asking your customer the right question gets them talking.

This is the real secret to a great customer experience. If THEY are talking and YOU are listening, then you are already light years ahead of the competition. Everything that happens after this is going to be good; trust me.

Asking your customer the right question builds rapport. They talk; you listen.

The more they talk the smarter you are. If you are listening and interested, then you have created a connection. It is that connection which builds trust, credibility and relationship. That rapport is the foundation you will need when you begin to suggest product/solutions.

Asking your customer the right question builds credibility. You develop insight.

These days customers often walk into a store with a very low level of expectation. If they have shopped the competition, they've likely experienced poor, disinterested service. By asking great questions, you have already distinguished yourself as someone with insight and perspective. The customer NEEDS your help.

Asking your customer the right question helps you learn your customer's needs.

Asking questions and listening also does something else that is crucial: It helps YOU to learn. Now that you know something about this customer, you can actually begin to meet their needs.

Asking your customer the right question increases the possibility of a sale!

Unfortunately your customer has other options. They likely can buy your products in many places. Once they are in your store, you must give them a REASON to purchase NOW. Interacting with the right question increases that likelihood.

Enrich Your Customer's Experience...

...by checking Dan out at Cultivate'14 this July 12-15 in Columbus, Ohio. He will cover merchandising non-negotiables, subtle nuances of the buying decision and the benefits of positive employee-shopper engagement, to name a few. To learn more about his appearance and other A-list experts scheduled to appear, visit www.cultivate14.org.

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