



If everyone is going to eat, someone has to sell

Selling is a journey, not a destination



By Rick Hill

The last few articles have focused on sales teams and motivating them. But what if you are one of the 18,000 small shops that read *Wood Digest*? You run a good woodworking shop, you might have help in back, but the sales are up to you.

As a woodworker, you have had to pick

up new skills whenever the job demanded it — tricks of the trade that made your product better and your work easier. How to make mitre corners or match left and right twist rope mouldings are all easy now. You have continually improved your skills.

The same goes for the skills in selling. Whether you consider yourself a salesperson or not, we can all use a little improvement in our skills.

Though the books and audio seminars will talk about all kinds of new methods you can use to make more sales, the biggest improvements always come from improving the basics. Just like your woodworking, if you do a great job of sanding, the finish will always be better.

GREAT SALES COME FROM GREAT NOTES

The first skill is simple notes. It is as easy as jotting down your discussions with your customers as you talk. It helps to have those notes for future discussions with the customer. One of my past great sales managers always taught that as soon as you are done with the call, go over the notes and rewrite, add, delete and clarify the discussion. Then he would send a fax (now you could send an e-mail) to the customer thanking them for the time and clarifying their understanding of their needs. If you can't be bothered to send them a quick note, then at least end each meeting with a summary explaining what you understand your next tasks to be for the customer. The summary will help to clarify what you plan on doing next and what each person's role will be.

This is the time to remind them of tasks they have to perform, like deciding on door styles and making sure they realize that you cannot quote them before they decide. If you do nothing else to improve your skills, adding the summary discussion method will increase your sales substantially.

Prospects and customers are not looking for the smoothest talking, best dressed sales person. They do not care if you are the most technical guy to walk in their door. What they want to know is that you understand what they are trying to create. When you follow up quickly with a summary, note or e-mail, you show them that you follow through, that you understand, and that you care about their ideas.

The second basic skill is to set up a sales file by customer. It doesn't have to be a computerized customer relationship manager (CRM). It can be as simple as a manila folder by customer and a tickler file. Right after you write your first note of understanding to the customer, make a quick copy of it for the customer file. Then set a date that you want to call them back. This date is the basis for your tickler file.

A tickler file is essential to any sales improvement. You might use some type of calendar system now for keeping track of your steps to

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project completion. A tickler file is the same concept but for sales. Its sole job is to remind you of your next step in your sales progress with the customer. Based on a calendar, the tickler can be done through your Microsoft Outlook program, a CRM or even a 3x5 card in a date file. The point is to take a minute to write down the next step in the sale. Then set a date to call them back.

Decide what the next step is in the sale. Are you waiting for them to pick a stain? Do you need to send them a quote or a drawing? Whatever the next step is, that is what goes into your tickler file. Every day as you open your calendar, only the files you need to call show up. As you take care of each call, you

write down the next step and set up a new tickler. The old one goes into your customer file and becomes an immediate history for future reference.

The goal of each tickler is to write down a step that makes progress in your sale. Progress is defined as any action that gets you closer to the sale. Progress calls are not asking about their health or discussing the local sports. They are incremental advances in your sale. Every sale is a series of small steps to acceptance. Progress calls move the prospect up each step. If the client hasn't made a decision on who will get the work, your progress tickler could be asking them to come in and take a look at your pictures of past jobs and testimonials. If they are trying to decide on what style of doors they want, your tickler could be an e-mail of popular door styles.

I have consulted with several salespeople who balk at the tickler file step. "I don't need a reminder; I remember everything." Or, "The important stuff never gets past me!" These are the same people who have stacks of paper on every surface and can "always find it when they need it." These are also the same people who are always worried and concerned over all the things they have to do.

What most people don't realize is the peace of mind they can get from a simple tickler file. Once you have written the note and it is in the calendar, you can forget it. As the day comes around, you'll be reminded through your system. This allows you to work on other projects without concerning yourself with every detail. If you ever need to see what your progress is, it is in the customer file.

I'M NOT PUSHY ENOUGH TO SELL

We all want to have the ideal business, where the client walks in the door because they heard about you from someone else. Well, even Tiffany's advertises, so until you surpass their reputation, you will always have to do some marketing and selling.

The fear of selling comes from our experience with the horrible pushy salespeople we've all met. The kind that won't listen, won't take no for an answer and won't stop calling. Just as there are all

kinds of woodworking styles, there are also all kinds of sales styles. Great salespeople don't have to be loud and aggressive to get sales. They just have to have a compelling story. A compelling story comes from the heart; it grabs people with emotion and honesty and gets them to realize they want to work with

you to create their dream.

There's a new laminate distributor in our local market that has a great story. When he tells it, the shops invariably want to buy from him. They often pay him early because they know he is just starting out and, like them, is trying to build a new kind of business.

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He talks of his family's long history building cabinets in the market to show he understands their problems. He talks of how he successfully ran his own shop for four years, but the long hours and an unhelpful partner did him in. So, he went to work for a laminate distributor in town and learned the laminate wholesale

business. After several years he grew disgusted with the hidden charges, fuel surcharges, handling fees and rebates that the industry used to control the market. When he found an import line that needed a distributor, he leveraged his house, bought an inventory and now is selling a new line of laminate in the market.

When he tells his story to the other shops, you can see their emotional involvement in his passion. They want to help him grow; they understand how it is to struggle with your own business, and they are glad to see someone who understands the problems of the industry. He doesn't have to "sell;" he just has to explain

where his passion came from. Those that understand, want to join in and help him build the business.

The same holds true for your story. You did not achieve your knowledge without trial and error. Along the way you made mistakes and learned from them. Ultimately, you built a business that you believe in. Put that story into words, show the passion you feel for what you create, and you will have a sales story that can be told to anyone.

CONCENTRATED EFFORT

I learned this technique in the days before cell phones. (Yes, I am that old!) We had a company calling card that gave us a cheaper rate if we did not hang up between calls. So I would find a pay phone inside a hotel, sit down with all of my follow-up calls in front of me. As one call would end, I would push the pound button and make another. Within an hour I would have made over 15 to 20 progressive sales calls.

It's amazing how much you can get done with no distractions. If you concentrate on only selling for one hour, you will build your business. Take no incoming calls, don't answer the door, and don't read the incoming e-mail. The goal is to get through your tickler file and talk to as many people as possible about your company in one hour. The more qualified people you talk to,

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the better your chances of getting someone interested in your story. During that hour, you make the calls in your tickler file, follow up on past customers' satisfaction while asking them for referrals, and call the people "that know."

Just a quick note on "calling." A general rule is that people over 50 respond better to phone

calls. People under 50 reply faster to e-mails. Use the technique that gets the better response, not the one you are comfortable with.

Calling people from the tickler file is easy — they know you and you have something for them. The referrals can be harder, but the questions are really very simple. "Hi Ms. Jones.

It's Rick from Rick's Cabinets. Just doing my one-year follow-up to see how you liked your cabinets. How was the design? Are you still happy? Great. You know we are doing laundry rooms and media rooms now? Well, just keep us in mind for any other projects you have. Thanks. By the way, do you know anyone else that might need our help? Thanks, take care."

That's it. That simple.

Now I can hear Negative

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Ned out there typing an e-mail to me saying he doesn't want to talk to Ms. Jones again. What if she is unhappy with the cabinets? Then what are you going to do? Let's assume that Negative Ned is right and one of the customers we called is unhappy.

Well that one customer was unhappy before we made the call. It didn't just come up as we called him. In fact, he will have been telling several people how unhappy he is with Rick's Cabinets. It's a good thing we called so we can try to fix the problem and turn him into a customer who tells his friends about the great service from Rick's. Look at dissatisfaction as an opportunity to learn how to make your product better, or how to better pick a customer.

The last sales call is calling the people "that know." Those people are easy to find, and you know some of them well. Your insurance man knows

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everyone who is adding to their house, had a new baby, or just bought one too many cars for their garage space. Your barber/hair stylist knows who is contemplating a redo of their living room for the upcoming holidays. Your realtors know who is moving, renovating and remodeling.

In my business, we sell for several companies, one of which manufactures a great line of adhesives. These adhesives are used in edgebanders, laminators and profile wrappers. Whenever we hear of a customer contemplating a new type of machinery, we ask their permission to send their name on to our contacts in the machinery business. If they agree, we pass their name to the people who can help them make the decision. The reverse is also true. When the machinery technicians need a glue to run in their trials, they often call us to get free samples for their customers. We also offer to be there during the trials to help with the technical aspects of the adhesive. Afterward, we often send a thank you note and a small gift to show we appreciate them thinking of us. It is amazing what camaraderie can be built just from a handwritten thank you note and a bottle of wine. It is easy for us to do because we really do appreciate their help. We have gone so far as to have the wine private-labeled with our company logo to remind them of our ties to their industry and success.

What you are doing is not pushy, aggressive behavior; it is building a network of successful people that recommend your company, people who can vouch for your work and ability even when you are not there. You want the movers and the shakers of your local market to help you build your reputation. If you cannot abide the thought that you are sell-

ing, then change the vocabulary. Call it telling, not selling. You are telling your story to as many people as you can. Everyday as you listen to customers' needs and tell about your business, you are creating new alliances of people who want you to share in their project. Remember, if everybody's going to eat, someone has to tell. **W**

Ed. note: Rick Hill is the founder of WoodReps.com, a national association of independent sales representatives in the woodworking industry. Hill also runs OnPoint Sales, an independent rep group in the Midwest. He can be contacted at onpoint@excel.net.