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Customer Loyalty:

Assure That Your
Customers Are Satisfied
Now and Loyal Forever

The Relationship Selling™ Series

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The Value of Assuring Customer Satisfaction

I love to ride motorcycles. Note that I don't merely "like" motorcycles – I love them! Several years ago at the motorcycle dealership where I often do business, I bought a pair of summer riding gloves. They only cost twenty-two dollars. When I got home and took them out of the package to try them on, they didn't fit quite right.

So I took them back to the dealer the next day, found a pair of gloves that were one dollar cheaper, and I told the clerk, "These gloves I bought yesterday didn't quite fit, but these other gloves fit me perfectly. They're not in a package, so I've already had the chance to try them on. Let's trade gloves and you can just keep the extra dollar. I'm not interested in a refund, I just want some gloves that fit."

Scott, the guy behind the counter said, "Do you have your receipt?" And I said, "No." He said, "Then I can't exchange them."

I noted, "But you sold them to me yesterday."

He said, "I know, but I can't exchange them without a receipt. That's just the way we do it here."

So I said, "Well, let me talk to your manager."

His manager came over and I told him what I wanted to do. And he said, "Do you have a receipt?" And I said, "Not on me, I have one at home."

"Jim," he said, "put yourself in my position. If someone comes in here like you, and they want to trade gloves, and they don't have a receipt – heck, these gloves could have fallen off a turnip truck!"

I corrected him, "A glove truck maybe." He said, "OK, OK. But still, they might have been stolen or picked somewhere else. Without a receipt, how do I know we sold them?"

I said, "Put yourself in my position. Scott here has sold me not only these gloves, but many, many other things over the years. And you, personally, as a sales manager, sold me my last motorcycle, and it cost me over ten thousand dollars. Prior to your being here,

I bought two other motorcycles from this dealership and, barring any negative outcomes to today's dialogue, I'll probably buy future motorcycles here. So, best I can tell, I am not an adversary to your business, nor a potential glove thief. I'm an asset worth at least forty thousand dollars, and maybe more, to your dealership."

All of a sudden his body language changed. He looked a lot more pleasant and agreeable, and he said, "Would you like a bag for those gloves, or do you just want to wear them home?"

His whole position changed from one of seeing me as an adversary, to one of seeing me as an asset. The reason it changed was because he started understanding my point of view. As a customer, I had a great deal of business to bring to him – not just now, but over the years. And he could endanger that business by handling this one transaction in an inappropriate way.

Customers aren't just people who buy. They are assets. The real trick to building a business is creating ongoing, profitable relationships with your customers.

But the big question isn't, "how can I get my customers to become more loyal to me?" Rather, it's, "how can I become more loyal to my customers so that they don't want to lose their connection with me?"

Please pause and read that sentence again.

I'm suggesting that you stop seeking customer loyalty, and simply start becoming more loyal to your customers. Don't wait for them to show their commitment to you – make a commitment to serve them so well that the competition becomes irrelevant.

When it comes to giving customer loyalty, what's in it for you?

- 1.** You retain more customers.
- 2.** You save time that would have to be spent finding replacement customers.

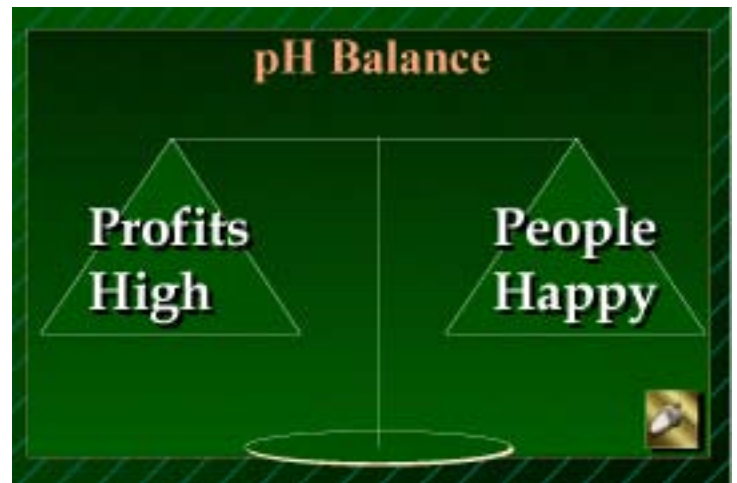
3. You protect your current customers from your competitors.
4. You reduce the cost of each sale, since you already have the connection with the customer.
5. You enhance your reputation as a caring, conscientious sales professional.
6. You get fewer customer complaints.
7. Your customers not only give you the benefit of the doubt, they also refer more new customers to you.
8. In focusing on giving customer loyalty, you increase your profit per account and lessen the pressure on you to increase sales.
9. New sales come more easily as you build your base of grateful customers.
10. You learn more about what your customers will buy, and you save money on marketing research and promotion.

Satisfied customers are the quickest route to increased revenues. When we forget that, we erode the base of our business and put future profits at risk. The way to assure that they are satisfied is to retain pH Balance.

pH Balance: Profits High, People Happy

There is an ad that has run on TV for many years stressing the importance of a woman's deodorant being "pH balanced". What this means, of course, is that it has the ingredients that make it compatible with the chemistry of a person's body.

I believe that a business – and for that matter, your selling – should also be pH balanced: pH=Profits High and People Happy.



What you do certainly should cause the profits to be high; but at the same time, it should cause the prospects who choose to become your customers to be happy with their decision.

In any given situation, you need to balance those two. When you just focus on the numbers, on the profitability of each transaction, you can make the wrong decision – and actually lose a valuable sales relationship in the process. At other times, tracking the numbers is the best thing you can do. You need to know how many calls it takes to make a sale. You need to determine how many assets are in use when you are selling, how many resources are you using up, and how much time are you committing to each sales process. How many customers do you see in a typical day, week, or month? When you look at the allocation of assets and the return on those allocations, the kind of profit you're getting, it tells you how to more efficiently use your time. The purpose of all these measurements is to determine what pays off, and what doesn't.

This is doubly true when it comes to giving loyalty. It is not enough to just do what we consider to be loyal things – we must engage in behaviors that the customers consider to be expressions of our loyalty to them. Once we identify what these actions are, we can structure our systems to assure that we consistently deliver those behaviors.

On the other side of this pH scale is People Happy. If all you're doing is producing high profits but people aren't happy, pretty soon you're going to start losing sales and the profits will drop. So look at the People Happy side of the equation:

- First, do your customers know that you care about

them? If so, how do they know? What are you doing to show them that you care? Have you asked them?

- Second, do the customers truly feel understood by you? It's one thing to understand someone, it's quite another for them to feel that you understand them – that's where the real power lies.
- Third, look at the customers you're calling on and the ways you're calling on them. Are you an enhancement to their day? When you show up, do you look like good news to them, or do you look like an interruption?
- Fourth, look at yourself. Are you happy with what you're doing? If you're not, alter the ways you're doing it. Find a new way to motivate yourself, find a new way to keep yourself focused on the customer, and find new ways to add some joy to what you're doing day to day. If you don't feel very connected to what you're doing, chances are good it's showing up on the outside and others can tell that you don't have your heart in it.

Learn to keep people happy – both yourself and the other people you're dealing with. Learn to keep the profits high. When you keep those two things in balance, business is beautiful.

Touch Points & Trust Points

In day-to-day business dealings, we have many "touch points" of contact with our customers. If you are like the Four Seasons Hotel and have 500 or so employees serving guests in around 270 rooms, then you will experience nearly 5,000 direct contacts with your customers each day. The better you manage each of those touch points, the better and more profitable your customer relations will be.

Yesterday, I had lunch at the Four Seasons. I informed the doorman that a guest would be arriving soon to join me, and asked that he direct the man to the lobby

lounge if he could identify him. When my friend arrived at our lunch table he said, "You must really be a big deal here! The doorman who greeted my car said, 'You must be here to meet Mr. Cathcart.' I said, 'How did you know?' He said, 'Just a lucky guess.'"

That doorman doubled his tip through that touch point. He so impressed my friend (and me) that we will both fondly remember that day. And all it took on the doorman's part was a decision to be proactive in inquiring about whom my friend was there to meet.

When it comes to touch points, I'm talking about the moment-to-moment encounters that fill our typical day. Don't let the large numbers of points intimidate you – just start handling each one as best you can.

In contrast to the proactive doorman, I recently took my car in for service and was treated as an interruption. I sat in my car in the service lane for 17 minutes before being greeted – and I was second in line! Even then I was greeted in a mechanical manner, as if it was my car that needed the respect instead of me as the customer. That caused me to immediately start considering other dealers for future services. (That's One.) We must remember that it is not the products that pay us, it is the customers. It is they who deserve our respect and loyalty.

Out of the 5,000 touch points mentioned earlier, there are many fewer critical contacts that we might isolate into the category of "trust points." Trust points are the customer interactions where the quality and outcome have greater implications than other points of contact. For example: the processing of someone's bill is a trust point, whereas the handling of their luggage is a touch point.

Here's another way to think of it: a typical golf ball has about 336 impressions on its surface. Each of these must be near-perfect if the ball is to be accepted for retail sale. Otherwise, it is rejected and used as a practice ball. Of those 336 impressions, only a few of them are in the strike zone where a golf club impacts the ball – which impressions depends on how you place the ball on the tee.

Once the ball has been teed up, there is a special section of the ball, known as "the sweet spot", where the club must hit the ball in order to send it where you want it to go. If you strike any other portion of the ball, it will go astray.

The same dynamic is true with business. Of all the many touch points with your customers, there are a few in each of your dealings with them that become trust points. In these moments of contact, trust is either built or reduced. Consider the service call touch point, where a customer is telling you what his problem is. If he feels you are listening to him and genuinely seeking to understand his concerns, trust increases. If he gets the impression that you aren't listening fully, then trust erodes.

Last week I took my wife's car to the dealer for service. When the rep told me about an expensive repair that was needed, I asked if there was a less expensive way to deal with it. He simply said, "It's an expensive car." Trust dropped in that moment. He didn't listen to and care about my concerns, he simply reasserted his price. (That's Two!) Next time, I'll be going to another dealer for service. It doesn't take many experiences like this before you start to feel the financial loss from poorly-handled touch points.

To address trust points and increase the High Value Relationships for your own business, start here:

- 1.** Identify all of the touch points where your business makes contact with the customers.
- 2.** Isolate the ones that are potential trust points.
- 3.** Develop a standard procedure for assuring that the trust points are always handled with care.
- 4.** Hold yourself to high standards of quality on all touch points.
- 5.** Teach your people that all relationships are assets and must be managed as such.
- 6.** Measure, monitor, and evaluate your customer contact experiences constantly.
- 7.** Remember; things that are measured tend to improve, but only if you analyze and discuss what you have measured.

As you can tell, I've come to admire the Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. They are an excellent example of a pH Balanced organization. From top to bottom, they measure their performance and hold high standards for every touch point. As mentioned earlier, in a typical

200- to 300-room hotel, they calculate that there are about 5,000 guest and staff interactions per day. They measure and refine every one of those contacts. Clearly they know what to do and why it matters. The happy result of this dedication is that the Four Seasons has the highest revenue per room night in the luxury hotel marketplace. Their profits are high.

Ah, but are their people happy? A resounding yes! They have the most satisfied customer base of all the top hotel chains and their own internal personnel are reportedly proud and pleased to work there. This is because they take care of their own people in the same manner that they care for their guests. There's money and happiness in giving loyalty.

What Is A Customer Worth To You?

Some years ago, I went into an automobile tire store. I needed a number of things for my car. I had a list of twenty-five items – a little switch here, something to fix a section of chipped paint there, this thing wasn't running well, that thing didn't look as good as it could, and so forth – but the item at the top of my list was tires.

So I went to the tire store, and found a set at a reasonable price. In those days, the entire set of four tires cost only \$239. The store was one of those buildings with three service bays where they put the car on a hydraulic lift to install the tires.

I was standing outside the service bay, behind a little white stripe painted on the concrete in the safe area for customers to stand, and I was watching Mike put the tires on my car. Well, Mike got all the tires installed and did a nice professional job of it, then he turned around to me said, "Excuse me sir, is this your car? Would you come here a second?"

I stepped under the car and looked up at the underside as he pointed out some things to me. He said, "Next time you have it in for service and it's up on a rack, check this area, because it looks like there might be the beginning of some wear. You don't need to do anything now, but later on you might need to address that."

And I said, “OK, what do I need to do today?”

He said, “Like I said, nothing. You’re fine, you’ve got your tires, everything’s good, I just wanted to help you enjoy your car and keep it safe.”

I was impressed. He didn’t try to gouge me for unnecessary extras. I began to trust him.

So I said, “By the way, I’ve got a list here of twenty-five items I need to get done to this car, could you refer me to someone to fix these other twenty four?”

He looked at the list and he said, “Well, sir, we’re a full service operation here, we can do almost all twenty-four of those.”

What started out as a \$239 tire purchase, ended up on that same visit as a \$1,600 renovation. And over the years, every time I needed service, I brought my car back to that particular dealer. I ended up spending \$9,620.72 in parts and repairs on that car with Mike.

I know you might be thinking the car was a lemon, and maybe it was. But, I liked the car, and the little repairs from time to time didn’t annoy me that much. Plus, the car was paid for, so the service was like car payments in some ways.

Nonetheless, I was worth \$9,620.72 to that dealer. If they had simply installed the tires, sent me on my way, and thought of me as a tire customer, I would have come back the next time I needed tires. I never had to buy tires again for that particular car, so I wouldn’t have ever come back.

As it was, because they recognized that I was more than a tire customer, I was worth a great deal more to them – and they could do a great deal more for me. They cultivated that initial relationship in a way that facilitated the rest of the fruitful relationship.

Carl Sewell, an exceptionally successful automobile dealer, wrote a book called *Customers For Life*, in which he estimated that a typical buyer spends somewhere in the neighborhood of \$332,000 in their lifetime, just on automobiles.

Today that figure would be even larger. When you’re talking about that kind of money – whether you’re talking about cars, financial services, or independent business services – does it really make sense for you

to quibble with someone over details when there’s a problem or disagreement? No.

Whenever possible, it’s best to give in early and provide people with the value they need. Make sure you’re making a reasonable financial decision in doing this, but serve your customers with the ultimate value of that customer in mind – not just the current value of today’s transaction.

When a customer buys everything you offer, how much revenue does that generate? What if they remain a customer of yours throughout their buying lifetime? That amount is the potential value of a customer. They would no doubt also provide you with referrals, testimonials, and valuable feedback as well.

For example: if a typical customer buys \$1,000 of goods from you and an ideal customer buys \$100,000 over time, then upgrading your typical customers to ideal customer status represents a \$99,000 per customer revenue opportunity...with no prospecting required.

If you have 300 customers and they buy an average of \$1,000 of your products per year, then your base is \$300,000. By finding better ways to show your loyalty to those 300 people, you can expect that many of them will upgrade and buy more from you. Assuming that 10 percent of them buy twice as much, that is worth \$30,000 more to you with no extra marketing costs. Imagine what the numbers could be if you had 5,000 customers, or if you got 20 percent of them to buy more, or if some of them bought everything you offer!

The numbers get very attractive, very quickly. Now, look at your existing customers and start asking yourself, “Since they are worth so much to me both now and in the future, how can I invest more energy into serving them even better?”

Exceeding Customer's Expectations

Service is not a competitive edge, it is the competitive edge. People do not buy things, they buy expectations. One expectation is that the item they buy will produce the benefits the seller promised. Another is that if it doesn't, the seller will make good on the promise.

**Karl Albrecht and Ron Zemke,
Service America: Doing Business in the New Economy**

Think about what your product or service does for someone. The basic value they get from it grows out of the product or service itself. If they don't get what they expect from the purchase, they're disappointed and they lose the sense of connection with you or your company.

For example, if you're buying a laptop computer, you expect the computer to perform without breakdown. You expect that it will function well, perform in the way that laptops are designed to perform, and continue to work as well as it did when you bought it – provided you upgrade and service it.

If it doesn't do that, you become dissatisfied. On the other hand, if you buy a computer, and it not only meets but it also exceeds your expectations, then you get really excited about it. You'll start telling your friends and neighbors about it, which will build more sales for the company that sold it to you.

The same thing is true for services. If you buy a membership in a club and, by being involved in that club, you get more than the expected benefits, you'll spread the word. But if you get less than the expected benefits, you also tend to spread the word.

The Technical Assistance Research Program out of Washington, D.C. did a classic study on this phenomenon during the '80s. They found that the average satisfied customer would tell between five and 12 other people how happy they were with their product

or service. An average dissatisfied customer, on the other hand, will tell somewhere between 13 and 20 other people how dissatisfied they were.

As you have seen, I am quick to share my stories of both success and failure. When I get great service, I brag about it. When I get mistreated, I use it as a cautionary example for others to learn from. Naturally, I'm an exception because, as a professional speaker, I have a large audience and I'm expected to tell true stories with learning points.

But everyone does this same thing on their own level. My mom tells stories to her lunch bunch, my neighbors tell stories at the fitness club, my friends tell stories over dinner, and each of us is continually encouraged to do so. Friends and coworkers ask, "So, how was your trip to San Francisco? Where did you stay? How was the food?" It is also easy conversational fodder for speaking with strangers we encounter. "Nice day, isn't it? Have you been to the new XYZ business? My wife and I were there last night and had a really (insert good or bad) time." See what I mean? It is normal and natural for all of us to give referrals or critiques of those we do business with.

I once was treated so poorly and uncaringly by an airline that I told my staff to avoid booking me on that carrier ever again. Since I travel almost every week and had accumulated over one million frequent flyer miles on that airline, this had a significant impact on their finances. Over five year period, we calculated that I had redirected more than \$240,000 of airfare away from that airline – almost a quarter of a million dollars that went to their competition! Why? Because they had offended me by showing me that they didn't care about me as a customer. A simple and sincere apology would have resolved the situation before I had made any changes.

Now, how many of your customers are harboring similar feelings but not telling you about it? It could be costing you a fortune!

When you look at dissatisfied customers, don't just think of one person being unhappy; think of one person starting to spread the poison that is a bad reputation. So stop the bad news and start the good news in every way that you possibly can, and then ask yourself, "What can I do that's a little bit extra? How could I, not 'up-sell' them, but 'up-Serve' them and provide more benefits?"

Up-Serving vs. Up-Selling

Most of the business community practices what we have come to call “up-selling” when they want to increase the size of one’s transaction. In its most basic form, it is asking “Do you want fries with that?” when someone orders a hamburger.

In a bank, it is selling a new credit card to go with the checking account and referring the client to the loan officer and mortgage department before they leave for the day.

In a hotel, it is upgrading them to a suite, adding an extra night’s stay, booking a restaurant reservation, spa treatment, or a room service order in advance.

At an auto dealership, it is adding on new wheels, a custom sound system, and a GPS navigation system. In home decorating, it is expanding from doing one room to doing the entire house.

The problem with up-selling is that it is still selling. It is you trying to talk your customers into buying more. The energy is coming from you, and they tend to feel defensive because you are attempting to persuade them to buy more than they may need.

There is a simple way to change all of this and still get the larger sales. It is what I call “up-serving.” Instead of seeking to sell more, you change your approach to trying to satisfy them even more with their decision to buy from you. Look for ways to add to their enjoyment of the product or service. Come up with add-ons that don’t cost you much but “Wow!” the customer with the added value.

In up-serving, you are paying it forward and attempting to add to their happiness. The result of this is that you feel better about yourself because you are being generous, and they feel better about you because you aren’t pushing them to buy more. In the process of up-serving, their trust of you increases. When trust increases, tension drops and they will tell you more about their needs and interests. That positions you to prescribe other services and products in a helping way rather than a selling way. People who feel they are being helped are more willing to buy. As the old saying goes, “People love to buy, they just hate being sold.” Here are some examples of up-serving:

Offer to have the new car delivered to the buyer’s

home after the initial service instead of requiring them to come back to pick it up.

Wash their car every time it is in for service. If you have to increase the cost of a service call to cover this little extra then do so, but make it easy to afford. Assure that the car always looks better when they pick it up than when they dropped it off.

Call the new computer owner and offer to walk them through some of the start up procedures over the phone, or do a remote service online. Don’t wait for them to call you.

Drop by the homeowner’s new home after they’ve moved in and provide them with an “owner’s manual” containing all the local service technician numbers, a list of local stores, utility phone numbers and websites, and even some discount certificates for local businesses.

Drop by on move-in day with some food or a dining certificate nearby where they can dine without having to dress up. Remember, their home is still mostly in boxes!

When your people deliver new furniture to someone, drop by and offer decorating suggestions and a free gift, like a dish or tray that they will use often and remember your generosity.

When you do the online web design for a new client, offer to install some free added features that they will enjoy. Then call them and walk them through the changes on the phone.

What will surely happen in many of these cases is this: the customer will ask questions that lead to new recommendations and additional sales. Will everyone buy more? No. But the odds will be so much in your favor that you won’t care when some don’t buy more. Plus, you will feel good about treating your customers so well. Up-serving is the happiest road to more profits!

Assuring After-Sale Satisfaction

A satisfied customer becomes your apostle and spreads the good word about you, while a dissatisfied one becomes your nemesis and poisons your well. So make them happy and keep them that way. Let’s look at following up and staying in touch after the sale.

Whether you're a sales person or a front-line customer service representative, you need to understand some of the things that can go wrong after the sale. Customers become disgruntled for a number of reasons, most of which turn out to be minor once they're handled tactfully. Your patience and understanding of human nature will help you remain calm when panic-stricken customers call and demand service.

"Selective perception" is a common mindset that customers adopt after a purchase. What this means is that they perceive one thing to be universal. They spend too long on hold and expand their impression into a general attitude that your company doesn't care about them.

To understand this tendency, try this exercise. The next time you're at a large sporting event, look across the stadium at the stands on the other side, and as you're looking at all those people over there, think of one a color. First think white, and look for only the color white in the stands. It will jump out at you. And then think red, and then think blue, and then think black, and then think yellow. As you think about the different colors and you pause to look for them, you will see that color stand out in your consciousness. This is called selective perception — you perceived the one color selected and focused on it.

Sometimes a customer may get a wonderful piece of equipment that does exactly what they want it to do, but there is one little item that's annoying them about

CASE STUDY

USAA

USAA, an organization in San Antonio, Texas that provides financial services to U.S. military personnel and their families, keeps its database fresh by periodically surveying its three million customers worldwide. The company seeks updated information about customers, such as whether they have children (and if so, how old they are), if they have moved recently, and when they plan to retire. USAA then tailors its marketing pieces to clients based on the surveys. If, for example, a family has college-age children, the association sends those children information on how to manage credit card debt.

"Some unnamed companies in financial services think it's appropriate to give credit cards to college students without teaching them to use them responsibly," says Phyllis Stahle, USAA's senior vice president of marketing. "When we issue credit cards, we spend a lot of time and effort explaining to students what their responsibilities are."

Similarly, USAA sends members booklets on things like financing a child's college education if those members have young children, or on estate planning if they're retired. "I know it sounds hyperbolic, but there's a sense of family with USAA," says Howard Gross, an attorney in Farmington, Connecticut, who's been a customer for roughly 25 years. "I get barraged by entreaties from various insurance companies, but USAA's mailers always seem to say, 'We're here to serve you.'"

Showing such care for customers is good business, Stahle says. She should know: USAA, a roughly \$7 billion organization, retains 97 percent of its customers. "We build loyalty by convincing [customers] we're loyal to them," Stahle says.

SOURCE: Dwight Gertz, "Strategic Growth," *Journal of Business Strategy*, (March/April 1997).

it. Maybe the color's not quite a perfect match for the other things in their office. Maybe there's a noise it makes that somehow grates on their nerves. Maybe it takes a little bit too long to warm up for their personal preferences. Their concerns about this one item can create what is known as a "halo effect" and obscure their awareness of the rest of the picture. Whatever it is, they tend to make that one item the all-important

CASE STUDY

CFX, Inc.

One company that has seen impressive results from proactive communication is CFX Inc., a Miami-based importer of fresh-cut flowers from Central and South America. CFX holds training sessions for the top fifteen percent of its wholesale customers on all of the intricacies of the flowers they sell. "People don't realize that there are two hundred varieties of roses on the market in any given day," says Barbara Montes, CFX's sales and marketing manager.

"New products are becoming available faster than anyone in our channels of distribution can learn about."

The sessions, which are usually held at the wholesalers' sites, have yielded anywhere from twenty-five percent to one hundred percent increases in sales to participating wholesalers.

"These are dramatic increases when you realize that our overall sales increases have been running five to ten percent for the past five years," Montes says. "As our industry grows, we've seen that it's important to work most closely with our highly committed customers."

SOURCE: "CFX, Inc. / USA Floral Products Brief," Thompson Financial Investext, June 6, 1998.

thing upon which they focus, and they forget about the other benefits that they're getting from the product or service.

Since they expect their purchase to be perfect, the more they spend, the greater their expectations of perfection. As salespeople, we need to put things in context for them. When someone lodges a complaint, check it out to see if it's a valid complaint and a correctable problem. If the customer's complaint is exaggerated, you may have to do some reselling. Put the negative detail in perspective by pointing out the positives.

You can also compare your problem to your competitors, and show your customer how nothing would be gained by switching companies or suppliers.

In addition, you can suggest creative ways of solving the problem. Maybe you could move the offending noisemaker, or you could soundproof the area somehow.

Another common source of frustration for customers is user error. If you've ever bought a computer, you can easily relate to this one. Computer users usually go through hours of anxiety while they're learning to use the new system. This is why a formal training or orientation program should accompany installation in an office for everyone who will use it. Part of your job as a salesperson, when confirming sales of a technical product or service, is to try to avoid user error. You must evaluate your customer's technical ability and recommend or provide training if necessary.

You must also make your customer aware of the learning period required. Help them recognize what the rules and expectations are and where they can find answers, then they'll be more able to solve their own problems.

This is equally important if your customer will be tracking results that prove or disprove your claims of performance. The true test of your product or service will come only after everyone is using it correctly. Train people to gain the maximum benefit from your product or service. That's part of your responsibility as the salesperson.

There's another phrase you often hear – buyer's remorse. It's a catchall phrase that encompasses all the reasons why a customer might regret having made a

purchase.

I once bought a vacuum cleaner from a door-to-door salesperson. Yep, he made a cold call, and I bought. And this wasn't a simple little \$200 vacuum; it was a "home cleaning system" that cost more than twice that amount. His presentation was compelling. He scurried around our living room performing his cleaning miracles, and we just couldn't wait to get our own machine so that we could have as much fun as he was having!

His enthusiasm was contagious and his closing, (yes, I said closing, not confirming) was powerful. We felt that not buying would just be deeply wrong, and so we bought it all, hook, line and sinker. After he left, we started experimenting with our new machine and were having a good time doing what had previously been seen only as housework.

Then our neighbor came by and we proudly displayed our new machine. She asked how much it cost and we told her. She was shocked!

"How could you justify paying that much?" she asked. "Why, you could buy three excellent vacuums, one for each part of the house for less than that price!"

We hadn't thought of it that way. When we considered how much money we had paid, our enthusiasm for the product dissolved and we felt ripped off. The thing that changed was not the price, the product, nor the sales process – it was simply our perception. And with that



"People respect sincerity, Hopkins, and, hey, I really mean that."

change in perception, we began to feel manipulated. Now we resented the salesman and wanted to return the product. Buyer's remorse was in full bloom!

Luckily we recovered and didn't have to confront the seller or return the product, but this experience is not uncommon. That is why it is so important for you and me as sales people to assure that every customer truly sees and understands the value they are getting for their money. When they see the value, they help us sell others too.

The bottom line is the customer has not yet realized the benefits of the purchase, so it's your job to assure them that you've provided the solution and the benefits will become apparent soon enough.

The more specific you can be the better, and this is a perfect time to remind your customer of your service guarantee or to show them once again the good reasons that they chose to do business with you.

It doesn't matter if the reason is selective perception, user error, or simply the fear of having made the wrong decision – if the buyer feels remorse, you've got a problem to solve, and it's your responsibility to do so.

Warning Signs Of Dissatisfaction

Here are some warning signs to watch for after the purchase that might indicate that your customer is becoming dissatisfied:

Decrease in purchase volume. Because external factors may affect your industry, decreased sales may not be a reflection of dissatisfaction with your product, but you're never going to know that unless you check it out. So if external factors are not the reason, you may have a situation in which a complaint has gone unresolved or some other concern exists.

Increase in complaints. This is obvious. If the number or frequency of complaints increases, you have to quickly and effectively resolve the situation. And go one step further, if there's an operational flaw in your company or in your product, work to have it corrected. Chances are good that more than one customer is having the same problem. How many are quietly taking

their business elsewhere?

Repeated comments about the merits of the competition. Whether you hear it directly from a customer or through the grapevine, this is a sure sign that somebody is getting ready to defect. If the competition's grass looks greener, you have to get out there and resell your company. Increase the perceived value and build trust again – bend over backwards if the account is worth it.

Decline in the business relationship. If you find that your customer is a little less cordial during your sales calls or less receptive on the phone, find out why. Either you're making a pest of yourself, you're not in touch with them often enough, they've become less enamored of your product, or they're looking at some other alternative. Find out why.

New management. This happens to all of us. It may not be a sign of dissatisfaction, but when new management comes into your customer's company, you need to pay close attention. Your task may be as simple as introducing yourself with a phone call or letter, assuring them that their satisfaction is your highest priority, or you might even be required to start from scratch with this new manager. Build trust, identify and understand their needs, solve their problems, gain a commitment, and so forth – sell them all over again.

Change in ownership. Whenever your customer's company is sold or absorbed by a larger firm, you need to establish a new working relationship with the new people. Sometimes the same people are still there, but the reporting responsibilities have changed. Companies often start over by soliciting bids for the products or services that they have, and many times that puts you at risk. So maybe they're not a new prospect, but you've still got to do your homework as if they were. One advantage, however, is that your product or service was already in place before the change, which is a selling point that you ought to be able to use, assuming your track-record was good.

Keep your eyes and ears open and watch for warning signs before they become a firm statement of dissatisfaction.

When a customer is dissatisfied, your first job is to listen and show them that you are listening. Next, you will need to address their concerns instead of brushing them off or making light of them. And finally, you will need to reignite their passion for your product in whatever way you can. Resell them on the wisdom of their buying decision. Stay close to them and follow through on your promises.

Fifteen Ways To Stay Close To Customers

Here are fifteen ways to stay close to your customers:

Show them that you think about them. Send a fax, an email, a helpful newspaper clipping, tasteful cartoon, Christmas card, Thanksgiving card, birthday card, etc. Send a card on the anniversary date of the day they became your customer.

Drop by to show them what's new. Always make an appointment or call first, but do it when you're going to be in their neighborhood. Show them a new product, leave a brochure, or show them how to get another benefit out of what they already have.

Follow up a sale with a free gift to enhance the purchase.

Offer valued-customer discounts. Give them coupons, letters, or sales promotions, something that would stimulate them to place additional orders or do more business with you.

Let customers know they should contact you when they

hire employees. That way you can train their new people for free on how to use your product or service, give them an orientation, provide them a briefing, or communicate with them by phone to help them understand the value that their coworkers are getting.

Compensate your customers whenever they lose time or money. If they lost time or money from problems with your product or service, have a recovery program built for your customers and stick to it.

CASE STUDY

Ward Howell International

Ward Howell International, a New York-based executive recruiting firm, grows its revenues by becoming virtually enmeshed with its customers. While most executive recruiters place people in corner offices, collect commissions, and then move on, Ward Howell actually helps its customers reorganize their entire companies.

For instance, the recruiter started placing executives at Harley Davidson Inc. seven years ago. When the relationship began, the quality of Harley's motorcycles had deteriorated; the bikes were considered inferior to Honda's, the market leader at the time.

So, executives from Ward Howell visited all of Harley's major plants and interviewed workers and engineers. They also spoke with dealers and members of riding clubs. Their conclusion? The problem wasn't with the rank-and-file workers, but with the company's leadership.

"We sat down with senior executives and said we'd build a team that would make a first-rate brand and superior product," says David Witte, Ward Howell's chairman and CEO. "We recommended that Harley find new people for officer-level positions in areas such as manufacturing, sales and marketing, and product design. When we suggested the personnel changes, the executives said their list was the same as ours. So we went out and got them some super people, like a top product design guy from Corvette."

Not long after, Harley became the market leader. In the past (several) years, it has broken the \$1 billion revenue mark and doubled in size. While Witte is loath to take credit for his client's success, he does say, "We sit in with senior managers when they do their quarterly operational reviews, and find out what leadership competencies they need. We're their arms, legs, eyes, and ears. We go out and find the very best talent to meet their needs."

Rich Teerlink, Harley's then chairman, president, and CEO, had no problem giving his recruiters this much access to the company. "They've performed well for us," he says. "At the start of the relationship, they took the time and made the effort to learn about us, and they've earned our trust."

Ward Howell invested considerable resources in Harley, too, devoting an 18-person team of executives and researchers to the account. Witte himself works closely with the company's board of directors.

The recruiter's devotion has paid off. In seven years, it had placed 38 executives at the motorcycle maker - and none of them has left. "This is a long-term relationship, not a transactional sale," Witte says. "We're a consultant to Harley."

SOURCE: "New Strategy Announced at Ward Howell," Business Wire, May 5, 1998.

Err on the side of generosity rather than losing your account.

Be personal. Keep notes in your customer file on everything from spouses' names, to hobbies, to schools they went to, personality differences, and so forth.

Always be honest. Nothing undermines your credibility more than dishonesty. Lies always come back to haunt you at the worst possible moment.

Accept returns unconditionally. The few dollars you may lose in the short run are far less than what you could gain from acquiring a new customer.

Honor your customer's privacy. If you've been told something confidential, keep it confidential.

Keep your promises. Babysit deliveries and promised services if you have to, see that they get done, your reputation is on the line.

Give feedback whenever you get referrals. Show your appreciation and tell the customer what happened when they referred you to someone. It's also a good way to get more referrals.

Make your customers famous. If your company has a newsletter, ask your customer for permission to write about their success with your product or service in the newsletter. Then send copies of it to that customer. The same can be done for industry publications.

Arrange periodic performance reviews. Meet annually, at least, with your customers to review how they're doing.

Keep the lines of communication open. Assure your customers that you are open to all their calls about anything and everything: ideas, grievances, advice, praise, questions, and so on.

Maintain that all-important rapport. Remember, people do business with people they like.

When is the last time you called a supplier or service provider and told them how they could get more business or referrals from you?

Tell the truth now. In most cases that answer would be never. Why? Because we have no particular motivation to do so. Even when we are happy customers, we tend to simply go on with our own lives in contented silence. But the provider could get much more business from us if they were to ask just a few questions. Questions like:

How does this product perform for you?

What does it not do that you'd like for it to do?

What have you wondered about that I could help you discover?

How have your coworkers, friends, or colleagues reacted when they saw this new product?

I believe it's really valuable to conduct an annual review of and with each of your customers. Once or twice a year, evaluate your accounts to determine their A-B-C status, which ones are paying off the most for you, and which ones the least.

And then once or twice a year, you should also meet with your customers, at least your best customers, to review where things stand. This gives you a chance to evaluate the account activity, the industry in general, the economic climate, to get a sense of what to anticipate, competitor strengths and weaknesses, and so on. This is identical to the research you did when they were still prospects for you, but now you meet with your customers to get their input as well. You're collaborating in this review.

This meeting is an opportunity to keep the relationship strong, to ask for feedback, to get new ideas for products or services, to give them new ideas about products, services, or features that they could add, and to shape the direction of future business with them.

You can also use this as a great time to gain referrals and testimonials. Every review meeting is different, but take the general guidelines that follow, and use these as often as you can.

- If possible, arrange the meeting to be over breakfast or lunch. Eating tends to relax people and it gives it a more informal tone. Select a place that's conducive to the meeting, whether it's a meal or

Annual Account Reviews

not. It should be well lit, with a large table, and a place that won't rush you out after your meal.

- Invite all the significant participants from your account. If there are two buyers, make sure both can attend the meeting.
- Bring all the spreadsheets or documents that are necessary to discuss your previous year's business. In addition, bring documentation to substantiate any claims that you may be making regarding trends or product reports or other things that you want them to consider.
- Allow an adequate amount of time for the meeting. An hour might be rushing it, but then again, an hour might be plenty.
- Organize your presentation – this is not just a casual visit, it's an important business event. Use your time logically. Ask questions about how you've been performing, how your product or service has served your customer, the level of quality, and how satisfied they are.
- Ask about their business and their future, what's new, what plans, what players, what changes.
- Give them plenty of time to talk. Ask open-ended questions that draw your customers out and encourage them to say whatever is on their mind. Take notes or record the meeting, after getting permission.
- Send a copy of the notes to your customer as a follow-up, summarizing the points.
- Convey through your actions and your words that you are committed to serving the customer and you want a long, beneficial relationship with them.
- After the annual review, introduce a new product, service, or marketing idea. But do not make this primarily a sales call. Make it primarily a relationship-strengthening call.
- You can also offer them, as a sort of a payment for their cooperation in this review, some kind of a special discount or a promotional package, something to say thank you.
- Look for opportunities and needs that go beyond the obvious ones. Focus on the big picture of what you're trying to do for your client and what they're trying to achieve for themselves, as well as looking at small details.

- And when appropriate, ask for referrals or testimonial letters. Ask them if they mind if you document and publish the success they had with your product or service, so you can share that with others. Your present customer base is one of the best resources for new business for you.
- Make sure that you review with each one of them how you're doing, and how you can get better.



**"Clients can be a little prickly
at these Account Review sessions."**

Resolving Customer Problems

Every salesperson encounters customer problems. These are problems that a customer has had with your product or service or problems they are having interpersonally with you or one of the people in your company. Whether you follow the right steps in resolving these problems or not determines whether you will keep that customer's business or lose it.

In my earlier example of waiting 17 minutes in the auto service lane before being greeted, the problem had nothing to do with servicing my car (my reason for being there). I felt neglected by the dealership, and until they resolved that problem it didn't matter what they did to my car.

Handle the person first, then the problem. If a person is angry or upset, let them vent for a while. This alone will go a long way toward resolving the problem. Problems seem a lot less severe after people have had a chance to tell how they feel.

Second, **apologize**. This part's often left out, but it's a crucial gesture. It's not enough just to say, "I'm sorry this happened." Offer a sincere, personal apology, not just one on behalf of the company. Show that you are committed to the relationship.

Third, show **empathy**. Assure your customer that he or she has every right to be angry, disturbed, or disappointed, and you would feel the same way if it had happened to you.

Fourth, **find a solution**. Resolve the problem *with* your customer, not just *for* her. Ask questions that will get her involved in the process. For example, "How would you like to see this problem resolved? What would be an acceptable resolution to you? If you were in my position, how might you resolve this kind of problem for your customer? Would a refund be acceptable to you? How can I compensate for this to help you be happy once again with our product?"

Jump through hoops, if necessary. Take over and make the recovery process easy for your customer. If there are phone calls to make or forms to fill out, you assume the responsibility; you do the work. If the resolution of the problem is going to be complicated, explain the system to your customer so they understand how it is complex.

Stay in touch. People feel much better when they're informed than when they're kept in the dark. Imagine sitting on an airplane out on an active runway waiting for your turn to take off. But you're a passenger, not a pilot, so there's a delay and yet another delay, and you're not informed. How would you feel? Well at first, you would trust in the pilot.

After a while, you'd become concerned. A little later still, you'd ring your call button and you'd talk with

the flight attendant and ask, "What's going on?" If you didn't get a good answer, then you'd start becoming upset. And ultimately, at some point you'd be venting your frustration, or at least hoping to.

If you keep people informed as to what's happening, and how it's being handled, their frustration is often diminished.

Offer compensation. If what happened was bad enough, call personally and say, "I'm sorry" with some concrete gesture, like offering a discount, giving a gift, or going out of your way to provide an extra service to make it right. And it should be immediate – giving a gift long after the fact loses meaning and appears insincere. Make it meaningful – a meaningful gift is something that has a high, personal perceived value to your customer. It doesn't have to cost a lot of money, but it should be meaningful and valuable to the customer.

It should also differentiate you from your competition. Be creative and customize the gift. Don't just send flowers or a box of candy, a lot of people do that. Know your customer well enough to determine whether a pair of tickets to a baseball game or a hot air balloon ride would be an even better gift.

The gift should be consumable. If you send a calendar or a clock to say I'm sorry, every time your customer looks at the calendar, for an entire year, they will be reminded of the problem they had with you. Save those kinds of gifts for different, positive occasions. When you give a customer a gift to say I'm sorry, make it something they can consume – something to eat or some sort of experience that will be finished soon.

It should also be inexpensive. The combination of a high, personal value to them and a low cost to the company is ideal. Giving away more of your company's products or services may be appropriate and inexpensive, but do it only if they won't cause further problems. The worst thing you can do is offer your customers more of something that has already caused them grief.

And finally, **follow up**. After resolving a problem, with or without a gift, follow up personally. Make sure things are OK, and look for additional needs that represent future selling opportunities. Follow-up is essential because there's nothing worse than a fouled-up recovery. A recovery mess-up is guaranteed to lose you a customer.

The happy news in all of this is that when a customer has a problem, the problem becomes resolved, and the customer feels good about the resolution, that customer feels more of a sense of allegiance and loyalty to you and your company than the customer who had no problem whatsoever.

Look upon problems as an opportunity to strengthen your bond with the customer.

Handling Problems By Phone

So much of business today is not done face to face but rather by telephone and email.

There's definitely a right way to handle customer problems when dealing with customers on the phone. If you answer your own phone, you need to take time to do it properly. If someone else answers your phone, that person should be trained to give customers the best impression. There are no excuses for rude or unprofessional behavior. Either use common courtesy, or don't pick up the phone at all.

The five basic impressions a caller should receive from you are:

- 1.** I will not waste your time.
- 2.** I care about you and your business.
- 3.** I am competent and well organized.
- 4.** I can be trusted to help you get through to your party or solve your problem.
- 5.** I'm proud of my company and I enjoy working here.

Here are some things everyone needs to know when it comes to the phone:

- Answer phone calls in no more than four rings. If your phone traffic is too heavy to allow this, hire someone else or develop some new way to get the call answered before the fourth ring. Answering calls promptly lets your customers know that their call is important to you.
- Be prepared. You look bad when you have to search for a pen and a notepad. Keep them near your phone. Similarly, if prices or other information are commonly requested over the phone, keep that information handy. If you're often answering calls on a cell phone, keep that information handy so you can quickly refer to it in the field.
- When you answer the phone, identify yourself, your company, or both. The caller should know immediately who took the call. It gives information but also adds a friendly, personal touch.
- Screen calls tactfully, if you're going to screen them. It's better to make a request or ask a question than to sound demanding. Instead of, "What's this about?" you might say, "Will the person you're trying to reach know what this call is in reference to?" By the same token, "May I tell him who's calling?" is more polite than, "Who's calling?" Anything can be said nicely if you'll try.
- Don't make customers repeat their stories. One of the most frustrating things for a customer is when they call in and talk with one person, tell their whole story, and then are transferred. You get referred to another and you have to repeat the entire story. If you're referring a call up the line to someone else, when you refer the call, tell the person you're referring it to what you've already been told. When they answer, they can say to the customer, "Hi, Mr. Customer, I understand that you're having a problem with the first part of the installation process, let me see if I can help you."
- Maximum hold time – 15 seconds. Yep, 15 seconds. If you have to put somebody on hold, put them on hold very briefly. Otherwise, ask them for their number and call them back. Better yet, ask for permission to call them back. You can say, "I'm right in the middle of something right now that I can't interrupt, may I take your number and get right back to you?" Give them a courteous response, show them you respect their problem and their needs, and tell them that you'll get back to them right away. And then for heaven's sake, do it. Time spent on hold is often referred to as being in "voice jail." This is where you feel like you can't get out and you're waiting endlessly to get your message through.
- When either you or the person you're calling answer the phone, get in the habit of asking, "Is now a convenient time for you to talk about this?" Or if

they're calling you, "May I ask a few questions to determine how we can best explore the roots of this problem?"

- Train, test, and coach. Train yourself, test yourself, have other people call you and observe your calls. Then coach yourself and get coaching from other people who are good at telephone skills. Train others well, tell them exactly what you expect, don't assume that people know how to answer the phone well, test them by having a friend call to see how they're treated on the phone, and have others do the same thing for you.

Using these insights to train yourself and coach other people will vastly improve your telephone skills.

When To Fire A Customer

A few years ago, Susie, my administrative assistant, came in and said, "Jim, there's a man on the phone who demanded to talk to you."

I asked her, "What's it about?"

She said, "He said, 'Let me speak to Jim' – that was his opening. And I said, like you have always asked me to, 'Certainly, may I tell him who's calling?' He roared, 'Just put him on the phone!' and I said, 'One moment.'"

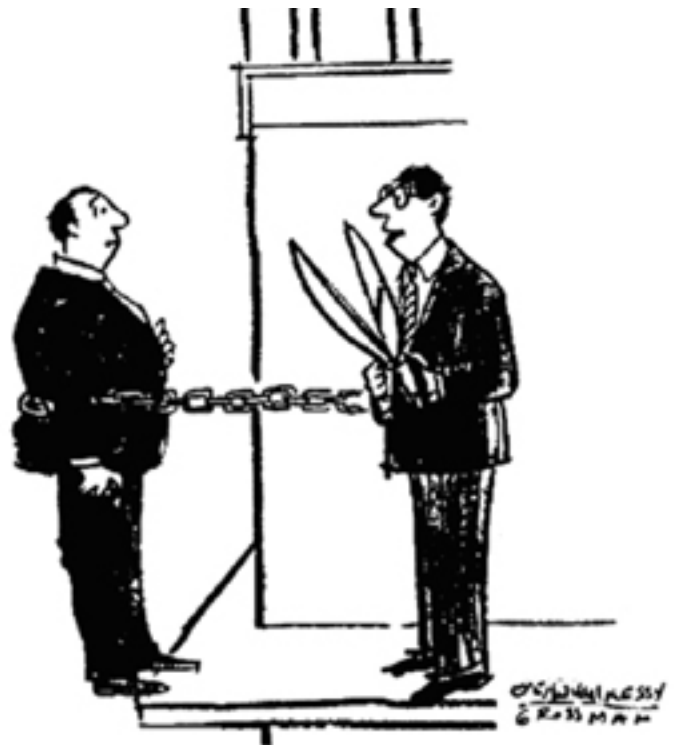
Upon hearing of his rude behavior, I told Susie to stand right there and let me handle this call in her presence.

I put him on the speaker phone, and said, "Hi, this is Jim."

The man on the other end said, "Hey Jim, how's it going?" He then started a false-friendliness kind of a sales spiel.

I said right back, "Excuse me, did you just say to my colleague, Susie, 'Just put him on the phone!'"

He said, "Well, I deal with a lot of high-powered executives who don't want their subordinates knowing their



"I think I've found a way to resolve our personality differences."

personal business."

I said, "Well, I find that really insulting, and I would appreciate it if you would never call here again, because in this place of business, we respect our coworkers." And I hung up.

Susie looked at me, smiling from ear to ear.

I said to her, "Susie, the next time somebody calls and behaves like a jerk, you have my permission to say to them, 'Sir or Madam, I have the authority to terminate this telephone call, would you like to approach this a little bit differently?' And you can do this even if they are our customer, but give them the benefit of the doubt first and offer them the chance to change their tone or call back at a better time."

When should you **fire** a customer? Interesting thought. Fire a customer! In reality, some people are really not good potential customers for you. When a customer is too demanding, rude, and abusive, many times it makes better sense to refer them to someone else or to politely decline doing business with them and happily move on to another more productive contact.

If someone is continually critical, abusive, and unpleasant, you need to reevaluate. Do you need their business desperately enough to put up with that, or is there no justification for continuing that dialogue?

Does the client do business the way your company does business? If honesty, integrity, and candor are important to you, as they should be, and your client suggests cheating his company, your company, or a third party – you're headed for major problems down the road. Don't do business with people like that.

When it comes to bad customers, actually I'm talking about people who probably shouldn't have been your customer in the first place. I think you should apply Cathcart's First Rule of Commerce: Never, ever pay people to make your life unpleasant.

Think about that, when you spend time with someone. You're paying them for whatever you get from them. When you spend resources on someone, you are in effect, paying them for whatever you get in response. When you put your time and energy into serving a customer, you are in fact "paying" them for whatever they pay you in return. If you're getting nothing but unpleasantness back, maybe this person shouldn't be on your customer list.

When people are truly unpleasant toward us, if the unpleasantness is really out of line – not just a dissatisfied customer who's voicing a complaint, but someone who's being downright rude and obnoxious – I believe we should eliminate those people from our customer or prospect list. Some of them are just not worth the energy that it takes to get their business.

Sometimes we have to tolerate a few of those little outbursts, just to keep the customer well served and happy. There are moments where everybody has a bad day or a bad mood. But, when it truly gets out of line, I think we need to draw the line. If we don't respect ourselves, and our own coworkers, they have no reason to respect us either.

These are only a few of many possibilities open to you. You need to know where your boundaries are, what the standards are by which you operate, what the types of behaviors are that a customer might do that would cause you to say, "I think you'd be happy doing business with someone else instead of us."

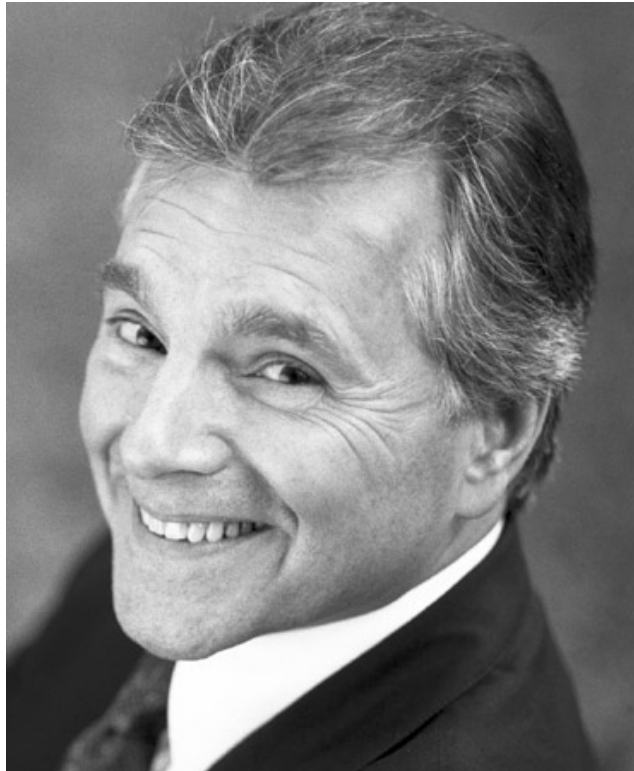
Sometimes it does make sense to let a customer go to someone else. When the cost of keeping them requires you to compromise your principles or involves a great deal of grief on your part, maybe it's a good idea to pass this one up and go on to the next sale.

The irony is that many times, when confronted with the awareness that they have been obnoxious, customers will change their behavior. People want to be liked but sometimes they charge boldly ahead with no awareness of how they are affecting others. In times like those, they need a wakeup call to get them back on track.

Your future income will be a reflection of how you treat your customers.

Yes, I said how you treat them. If you are loyal to your customers even when they aren't loyal to you, their loyalty will increase – for most of them anyway. Let the others go and don't worry about the ones that got away. Just make the commitment to generously serve those that you can identify.

The happiest and most successful business people I know (note that I said happy and successful, pH Balanced) are people who love to serve their customers. They don't wait for the customer to behave in a certain way first. They simply look for ways to serve. Become a giver in your job. Be known as one who always shows customers that you care about them. Give as much as you reasonably can, and watch the gratitude and new business flow your way!



About the Author

Jim Cathcart

High achievers from around the world credit the advice and inspiration of Jim Cathcart as keys to their personal advancement. As the author of thirteen books on business and psychology including two best sellers, *The Acorn Principle* and *Relationship Selling*, Jim Cathcart's works are in use by businesses and universities worldwide.

CEO and founder of Cathcart Institute, Inc., Jim sits on several corporate boards plus the Board of Visitors of Pepperdine University's Graziadio School of Business and Management.

He is one of the world's top professional speakers and business authors and has been inducted into the Speaker Hall Of Fame, received the Golden Gavel Award from Toastmasters International, and the Cavett Award from the National Speakers Association. Jim became a member of Speakers Roundtable, 20 of the top professional speakers in the world, in 1986.

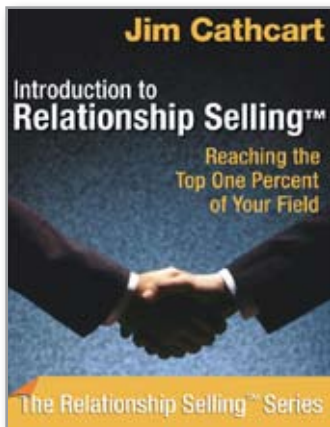
Cathcart Institute, Inc., founded in 1977, is a network of highly qualified business advisors who teach Jim Cathcart's concepts and strategies for Relationship Selling and personal advancement. The Relationship Selling Sales Excellence System is built upon the principles of personal accountability and structured to utilize all of an organization's learning resources, not just the material in this book. Business leaders and top salespeople turn to Cathcart Institute, Inc. for training, inspiration and personal advice in their quest to reach the top one percent of their field.

With over 2,500 speeches delivered to more than 1,500 different clients worldwide, Jim Cathcart has reached hundreds of thousands of business professionals in person.

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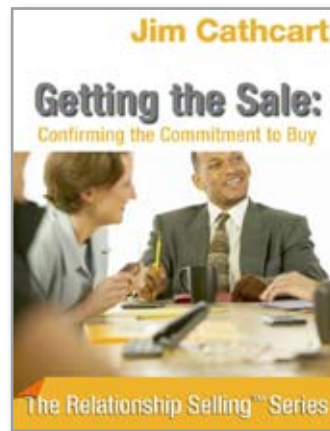
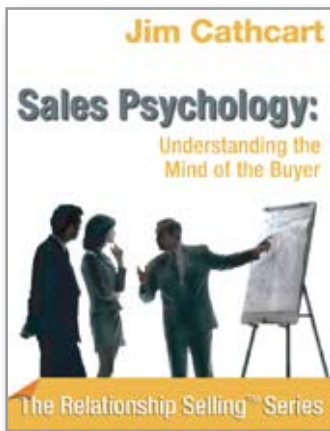
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