



Are Your People's People Skills Helping or Hurting Your Sales?

By Trish Brock

We have been saying it for as long as I can remember—office furniture is a people business and people buy from people. And because furniture projects can be downright tortuous, at least for our customers, they will buy from people that will help make the process less tortuous for them.

I once had a customer tell me they chose me and my company because they knew they would at least be spending time with someone they liked.

Let's be clear: Selling office furniture and services and winning projects is not a popularity contest, although sometimes it feels that way. Salespeople must know their stuff, particularly in this economy. And the competition is incredibly fierce.

Having exceptional selling skills also helps. A lot of focus has been placed on sales training, teaching people how to overcome objections, getting to the pain points, finding where the “no” is, trial closes and so forth.

I think sales training is terrific, but too often, the emphasis is on a process that all participants are being trained to follow. And in so doing, the process of understanding an individual human being gets lost.

And I have to ask: If this is a people business, why are we not training our people to better understand and relate to people? Are we teaching salespeople genuine people skills or are we training them to be manipulative and bypass the human condition, so they see projects instead of the people who manage them?

Wouldn't it be more effective to increase their social skills, their emotional intelligence and their ability to relate to another person in a genuine and authentic way?

We talk about being professional, gaining trust from our clients and being solutions-oriented. How can any of that happen when we are working solely from a system? Identifying the decision maker is one thing, but how do we relate to them once they're found?

All too often in our industry, our salespeople are product-centered and not people-oriented. And in an industry that is widely perceived as commoditized, that presents a real problem.

Salespeople are trained to spend time extolling the numerous virtues of their product or services and in the process of doing so, they manage to do a lot of the talking. Unfortunately, though, they tend to listen very little, if at all.

Here is the reality: People don't care how much you know, how great your product is or how special your dealership is until they know how much you care and understand about them.

And until you really show them—not just tell them—that you care, they won't care one flip about your furniture and services. It's as simple as that.

It's your people skills that make your product knowledge pay off. It often boils down to some common courtesies and a genuine regard for the other person.

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If you show people that you care, they will respond positively to you. Abrupt emails, rude behaviors, abbreviated conversations, failing to say thank you and delayed responses and listening skills that are poorly executed all signal a disingenuous interest.

Here are some quick and easy things to consider to help salespeople stay on the human side of the sales process:

SMILE

It's a universal sign of friendship around the world. Everyone understands and relates to a warm smile. "The shortest distance between two people is a smile." Author unknown.

BE INTERESTED

When there is a sincere interest, it shows. Look directly at the prospect when they are speaking. Stay off your cell phone. Don't text. Don't look around the office as if you are only waiting for them to finish speaking. Use facial expressions to reinforce your interest. Ask open-ended questions and listen fully to the answers. If you truly take interest, you will be in a much better position to respond with sensitivity, understanding and with credible solutions to their needs.

TALK ABOUT THEIR INTERESTS

Don't ever forget that people's favorite subject is themselves. They may not have the time to talk about what you want to talk about, but they will certainly find time to talk about what interests them – themselves! When you allow a prospect to do that—and if you pay attention to what they say—you will be able to learn about their problems, their business needs and especially their business climate or conditions. The more you listen and learn, the more effective you'll be at meeting their needs. And the big pay off here is that they'll let you do it because they understand that you care.

USE THEIR NAME

It sounds pretty basic, but its importance is often overlooked. Be sure of pronunciations. Don't automatically call someone by their first name. In this age of overly casual behavior, show respect by calling them Mr. Smith, and let them tell you to please call them "Jim." Err on the side of good manners—you will earn mutual respect more quickly.

BE GENEROUS WITH COMPLIMENTS

And be sincere and respectful when doing so. Taking the time and thought to give an honest compliment has an amazing effect on relationships!

LISTEN ACTIVELY

This means really listening, interpreting and evaluating what has been said before responding. It also means not thinking about what you're going to say next while the other person is speaking. Lis-

tening is not just keeping quiet until there is a pause. It's about paying careful attention to everything the person is saying, not just what we want to hear. And don't go jumping to conclusions and presuming you know just what the other person is about to say. That's a sure way to invite unwelcome surprises!

LISTEN REFLECTIVELY

Verify with the speaker that you have understood them correctly. It will reinforce the fact that you care and help minimize misunderstandings and resulting errors. Don't be afraid to slow the conversation down by saying, "I just want to make sure I'm hearing you correctly," "Let me repeat what you said to make sure I understand," and so forth.

HAVE EMPATHY

Put yourself in your customer's shoes and try to fully understand what is happening in their world. Don't judge. Don't have prejudice. Don't compare. When you understand their challenges better, you will be in a much better position to apply your products and services effectively.

EXTEND COMMON COURTESY

Good manners, punctuality, presentation of self, paying and receiving compliments, thank you notes, being respectful—much of these basic behaviors—have become too lax.

Customers are not inclined to overlook such things—nor should they. And this not only reflects on individuals, but also on the companies they represent. Too many managers have failed to coach this side of the business and they suffer accordingly.

Remember, people will buy from you not so much because they understand your product or service, but because they feel you understand them.

Your product knowledge or selling skills are important and they give you credibility and the tools with which to solve problems. But most importantly, never forget that we are, in fact, in a people business and fine-tuned people skills will take you where your products can't.



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