

IDEAS

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LESSONS LEARNED | BY GERSON ROSENBLOOM

THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK

They say that boxers need to excel in their footwork and that the best of them win in the ring based on that skill — much more so than brute strength. I believe that business people need to be equally quick on their feet to win in the sparring matches of everyday business life. Your interactions with customers do not come with a script. Every time you open your mouth without thinking first, you run the risk of saying something that could jeopardize your relationship with your customer. And yet, being too deliberate in your thought process makes you appear stiff and possibly calculating. It's a delicate balance.

You may have lots of pre-planned verbiage that becomes part of your presentations, but it's the unscripted portion of your conversations that can either endear you to your customer, or forever blow up the relationship.

OPEN MOUTH, INSERT FOOT

In the early days of our business, our inventories were so lean that we would visit a local distributor several times per week to restock small goods



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and accessories. With so many visits, we developed a personal relationship with their staff. One day, our buyer walked in to see the sales associate talking to a woman at the counter. She

turned to leave, walking past my buyer, who then approached the counter. With all the style of “Mad Men’s” Don Draper, my buyer commented about how gorgeous the woman was until she turned around, and then how painful her face was. It turns out, the woman was the sales associate’s wife! I don’t know that our relationship ever really recovered from that lapse of judgment.

Another time, a customer came in inquiring about repairs on a violin. Our associate, preparing to tell her about all the work that would be necessary, queried, “Where did you buy this piece of junk?” It turned out that she bought it from him a few years prior. Oops!

I had one associate who addressed young guys as “fella.” So one day he asked, “What can I do for you, fella?” It turned out that the customer was a teenage girl.

And lest it sound like I never had any miscues, there was the time I was on the road selling guitars and had a dealer that bought my line early in the year. He quickly sold all that he had purchased, but then had a series of excuses through the course of the year why he couldn’t restock.

Finally in November, with the holiday season looming, when I asked for an order, he advised that he takes inventory on December 31, so he wanted to wait until January or February to buy. Out of sheer frustration, I shot back, “I can understand that you’d prefer to wait for the February rush.” Would I have ever gotten anywhere with this dealer? I’ll never know, because I let my words assure that he was alienated.

The thing about words is that you can’t take them back. Fortunately for me and my staff, we were normally a lot better than these instances would make it appear. But on the occasional lapse, there is really only one solution. Once you realize that you have said something that you wish you hadn’t, it’s best to offer a sincere and unqualified apology. Any excuses you offer will weaken the impact of your apology and make it seem disingenuous.

Ideally, you’ll hone your skills so that you can be proud of everything you say. Choose your words wisely, and you may just score the perfect takedown punch! **MI**

Gerson Rosenbloom is the vice president of strategic management at Sweetwater Sound, the former president of Medley Music, and a past NAMM chairman. Email him at: gersonmusicinc@gmail.com.