

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

# How to Greet a Client

**N**o shoes, no shirt, no service. No checks, no credit, no returns, no exchanges. No pets, no food, no change, no foreign coins, no bathroom. Do not touch, do not sit, do not play, do not lean on the counter.

OK, you get the idea. But I have a question for America's retailers: How many negative messages do we want to send before we've even said "hello"?

I'd bet no body of literature has more clichés than sales training books. My all time favorite: "You only get one chance to make a first impression." My dad had two great variations: "It takes a while for people to decide to do business with you, but it only takes a moment for them to decide not to," and "'No' comes out fast, but 'yes' takes time."

## SENSORY OVERLOAD

The customer whisperer considers how patrons initially perceive his or her business. Customers' cues are all sensory, starting with visual. They see your sign, storefront, landscaping, windows and door before they see any products. Hopefully, they see a smiling face, as well. Customers make instantaneous judgments on each of these details and begin to form their impression. All of these images are important but none more so than a smiling face.

Next are the audio cues. I've always preferred the natural sounds of a music store to Muzak, radio or a chattering TV running some ridiculous promotional video — or, even worse, Fox News. There's nothing wrong with silence or the faint sound of an instrument being tuned. The sound of another customer playing an instrument is ideal. And again, a friendly 'Hello, welcome to our store' is a powerful, positive force.

You may be surprised to know smell is also a factor. Real estate people often recommend baking bread or making popcorn

to stimulate clients' emotions when showing a property. You can actually buy new-car smell in a can. Furniture polish, varnish and leather are mostly positive smells. Smoke, french fries, pizza, melting electrical insulation, perfume or bad breath are very, very bad.

Finally, there's personal space. The entrance of every retail store needs to provide a decompression zone. If customers feel crowded, their natural instinct will be to flee. They may be motivated enough to hang around for a while, but their salesperson is going to be contending with a base instinct

## + CUSTOMER WHISPERER:

A calm/assertive sales associate who gently turns prospects into customers.

to run and neither of them will be consciously aware of it. Some space naturally entices prospects to come further into your store.

All of these sensory experiences are compiled and generalized in your client's subconscious before he's engaged in a personal interaction. It is important to structure and maintain your facility and staff, so you haven't done irreparable damage before you even open your mouth.

## EASING THE CLIENT

When you do open your mouth, it's important that you do not say, "How may I help you?" One of my favorite sales meeting gimmicks is to put a crisp, new \$100 bill on the table and offer to bet any associate I can get the next person who walks through the front door to say, "No thanks, I'm only looking." I've never had a taker. Insanity was once described as repeating an old behavior and expecting a new result. Anyone who's worked even a week at Wal-Mart has learned how to push customers



**Creating ease and establishing control of the dialogue are the essentials of customer greeting**

away using that tired greeting. Yet all too often it flies off the lips of even the most seasoned sales veterans. So, how does a customer whisperer start a conversation?

There are two things that must be accomplished in the greeting phase of the selling process. One is to put the client at ease, and the other is to establish control of the dialogue.

When a person walks into a strange new place, they naturally feel a certain amount of apprehension. If they are considering a major purchase or feel uninformed or unsure, the apprehension is amplified. The customer whisperer knows he must use his calm assertiveness to take the pressure off. A good start might be, "Hello, welcome to my store. I'm so

glad you came in. My name is Bill." This is a great time to extend a handshake and give your client an opportunity to say his name, which he'll usually do, if you remain calm and give him a chance.

This is also a good time to offer refreshment, and the customer whisperer has water, soda and coffee nearby. Almost everyone will take at least a small bottle of water, casting our associate in the role of a generous host. The tension is easing. The client is beginning to relax, and his attention has been diverted away from his initial apprehension.

The customer whisperer knows he will only be able to guide the client through the selection process by controlling the dialogue. And he will

be able to control the dialogue by asking thoughtful, engaging questions that seem spontaneous and fresh, even though they've been rehearsed and asked a thousand times. My favorite opening question is painfully obvious: "Are you thinking about getting a piano?" My guess is that it would work equally well for a guitar, drum kit or piccolo. (Someday I'll tell you the equally obvious closing question that has helped find homes for more than 4,000 pianos over the last 25 years.)

This is also an opportune time to neutralize the darling little monsters. Nothing will kill a sale quicker than an out-of-control kid or two. The customer whisperer has coloring books, picture books and kid's

videos handy in a location where he can have a quiet conversation with mom while the kids settle in. He uses his calm assertiveness to let the kids know they will not be allowed to play the instruments until their parents have selected one. Then and only then will they be allowed to try it out. And if they can't resist, they can play one particular instrument, with headphones. The customer whisperer knows reasonable parents actually appreciate his leadership because he's echoing the last thing the parents said to the kids before walking in the door.

**ESTABLISHING CONTROL**

The key to being in the question-asking business is to get permission to ask ques-

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tions. The customer whisperer calmly and assertively asks his client, “Do you mind if I ask a few questions?” Because a friendly relationship is evolving, most reasonable people agree to follow his lead. In the rare case where the client is Type A and objects or tries to blow the associate off, he can rely on his calm

assertiveness, look the customer in the eye and say, “The universe of possible instruments for you is vast, and our selection is deep. If I can take just a moment to ask a few questions, I can quickly direct you to appropriate choices and save you time.”

In the even rarer case where the client

insists upon dismissing our associate, the client can be encouraged to browse at her leisure while the customer whisperer “attends to a pressing matter” elsewhere. It only takes about three minutes for these people to realize they are lost and need help. A little attention to body language reveals a lot of information. When shoulders drop or someone sighs, the customer whisperer knows it’s time to come to the rescue. He simply asks, “Is this the one you’d like to have?” The answer is invariably “no,” providing the perfect opportu-

## + 8 STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL GREETING

1. Make sure your facility looks, sounds and smells great, features a decompression zone, and has no distracting signs or notices.
2. Smile.
3. Don’t say, “How may I help you?”
4. Introduce yourself, shake hands and get the customer’s name.
5. Reassure the client he’s in the right place, and you are happy to see him.
6. Offer refreshment.
7. Neutralize the monsters (kids).
8. Get permission to ask questions.

nity to return to square one and ask, “Do you mind if I ask a few questions?” The customer whisperer is now in control and has enhanced the likelihood of a successful outcome (i.e. a purchase).

Presumptive customer whisperers must remain calm and understand the importance of focusing on the 98 percent of clients who will happily follow their lead rather than to worrying about the stubborn 2 percent who can’t or won’t be helped.

Getting permission to ask questions is a wonderful transition to the qualification phase of the selling process. In the next installment, the customer whisperer will take a close look at qualification. (Oh, how I hate that term.) In the meantime, let’s find new ways to say “yes” to our clients, and make it easier for them to say “yes” to us. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Bonita Springs, Fla.



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