

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Getting Referrals

Friends and family make the worst customers. Even if you give them the perfect item at wholesale, they're never really satisfied, and they remind you of it at every family holiday, picnic and birthday party — forever.

However, your friend's friends make great customers. They are grateful to have found someone they can trust and appreciate even the smallest price concession or premium. The customer whisperer's best source of referrals is his friend's friends.

How then do we make friends with our friend's friends? My grandmother's playground advice was, "If you want to make a friend, be a friend." Fortunately, there are countless ways to make friends in a music store, and they do not involve inventory blowouts, newspaper ads or low, low sale prices.

ASSOCIATE REFERRALS

We know our obvious referral sources, but how do we encourage and incentivize them to refer us? Music dealers have been trying to define an appropriate referral policy for teachers, techs, interior designers and other influencers for more than 100 years.

The customer whisperer understands there are many reasons why people become music teachers, but money usually isn't one of them. Almost any other vocation is more lucrative, more stable and may even offer benefits. Interior designers generate more

revenue selling a vase full of dried weeds than we could ever pay as a fee, and techs carefully guard their status as independent experts. Therefore, to think we can buy our way into their hearts is folly. Sometimes, you have to pay a fee, but don't be fooled into thinking money will buy loyalty or friendship.

Teachers want their students to be treated fairly and with courtesy.

They want you to recommend an appropriate instrument. A customer whisperer earns a teacher's loyalty simply by being a customer whisperer. (Teachers also love stores that provide recital space, conduct competitions, offer a large print music selection and refer new students to them.)

Interior designers (and church committees) are primarily concerned with looking good to their patrons. Great service before and after the sale is the key. Showing up with a piano template and wood finish samples has solidified many designer relationships for the customer whisperer. Happily

+ CUSTOMER WHISPERER:

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

rescheduling deliveries without showing any frustration, then following up to make sure the installation goes smoothly, proves we are reliable partners and encourages future referrals. These people talk with each other, so dropping the ball can do major damage, while going the extra mile will pay huge dividends.

CUSTOMER REFERRALS

But you are probably wondering how you can get more referrals from your existing customers. The conventional method is to ask your client, as you are saying goodbye, if he or she has any friends who might benefit from your vast selection, discount prices and excellent service. The customer whisperer finds this practice embarrassing and unprofessional — reminiscent of the Fuller Brush and *Encyclopaedia Britannica* door-to-door salesmen of a bygone era. Shifting emphasis from satisfying your clients' needs to promoting your own selfish interests, just as they're starting to see you as a friend, only



A few simple steps after the sale will create friends, and referrals, for life

serves to remind them you're a salesperson. It's OK to ask your friends for referrals, but only after you have earned the right.

There are several simple things you can do to turn your post-sale relationships into friendships. First and foremost, send a thank-you note, and do it promptly. Nothing is more powerful than a simple, handwritten note of gratitude. Joe Girard, recognized by the *Guinness Book Of World Records* as the most successful salesman of all time, built an army of referring customers mostly by sending thank-you notes and birthday cards. His book, *How To Sell Anything To Anybody*, is a classic.

The customer whisperer knows a small gift can have even more impact. We send a bouquet of flowers to every client on delivery day. The effect of this \$42 investment is amazing. I almost always get a thank-you call. A bottle of wine or a box of chocolates would likely produce the same result — a friend for life and, occasionally, a high-quality referral, though sometimes years later.

A stack of clever note cards on your desk will inspire you to send a quick, handwritten message to clients and prospects when an opportunity presents itself. In these days of e-mail and text messaging, handwritten notes have more impact than ever.

Woody Allen said, "80 percent of success is showing up." The champion of this strategy is Bob Baker in Denver. Bob is famous in the piano world as the \$4 Million Man because he has written that much business in a single year.

When I had dinner with Bob during a recent NAMM show, I asked him the secret of his success. He told me two things: When he sells a piano, he offers to play it at the

client's next party, and he follows up to make sure he is invited to the party.

Bob also faithfully courts worship teams, and he does it just by showing up. (It occurs to the customer whisperer that every worship team I have ever participated in resulted in sales, and without any overt effort on my part.)

The other side of this coin is to provide opportunities for clients to "show up" at your store. Customers yearn for a relationship with us after their initial purchases and are often enthusiastic about sharing their experiences with close friends. Encouraging your customers to bring their friends to your in-store events is a great way to build referrals.

Friends stay in touch with each other. A very efficient way to stay in touch with your customers is through your newsletter. Hopefully, it has lots of pictures of your customers enjoying their instruments, your friendly staff and your events. Give extra copies of your newsletter and business card to the friends who are most likely to send referrals, especially technicians, teachers and designers.

Opportunities to make friends and generate referrals are all around you. The best

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way to build referrals is to be nice to everyone you meet and discretely let them know what you do. Many of your best referrals can come from people you buy things from or patronize regularly. (We recently enrolled a Starbucks server into our Piano Without Pain group lesson program.)

WHY FRIENDS MATTER

During my early years in Milwaukee, the biggest dealer in town was the now defunct Bradford's Piano & Organ. Bradford's had all the best lines, a 100-year legacy and about 50 percent of the market. It was predictably and reliably arrogant. Everyone, from tuners to teachers, was treated like a peasant, especially the movers. Back then, one moving com-

pany did piano deliveries for all of the local piano stores. Its drivers were Teamsters, and because of seniority rules, many of them stayed on the job for their entire careers. I had known several of the older guys since I was a kid.

Our store had a different relationship with the movers. We kidded around with them, asked about their families, talked sports and shared our coffee pot. It wasn't a strategy; they were our friends. Dad taught us, by his example, that you treat everyone with respect and friendliness whether it's a customer in a Cadillac or the trash collector.

One day, as the movers loaded a new piano for delivery, the driver asked for my advice. He explained that he was delivering an almost identical piano to the same customer from Bradford's and wanted to know what he should do. (I have no idea why the customer ordered two pianos.) I suggested since our piano was the last one on the truck, it should be the first one off.

After he unloaded our piano and collected the c.o.d., the driver asked the customer what he wanted to do with the other piano. The customer told him to take it back to Bradford's. The moral of the story is your friends will look out for you.

There are all kinds of formal referral programs. I guess if you put enough time and energy into one, it will probably work. The customer whisperer prefers to keep it simple. Send new customers a note or a gift, show up at their events, give them reasons to come back to your store with their friends, stay in touch — and be a friend. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Bonita Springs, Fla. He welcomes questions and comments at greg@steinwaynaples.com.

+ THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS FOR REFERRALS

1. Thou shall send a thank-you note or gift.
2. Thou shall show up.
3. Thou shall provide opportunities for clients to show up.
4. Thou shall stay in touch.
5. Thou shall be a good friend.