

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

# Speaking Truth to Power

At Steinway Piano Gallery, we see our fair share of what used to be called the “carriage trade.” A glimpse at our database would reveal a few superstar athletes, radio and TV personalities, and Fortune 500 CEOs. Because successful people are often over-achievers, they tend to be musical, so every music store has wealthy clients and every town has its own local celebrities. Often we are overwhelmed — or overimpressed — by their statures, and sometimes, we fail to serve them as well as we could. Most of what I know about serving the rich and famous was learned the hard way. That is, by doing it wrong.

My grandfather used to say that 2 percent of people are wonderful, 2 percent are jerks and the remaining 96 percent are just plain folks. He made no allowance for income or notoriety. Like most of us, the rich and famous tend to be shy and don’t want a fuss made over them. They can smell condescension a mile away and are outright offended by fawning.

## APPROACHING THE POWERFUL

Several years ago, a retired NBA all-star came into our gallery to select a piano for his kids. I made a big deal about him and recited details of his play-off games. He was very polite, but I could tell that he wanted to run away. Fortunately, my son (who is much taller and cooler than I am) took control and rescued us all. Occasionally, celebrities want to talk about their accomplishments, but it’s best to let them decide if and when.

My favorite example of how to serve a celebrity happened when I was a kid. Baseball legend “Hammerin’” Hank Aaron came into my dad’s store to buy a piano. The salesman was a wonderful guy named Herb Muth. Herb was a musician and would have been in awe of Miles Davis but didn’t know much about sports. The rest of the staff watched in amazement as Herb innocently asked the slugger if “Aaron” was spelled with one A or two. Aaron, the man who broke Babe Ruth’s home run record, wasn’t offended by not being recognized. He was happy to receive fair treatment and get his kids started in piano lessons.

Self-made clients came up the hard way. They made their own fortunes and are usually a joy to work with. They respect and identify with small business people. They are impressed when you do a good job but have little tolerance for inefficiency or B.S. The best way to start with these people is to acknowledge who they are politely and get down to business.

Trust-fund kids who inherited their money and were raised in privilege are a different story. Taking control and using calm authority from the

beginning will prevent a nightmare situation where they dominate and try to take advantage of your goodwill. However they got their fortune or fame, it’s best to start with something like: “I’m so pleased you chose to visit our store. Do you mind if I ask a few questions, so I can quickly direct you to an appropriate instrument?”

## SMARTER THAN AVERAGE

Even the smallest town has local celebrities. They might include the hospital president, a university provost or an influential church pastor. Most of your affluent clients are probably professionals and business owners. Successful people are usually a little smarter than average people, and they often manage employees of their own. Sincerity, honesty and competence are paramount. Professional people can sense deception in an instant, but they are unlikely to argue about it. Also, they are usually busy people who won’t be offended by directness. They’ll probably respect it.

A common mistake we make in serving wealthy clients is assuming they should spend freely. Affluent people resent the idea that money has less value to them than it does to others or that they should spend it just because they have it.



## How to serve your most affluent customers

Like the rest of us, they are concerned about being treated fairly. Because they are both intelligent and affluent, value and quality are more important to them than price — no matter what they say. Because they have huge demands on their time, they want a succinct presentation and convincing evidence. (This is often the case with physicians, who can be particularly skittish when it comes to spending decisions.)

## A salesperson who's intimidated by a client's stature can level the playing field by discussing the benefits of music education

I was once deeply offended by a radio station salesman who said to me, "Come on, you've got the bucks. Just part with a few." A customer whisperer understands that the relative wealth of the customer and salesperson is of no consequence. Our job is to use our calm, assertive leadership to guide our clients gently through the decision-making process.

A salesperson who's a little intimidated by a client's stature can level the playing field by briefly discussing the benefits of music education and what the store is doing to encourage it in the community. The wealthy are often very interested in philanthropy.

Don't be shy about your community involvement, even if it's modest. This can be particularly effective with civic leaders.

### SPEAKING TRUTH

There is no single method to serving wealthy or accomplished clients. Still, it's important to stand your ground, do your job and speak the truth. This often means resisting the temptation to tell people what they want to hear. If you speak truth to power, you will always gain respect.

Here are three true stories to illustrate

the point. (Names have been changed to protect the writer.)

### Example 1:

As a manufacturer's rep in the early 1990s, at the peak of the college sale phenomenon, I often helped out as a back-up salesperson. Late one Sunday afternoon, exhausted and facing a two-hour drive home, I found myself with the last cus-

tomers of the day. My clients, Dr. Greenberg and his wife, were both prominent psychiatrists.

They had considered several grand pianos and were going back and forth between two, playing a short excerpt from Beethoven's "Appassionata" over and over. Finally, as the clock approached 6 p.m., with all the staff and my dealer watching, I asked the husband which one

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he thought they should buy. “She really likes that one, but the other is less expensive, so I think we will get it,” he said.

In a moment of exasperation and frustration, I said, “Are you crazy? Why would you want to spend money to have an unhappy wife when you can have an unhappy wife for free? Doesn’t it make more sense to buy her the one she really likes?”

“Absolutely,” he said, and he bought the piano his wife wanted, even though it cost a little more.

That was almost 15 years ago, and I’ve been asking my clients, “Why would you want to spend money to have an unhappy wife?” ever since. It’s funny, but it’s also true. Over the years, variations on the theme have evolved.

**Example 2:**

Several years ago, the Wilsons purchased a digital grand piano from us. One day, Mrs. Wilson called to tell me that she was going to buy an inexpensive baby grand from a neighbor and wanted to know if the price was fair. I suggested that I had a much better piano for about the same price and would take her digital piano on trade. Dr. Wilson later called to say they would be coming in soon, but he wasn’t going to spend a dime more than \$5,000. They arrived later that afternoon.

After friendly hellos and refreshment (greeting) followed by a discussion of what Mrs. Wilson wanted in a new piano that she didn’t have in her current piano (qualification), the customer whisperer showed her the piano in question along with better and best options (presentation).

(Note: The fact that the Wilsons were well-known and

were coming in to see a specific product didn’t alter the process. It just changed the amount of time spent on each step.)

It turned out that Mrs. Wilson really preferred the best option, a \$50,000-plus Steinway. When I asked Dr. Wilson if he’d like to purchase the Steinway for her (closing), he said, “It’s all about the money.”

“It’s really all about having a happy wife,” the customer whisperer said as we walked back to my office.

“You’re right about that,” he said.

After considering an irresistible option (choice), we arranged to deliver their new Steinway.

This is speaking truth to power. It’s all about having a happy wife or well-educated kids or expressing the music within you. Quality matters, and price is of secondary importance. The customer whisperer is the helpful expert. He’s not afraid to look his clients in the eye and tell them what they really need.

Any husband making a purchase for his wife is more concerned with her happiness than he is with money. Parents selecting an instrument for their child are more concerned with the child’s development than they are with an instrument’s cost. When a client becomes focused on money, the customer whisperer stays focused on the client’s needs and desires. Sometimes, the customer whisperer has to take a strong position to serve customers properly and ensure both their satisfaction and his future referral business.

Maintaining integrity and speaking truth to power won’t always assure a sale, but it will preserve your self-respect, as we’ll see in this final story.

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**Example 3:**

Every once in a while, we encounter a *nouveau riche* prospect with an attitude. It’s important to keep from buckling under the pressure of a customer who wants to push you around. Someone has to be in control. In order for a transaction to occur, it has to be the customer whisperer.

About a year ago, a TV personality with a syndicated faux courtroom show visited our store. Since I work in the late afternoon, I had never seen the show and didn’t know who she was. She refused to qualify, so the customer whisperer did what he always does when a customer refuses to qualify: excuses himself.

“Please, go ahead and browse while I return an important phone call in my office,” I said. “If you feel as though you need my assistance, I’ll be right over there.”

Predictably, she followed, asking questions all the way. She eventually revealed (under my heavy cross-examination) that the piano was for her home in New York. When I asked why she didn’t buy the piano at Steinway Hall New

York, she said, “They won’t give me a discount!”

“Well, I can’t give you a discount either,” I said. “This is how much a Steinway piano costs, and it’s worth every penny. Let me show you why.”

Of course, no sale was consummated because there was never going to be a sale. But the customer whisperer saved himself and the client time and trouble by taking the lead, following the process and determining that he could not meet her demands. She was treated the same as everyone else. If I had groveled and followed her around like a puppy, the only difference would have been a loss of self respect. I later read that she receives \$45 million per year in syndication fees. I don’t know if she ever got a piano, but she will be forever known in our gallery as “Judge Snooty.”

**WHAT WE CAN CONTROL**

Like everyone else, the rich and famous need to be guided through the decision-making process to select the right instrument and to decide with whom to do business. The customer whisperer uses calm, assertive leadership with wealthy clients the same way he uses it to benefit all his clients.

We never really know who is going to come through the front door of our stores, what their circumstances are or what kind of day they are having. Our customers are a variable we can’t control. However, we can control our performance. With celebrities and the wealthy, as with everyone else, we remain calm, stay focused and speak truth to power. **MI**

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