

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Whispering 2.0

We may not like it, but it's true: People do their shopping online before going to a store to see an actual product, if they go to a store at all. This new retail environment changes our strategy. In the old days, a customer would come in and we would start from scratch. We'd try to make a personal connection. Today, our initial contact with clients is usually electronic. They form their critical first impression of us from our website or Facebook page and, if we're lucky, they send us an email.



The number of initial contacts is greater than ever and the Customer Whisperer's task remains unchanged: to gently guide our clients through the decision-making process. Shopping, online or in person, is still essentially a decision-making process. The web was supposed to make shopping easier, but it has made it harder. An Internet search for one of our products first delivers an overload of information. Then it delivers biased information. Ultimately it leaves customers confused. Because prospects browsing the web are easily distracted and have a short attention span, they end up uninformed or misinformed.

That is when they send us an email or pay us a visit.

Thinking about how we can adapt our approach for this new retail landscape brought me back to the original inspiration for this column — Cesar Millan, the Dog Whisperer, a feisty Mexican immigrant who swept his way into the nation's heart on television and with his book, *Cesar's Way*. Millan's method is to establish himself as the pack leader to the dog, and even more so, to the dog's owners. It works every time.

Our customers, too, need someone to lead them through the process of selecting and purchasing a musical instrument, especially if they start their search online.

And so — in advance of my Idea Center session at The NAMM Show on Thursday, Jan. 24 at 3:00 p.m. — I decided to revisit my first Customer Whisper column from six years ago. Its lessons, updated below, are more useful than ever.

LEADING THE PACK

Years ago there was a popular sales training philosophy that relied on analyzing customers' personality type and structuring a presentation to their classification. It didn't work. Maybe there are only two personality types: leader and follower. Maybe each of us is constantly switching roles depending on the situation. We are parents, as well as children; teachers, as well as students.

Rather than dissecting customer personality profiles, let's consider our own personality profile and see if we are predisposed toward leadership. Our basic personality will naturally fall somewhere between being assertive or submissive and either being mostly calm or usually excited. Only one of the four possible combinations of these traits is likely to create a Customer Whisperer.

ASSERTIVE/ CALM	ASSERTIVE/ EXCITED
SUBMISSIVE/ CALM	SUBMISSIVE/ EXCITED

The submissive/excited salesperson is afraid of the customer and thinks it is all about the product. He's worried the customer will walk away or buy from someone else. He tends to retreat to

If the transaction cannot be closed for one reason or another, her follow-up habits will keep this prospect in the fold

7 SIMPLE THINGS YOU CAN DO TO BECOME A CUSTOMER WHISPERER

1. **Take a deep breath.** Your clients will sense your calm demeanor and will relax.
2. **Be confident.** You are the expert and you know you can help.
3. **Be sincere.** You can't fake it, so don't try. Just be your authentic self.
4. **Reassure your clients.** They have come to the right place.
5. **Be the one asking the questions.** It's the best way to lead.
6. **Connect.** Find ways to engage your new email or Facebook inquiries.
7. **Follow up.** Resend a message that wasn't answered.

his comfort zone of musical ability or technical knowledge. His emails probably include links to supplier sites and a lot of product information. He might send three emails the first day, along with an ad for his next gig.

The submissive/calm associate is also afraid of his customer, but thinks he can win them over with kindness. He follows customers around the store like a puppy, dutifully providing information rather than asking questions. He is reactive and incapable of making a recommendation, even when asked, repeatedly! He might take three or four days to answer an email. Facebook scares him.

The assertive/excited representative is our worst nightmare. His excitement causes his assertiveness to morph into aggression. He doesn't waste time qualifying customers and rarely asks a question. He may be a top writer for a while, by sheer force of will, but he has many unhappy customers. He moves from job to job, leaving in his wake unfulfilled promises and customer service nightmares. He doesn't have a Facebook page and doesn't answer emails because he can't see an immediate reward. If he does respond, there are lots of spelling errors and missed capitalization.

Finally we have the calm/assertive associate — the true Customer Whisperer. She greets her customers with a friendly

smile, happy to be meeting a potential new friend. She reassures her clients that they have come to the right place. Online she is authentic, letting her correspondent know she is a real person prepared to help. She's not afraid to ask questions in an email to help refine their search. Her clients appreciate her professionalism.

In the store she finds common interests and demonstrates empathy. Her clients relax because she is calm. Her probing questions get them thinking about which products will really satisfy their desires. The more they consider their true needs, the less important price becomes and more predisposed they are to select higher quality instruments.

The Customer Whisperer understands her new friends probably won't be able to find their perfect instrument on their own. They need her help and once they've found the right one, they may need validation and they might need a little nudge to pull the trigger.

She's calm near the end of the process because she is not afraid of losing the sale. She has become their "pack leader." Because she earlier established empathy, she can be assertively persistent and close the deal without resorting to tricks or intimidation. If the transaction cannot be closed for one reason or another, she knows her follow-up habits will keep this prospect in the fold.

We've been taught for generations that great salespeople are born, not made. But anyone can become a Customer Whisperer by being a calm, assertive pack leader. We need to slow down, stay focused on our customers needs and, whether in person or not, we need to ask insightful questions to keep the dialog going. When we do that, we humanize the shopping experience and we vastly improve the likelihood of completing a transaction beneficial for both our customer and ourselves. **MI**

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

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