

IDEAS

Inside **IDEAS** > The Retail Doctor Page 30 > The Lesson Room Page 32

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

THE 17-MINUTE RULE

A few weeks ago, I heard an interesting little nugget of information on NPR. It turns out that all TED Talks are limited to 18 minutes. It doesn't matter if you are Bill Gates, Bill Clinton or Billy Graham — you get 18 minutes.

TED Talks (ted.com) are those 1,700 flashes of wisdom curated by *Wired* Editor Chris Anderson and streamed 2 million times a day on a variety of interesting subjects. There is no agenda, except to spread great ideas. And not many rules, except; no commercialism, pseudo science or talking longer than 18 minutes. But why 18 minutes? Anderson said, "It is long enough to be serious and short enough to hold people's attention."

SHORT BUT SWEET

This got me thinking about our own 17-minute rule. In the mid-1980s, we discovered the need to formalize our sales training and break away from the conventions of our fathers' generation. Things like the "Ben Franklin close" and the "reduction to the ridicules close"



Tell your customers a story, but keep it short

just didn't work for those of us who had come directly from the counter culture to the sales floor. So, we dissected the process and refined the fundamentals handed down from our elders.

As we dug into the presentation part of the process we discovered that when we talked for more than 17 minutes, we often lost our customers' attention. Of course, at the time the supplier geniuses were training

us to tell every prospect about every feature. The products were becoming increasingly complicated and this was impossible. Also, we noted that TV shows rarely went more than 12 or 15 minutes without a commercial and that our pastor's sermon was rarely 20 minutes long.

We had to do some serious cutting to get our 'pitch' down to 17 minutes. But, it worked. More of our prospects became customers. Trimmed down to its essence, we were able to give our clients enough information to feel informed and about as much information as they were capable of absorbing. Listening and taking in information is hard mental work and we tune out when we are overloaded. An unexpected benefit of our fine tuning was that our clients quickly came to see us as experts.

TED speakers similarly report that the 18-minute limit forces them to refine their message to its essence. What can you say in less than 18 minutes? David Christian's TED Talk told the history of the world, from the big bang to the Internet, in 18 minutes. John Kennedy convinced Americans to go to the moon.

Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address. Martin Luther King told us he had a dream. Steve Jobs gave one of the most remembered commencement speeches of all time at Stanford University in 15 minutes.

The best way to deliver the information and to hold our customers attention is to frame the facts and features as a story. Our most memorable teachers were the ones who told us stories. So, to hold our customers' attention we must turn that boring list of features into a story our customers can understand.

A quick way to start a story is by asking, "Do you know how a [piano, guitar, speaker] is built? They start with ..." and go from there. Lead your story to the particular item you are trying to explain, how it fits into the grand scheme and why it's better.

Refine your story as you go and let your enthusiasm show. But keep it short. Your customers will see you as an expert and you can ask them to buy the product before you lose their attention. **MI**

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