

IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

SMASH & GRAB RETAIL

We are blessed with a plethora of great resources for training salespeople. The canon of tools describes greeting, qualifying, FAB (feature, advantage, benefit), closing, overcoming objections — all components in our quest to capture the flag, revel in conquest, listen to the cash register go *ka-ching!* Those terms were important during my own three decades of selling, and I argue they remain imperative for employees to understand and, at minimum, be able to diagram in their heads.

The words aren't just about the triumph of the sale either. They also chart the basic skeleton of effective and efficient communication between salespeople and customers. One could argue that in today's 140-character-limit tweeting world, we are facing a new generation of employees lacking basic social-interacton skills. It would be a shame to see these techniques become a lost art.

Conversely, today's retail has evolved. Outside of the piano showroom and high-end boutique specialty shops,



independent music retailers are seldom afforded the opportunity to “interview” customers, let alone educate them. Customers enter the store informed (and often misinformed) of the products they want, and the opportunity to probe, qualify, solve and cross-examine has become a luxury on many contemporary showroom floors. It doesn't help that alternative industries are legendary for abusing these tactics. (Getting called a “used car salesman” is rarely a compliment.)

Then there's the time factor. Today's busy, microwave-reared consumer wants commodities and consumables like its food

— fast and served sanitized in a wrapper. They invade our showrooms with hyper-vigilance, expecting a quick exit and honest but concise answers to questions.

We also compete with retail models based on dumbed-down service. Sophisticated signage, brightly colored boxes and self-service — it's the way many people want to buy from us now. “Point me in the right direction, but for heaven's sake, don't try to sell me something along the way.”

All is not lost, though. Independent retailers can still be successful in this smash-and-grab retail environment. It only requires knowledge of a few fundamental tactics.

Acknowledge the customer. With shrinking margins, we can't afford to staff the way we used to. We have fewer employees waiting on more customers, and that means long lines and multitasking employees if you're fortunate enough to have a busy store. The most important thing to teach staff is how to make a roomful of customers feel attended to, even when they aren't. People in line are much more inclined to wait patiently knowing their rightful place, and a

friendly nod or smile goes miles toward making that wait tolerable. Whatever it takes, convey visually that you know they're waiting, their turn is coming, and you're happy they came in.

Balance needs. Be on the lookout for customers who need to get out the door quickly and customers who actually want to spend time with you. Offering literature to read (translation: stall) or pointing at more curiosities in the store can buy you time while you're finishing up with other clients.

Use science. This is where old-school selling comes in. You may not have time to qualify, close and smash objections, but the principles are still there in the communication. Get to the heart of what customers need early, and you save them time.

Today's sales floor can be like a hospital emergency room, and we want to be wired to stop the bleeding and keep patients alive. Failure to do so sends them home with a stronger instinct to cyber shop and ultimately deny us their business for good. **MI**

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