

Selling in the Ages

By Cheryl Crumb

We know that age discrimination is against our country's values and laws. Everyone should be treated equally regardless of whether they're 20 or 80... blah, blah, blah.

I've had reason to challenge the practice of that belief over the past few months in the retail community: first, in dealing with my mother who moved to a retirement community, and secondly in helping my daughter get established in her new Toronto digs. Both extremes of the age continuum could be labeled consumers, customers or the marketplace.



(she is her mother's daughter). In her mind, she just met a creature from the Planet Geek.

My mother, a camouflaged technocrat, on the other hand, is fluent with computers, whips out her cell phone with practiced flair, and downloads her digital shots with experience and ease. She expects a rich, provocative technical conversation and instead she gets Mr. Rogers.

The retailers became the victims of their own generalizations. What are the messages associated with this?

- Arrogance can be defined as thinking you know something to be true and acting in a way that supports that supposed knowledge.
- There's a huge gray market out there that has the capacity to spend their money on the new toys as they enter or enjoy the recreational phase of their lifespan. They buy more than adult diapers and insomnia pharmaceuticals. They are wise enough to know when they're being spoken down to, and they're bold enough to not tolerate it.
- Selling is about helping people make the best decisions for them. It begins with getting to know your customer, regardless of what you think you know, jointly discussing options and possible solutions, and then presenting the most appropriate solution in a language that matches the needs and comfort zone of the customer. It is not throwing techno speak at youth, or talking slowly and loudly to the aged.
- One of the reasons for this demographic stereotyping is that when you're young, you haven't experienced being older, so it's difficult to understand how it feels to be dismissed as irrelevant.

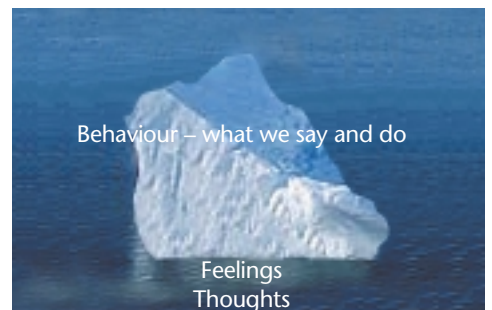
Being great at sales means becoming a better observer. The more we see and become aware of, the greater our response action repertoire. Give yourself some homework over the next week. Start by observing others who are selling. Watch and listen to how they approach, address and respond to the DC youth and the DIC (demographically incorrect) aged population. Listen to the kinds of questions and the vocal tone, and watch facial expressions. Note where you're seeing biases. Zero in as well on the targeted

customer. What is his or her reaction to the approach?

Part 2 of your homework is tougher. Observe yourself while you're working with customers. Pretend there's a little Jiminy Cricket sitting on your shoulder taking notes on your behaviour. Notice that it begins, not with what you're saying, but with what you're thinking. Become aware of how you're influenced by such factors as age, dress, looks, smell... Supplant a thought in your head that says, "this person is interesting and I want to learn more about him/her". Consciously give yourself the freedom to suspend the automatic judgment you made.

There's a simple but powerful model represented by an iceberg, and the only thing that is visible is behaviour. Everything else is below the water line:

Working from the bottom up, if we have negatively-oriented thoughts such as, "here's an old geezer who would buy a gramophone if he could", that automatically leads to feelings of annoyance, which then produces



behaviour of rolling eyes, clipped speech and prolonged sighs. If, on the other hand, we see the same aged individual walk into the store and our thoughts are, "Hey... he looks experienced enough to tell me a thing or two", the automatic feelings change to wonder, interest, and anticipation. Linked behaviours include genuine smiles, eye contact and inquisitiveness. In other words, what we think, we act. So, the only way to change our behaviour is to change our thoughts. The good news is that no one can control our thoughts but ourselves. The bad news is it means we must put effort first into identifying those thoughts. It's choice, and it's ours.

With more aware salespeople, my mum and daughter might have left the establishments as happy purchasers. Instead, they were unfulfilled because of assumptions (thoughts). Good salespeople are aware of their thoughts and are open to challenging them.