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Reactively Wait...or....

Proactively Seek New Customers

The typical retail salesperson waits for customers to come to him or her. The theory is that when a customer crosses the transom, they're either ready to buy now (3% according to one study) or open to buying (6% in that same research). So, by virtue of making the first move, the customer is already qualified.

But let's think about the rest of the not-buying population. Thirty percent are not even thinking about it, another 30% believe that they're not interested and the final 30% are definitely not interested in your product.

One of the best ways to get closer to that untapped market is through your greatest asset, an already existing happy customer. When you've made a sale, you've already helped people unconsciously through their buying process. The #1 reason why people buy from you is that they feel confident you can help them solve their problems.

But we buyers don't reach an "I'm ready to buy now" "aha" moment like a bolt out of the heavens without first going through some automatic predictable steps in our thinking. The first step is always "Flat out no interest" and we won't get past that internal thought until something changes in our lives or in the way we view our situation. Take my current reaction to glitzy new model cars. I have absolutely no interest in cars in general or any car in particular. I have a great car already, it still has the sniff of leather, people compliment it, it's shiny and as cozy as a warm, comfortable friend. As long as those fuzzy, happy thoughts are with me, no discounting master of wizardry could entice me. But let the engine start knocking, or the paint fade, or the nonexistent GPS control centre become urgent because I'm always hopelessly lost, I'll begin to slip into the next phase.

The second step is "I have a hint or whisper of interest". When an individual feels their antenna beginning to spark it's because they made some realization triggered by some event that there was a possibility here. That feeling of vague possibility needs to be massaged or it could dissipate and become forgotten. If it dissipates, we slip back to the above step.

When it is kneaded and the potential buyer makes more mental connections between his

situation and this gossamer thread of possibility, he reaches the third step, "I am really interested". The key here is that he's not necessarily interested in the specific product, but in finding a way to solve his problem or create an opportunity. This is generally the stage that customers are in when they walk through your door. They're looking for answers. The Grand Irony of this phase is that people don't get here because someone is pitching product at them. They reach this level because they find themselves answering questions. The answers they give to those questions (either asked by an astute salesperson or self-inflicted) continue to tweak the interest muscle.

The fourth step in our mental buying process is, "I like this solution". So, between the previous phase and now, they've examined a variety of solutions or products and they're weighing the degree to which this product helps them. This is usually the stage where buyers ask a lot of questions of salespeople or do their own research online. They often raise objections, because an objection is the brain's way of challenging yourself to make the best decision.

The fifth step is a decision in which we say to our self, "I prefer this one"....but there's still a lingering question of "Do I like it enough to do it now"? When we answer ourselves positively by realizing that waiting is not something we want to pursue, the sixth and final step is the declaration, "I'll do it now".

Many people go through this internal process and dialogue without benefit of a guiding salesperson. And in retail situations, they've usually climbed the first three steps on the buying ladder before they even see a salesperson.

So, how do we leverage our understanding of the customer's buying process to become more proactive in seeking new customers? As the salesperson, not only did you convince an existing customer that you could help him solve his problems, consider that he felt enough trust (even if only for the short term) that he chose you over other people selling the same product or service.

In effect, who is more inclined to extol your virtues, or those of your store or product, than

someone who has left there fulfilled. Unfortunately, too often we let these potential sales agents leave without leveraging what they could do....refer us to others., not only the 9% who are actively on the look, but the 30% who are not yet thinking about it.

Many salespeople occasionally get referrals, but it's generally done passively or sporadically. Successful salespeople follow a systematic method. When salespeople obtain referrals, they receive pre-screened leads from their new unpaid sales force.

When should you make a request? A systematic process needs to be applied systematically. Make it a habit to inform new customers that it's your practice to look for referrals from happy customers. That triggers them to begin thinking about colleagues in similar situations. You don't need to wait until the sale has been completed, although that's an obvious time. Make your request at the completion of various stages of the sale, for example, as you're providing them with educational information as background to help them make the best choice. It's always good practice to re-contact a customer after a sale to find out how well the solution is working. Not only should you be sincerely interested in your solution's effectiveness, it provides you with the opportunity to ask for referrals.

How do you ask? Keep it simple. Here's an easy five-step approach:

1. Tell your customer how much you enjoyed working with them and how satisfying it is to you when people's problems are solved.
2. Tell your customer that you would like to help others like them.
3. Ask who they know who might be interested in working with them. (If they can't give you a name immediately, ask if you can call them back after they've had more time to think.)
4. Ask questions to find out the issues facing this individual.
5. After you have contacted the referral, reconnect with the original customer. Provide them with a thank you gift or acknowledgement.

This latter step can be refined or augmented so that you create a reward system for successful referrals that could include future discounts or other incentives.

Most salespeople don't ask because it doesn't occur to them, they're afraid of rejection or they don't know how. If you've truly helped a customer, you've earned the right to ask. Try it....it works!