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Make No Bones About It ...

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In the 10th century BC, Samson killed a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. In 2017, we see millions of retail sales killed with the same weapon—the jawbone of an ass.

Consider every salesperson has two ears and one mouth and they're meant to be used in that ratio. In other words, listen to the customer twice as much as you talk. Most retail salespeople talk four times more than they listen.

In today's marketplace, any salesperson who only hands over the product a customer asked for is doomed. They aren't salespeople, they're clerks. They can be replaced by a website that will deliver the same or next day—or by one of the robot army waiting to invade the

workplaces. The greatest value a salesperson brings today is building a potentially long-term relationship between each customer and your garden center.

Your salespeople must focus only on what that customer in front of them says. There's no "one-size-fits-all" script. Each transaction is different. The successful listener generally doesn't answer the customer's first question, instead probing for more information to understand exactly what the customer is asking. Phrases like, "Okay," "Wow!" "Tell me more"—or the most powerfully empathetic, "I understand!" tell the customer you're listening to what they're saying. The most compelling question you can ask is, "What else?"

While teaching a graduate seminar in marketing, my students and I learned a powerful lesson. A senior marketing executive from a major airline was in the class along with management from Intel and Hewlett-Packard. The airline exec mentioned she bought a new computer. The Intel and HP people excitedly asked what she bought. She blurted defensively, "I'll tell you, but I don't want any feedback! I went to big box stores and I went online only to be overwhelmed with technology I'll never use. After visiting a Best Buy where I was totally bewildered by bits, bytes, RAM, DRAM and such, I flicked on the TV. The Home Shopping Network hostess said, 'Open the box and you'll see a red dot on the back of this computer. Find the cord with the red dot and connect the two red dots. Then the cord with the green dot goes into the slot with the green dot on the computer.' Finally, someone understood what I needed!"

She said she bought the computer. It took five minutes to get it working. "I have Facebook and email. I can balance my checkbook, write reports, keep my recipes, all without more stress in my life. I don't know the computer brand, but I think it runs Windows. I'm very happy because it does just what I want." The tech execs were stunned. This contemporary executive didn't want bells and whistles. She just wanted to get the job done. This was years ago, but her attitude is equally relevant in today's time-compressed world.

The process of asking the buyer questions ensures you know the end result your customer's seeking, while training your sales staff to laser focus on what's important. Customers don't want to be overwhelmed with information that doesn't directly impact their current project. As an employer, responsible for a reasonable payroll budget, you don't want employees wasting time or scaring away customers by overwhelming them. Have them listen more and talk less and each salesperson could handle at least double the number of loyal customers. It's worth conversations with your team about being responsive to customers' specific needs and, before they open their mouth, deciding if their comments are relevant to this specific consumer.

You'll find yourself with better customer service, stronger customer relationships, higher sales and more effective personnel. **GP**

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