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Retailing Riddles: Never Assume

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“What is found at the beginning of eternity and at the end of time and space?” The class gave “educated” guesses—“white light, total darkness, anti-matter, black holes ...” The professor then wrote three words on the board: Eternity, timE and spacE. More guesses came from the class. Finally, the professor hinted, “The answer is right in front of you.” At last a quiet voice said, “The letter E.”

How does this relate to retail? When faced with riddles, we usually answer based on our experience, assumptions and biases. These brainteasers teach us to avoid absolutes and understand there are different answers, depending on what the real question is. Say a customer wants bottlebrush for her yard. Immediately the salesman points out other plants that attract hummingbirds. Rather than

questioning, he reviews his experiences and jumps to his own incorrect conclusion. The customer shuts him down saying she wants a “privacy hedge.” The disconnect happens between customer and salesperson based on incorrect assumptions. The salesman has created a confidence crisis by not being open to all possibilities.

Here’s another: Two fathers and two sons go fishing. Each catches one fish. Why did they return with only three fish? Don’t assume. Look at the big picture. In fact, there were only three distinct people in the fishing boat. One was a grandfather. One was his son and also a father to the third generation, his grandson. Thus, two fathers and two sons equaled only three people.

A typical garden center will have some big spenders who only want the biggest and best. They may only buy from certain departments, never investigating other products. Maybe the customer has numerous needs we can solve, but we haven’t asked the right questions or listened closely to the answers. Have we effectively made them aware of our other departments? Have we limited their buying potential like we assumed two sons/two fathers were four individuals?

Mrs. Megabucks needed a housewarming present. Rather than say, “What did you have in mind?” the manager immediately pitched a large expensive shrub like one Mrs. M. had recently bought for her own yard.

However, his assumption the gift recipient had the same space or interests was incorrect. The manager didn't know the price range or even if the neighbor was in a house or apartment. Furthermore, why would she spend \$300 on a housewarming present? The customer left empty-handed. With some out-of-the-box thinking, the manager should have steered her to other departments within the store like giftware, housewares and other hard goods likely to have suited her needs. In tagging this customer as "big ticket," he was blind to the fact a person can fall into more than one category—like both a father and a son.

Across town a regular customer was unsure about expanding her gardening experiences. She'd been active in the community garden and public flower baskets programs. As she got older, active gardening was becoming more difficult. What the salesman didn't notice was that she was moving more slowly and with difficulty. The salesman assumed this avid gardener's needs were the same as always and ignored that she now wanted to explore houseplants and herbs to keep her green thumb active, but on a much-reduced scale. Even with clues in front of him, he couldn't solve the core retailing riddle: "What's best for this customer?"

In brainteaser riddles, it can be difficult to recognize two fathers and two sons as only three people or see that beginning and ends refer to letters not words. In the same vein, how good are you at answering your customer's riddles? Are you thinking about their needs from a different perspective so that you both profit at the end of the sale? **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.