

Five Steps to Better Remodeling Sales

by Ed McGowan

Selling is a part of every remodeling business. To succeed, you've got to do it well.



During a recent seminar for remodelers, one of the speakers asked the audience how many of them were sales people. Only a few hands went up, so he asked again. This time a few more hands went up. Finally, after about the fifth time he asked, all of the hands in the room were raised. The point is, remodelers are reluctant to call themselves salesmen. Perhaps it doesn't sound as good as referring to yourself as a craftsman or a builder. Or maybe we think there is something dishonest or sleazy about being a salesman. But the ability to sell is a fundamental part of this business and to succeed, you must do it well.

In sales, your job is to help the buyer make the buying decision. That doesn't mean being pushy or forcing people to do things they don't really want to do. When our customers call, they have a need or a problem. They are looking to us to help them solve it. We want them to choose our company to do the work because we believe we're going to do the best job and provide the

best service. That's not cockiness; that's confidence, something that's essential to sales ability.

Selling is a methodology that can be reduced to a series of steps, just like laying a tile floor or remodeling a kitchen. It's a little trickier for remodelers because we sell an idea, an intangible, instead of a product, like a pair of shoes or a new set of tires. So we have to create an image for our clients and help them to visualize the finished product.

We also have to develop a sense of trust, since many of the people we're selling to are convinced that we're less than professional. With all the tales of rip-off artists and all the horror stories our clients have heard from friends who've remodeled, it's hard to blame them for being apprehensive.

Like most small contractors, when I started my remodeling company 33 years ago, I worked in the field during the day and spent my evenings calling on clients and doing estimates. Even though I never really considered myself a salesman, I recognized that the

ability to sell was essential to the business. That's why, once my company got big enough, we hired a professional salesman, a former Fuller Brush man with extensive sales training.

We learned that very little sales training was available for remodelers, so we set about developing our own for our employees. The basics of selling remodeling are the same as for selling any other service. We broke these basics into five steps:

- Meet and greet
- Qualify the customer
- Demonstrate
- Close
- Follow up

These are not sanctioned by Dale Carnegie or any of the other experts. But they work for us.

Meet and Greet

How your customers feel about you and your company is determined in the first few moments of contact. For many, that initial contact is on the phone. At our company, we keep a sign by the

phone that says "smile." We also answer with, "Thank you for calling McGowan Corporation," and we say it with a tone of voice that makes our customers feel glad they called. This might sound like pretty obvious stuff, but think of how many offices you've called where the person answering the phone snaps a greeting that's as unclear as it is surly.

At our company, we follow up that first contact by sending a packet of information. This includes an appointment card reminding the customer when our salesman will arrive, a cover letter discussing the services we offer, our trade affiliations, and the history of our company. Our goal is to establish the professionalism of our company, which makes the salesman's job easier.

The next step is to meet the customer in person. Again there are a few basic rules that, while they may be obvious, bear repeating. Your vehicle should be clean and neat and you should be clean and neat. Our salesmen wear jackets

and ties, but this isn't always appropriate for every company. We also carry a clean briefcase, a camera, and a tape measure. We've learned that even if the job is pretty straightforward, customers like it when we do a lot of measuring and snap plenty of photos.

Sales gurus sometimes refer to the first phase of conversation with your customer as "the warm-up." But to me, it's just an opportunity to be friendly, to let your customer know you are an individual with concerns and interests just like them. That's important since many people don't have a good impression of remodelers. If you try to address this in a frank and friendly manner, it's an attitude you can usually turn around.

Occasionally you'll meet someone you don't like and with whom you don't want to do business. The reasons for your feelings may not be clear, so you might convince yourself to go ahead anyway. One thing I've learned is that even if you need the work, accepting a job when you're uneasy with the customer is a mistake. You can be sure you'll run into problems.

Qualifying

You're in the remodeling business, not the estimating business. If you don't find out right up front whether your customers are serious, you're going to spend a lot of time and effort for nothing. Avoid customers who barely let you in the door, let alone listen to your sales information. These types tell you they're too busy to talk. They point you around the back of the house with instructions to take measurements and call with a price.

Qualifying means asking some key questions. Do the customers have enough money? How do they intend to pay for the project? Are they serious or are they dreaming? How soon do they intend to buy? How many other bidders? Have the customers talked to other contractors or are you the first? Are they going to buy on price alone? If you find they are shopping for the lowest bid or have unrealistic expectations, now is the time to back out so you don't waste your company's time.

You also have to decide whether your services match their needs. If you specialize in kitchens and baths, you probably don't want to build a sun room, even if you need the work. Similarly, your prices should be in line with your customers' expectations.

This is a good time to talk with your customers about their real needs. They might say they want a family room addition, but a good qualifier digs a little deeper. For instance, what do they intend to use the family room for? Who will be spending the most time there? In

the course of your discussion, you might find your customers need private space, a place to escape from the children. A larger master suite and a private bath may be in order.

Timing is another issue. Your customers might have lived for years with a cramped, unattractive kitchen. Now that they've decided to make a change, they want to do it right away, next week if possible. They don't realize the remodeling process is a long one. The kitchen cabinets they want may take months to arrive. And chances are your schedule is full for the next three months.

In addition to judging the feasibility of taking on the project, now is the time to begin to educate the clients so their expectations are in line with reality.

Demonstration

If you've dealt with insurance salesmen, this is the part where they whip out the pitch book and start showing you charts, graphs, life expectancies, return on investment, information about the company, and so on. It's the same process with remodeling. The idea is to show your customers what your company is all about, how you've helped other people, and how you can help them.

All our salesmen carry a presentation book which we put together years ago but are constantly updating. We include a sample set of drawings that are very detailed and professional looking. We also include testimonial letters, before-and-after photos, warranty information, articles about us, certifications we've received, insurance information, a brief resume of our key personnel, and so on.

The presentation book doesn't have to be elaborate. A simple three-ring binder, neat and clean, is a start. Sometimes materials suppliers or manufacturers will give you a book promoting their product, which you can simply customize by adding information about your company.

As we present our book, we talk about other jobs we've done in the neighborhood, the talents of our carpenters and subs, the quality of the materials we work with, and the uniqueness of our design services.

Close

If you've done everything right up to this point, the close should be the easiest part of the sale. After all, you've gotten to know these customers, you like them, and they like you. You've shown them you have the ability to do the job. You've discussed what product is best for them and you've agreed, at least preliminarily, on a budget. Logically, the next step is to sign the contract and get started. Yet entire books and seminars are

devoted to such simple questions as, "When can we start?" or "Do you care to sign now?"

Asking for the sale raises a whole new fear: the objection, and its evil twin, rejection. The two are intertwined and they play havoc with your confidence. I cringe at the idea of spending hours trying to win over customers only to hear the reasons why they don't want to buy. But objections and rejection are just another part of the sales process. There are techniques for handling these and still closing the sale.

Many times what we perceive as objections are just the customer's need for additional information. Here's a good example of an objection, one we've all heard too often: "The price is too high." The first step is to turn the objection into a question, "Is the cost of the project too high, or are you saying that we have to make a few changes in the plans to make it more affordable?" If you still don't get anywhere, rephrase the question, "Are you saying that there is nothing wrong with the job as we've outlined it, but it's more than you can afford to invest?"

If your customers say yes to that question, your next step is to say something like: "Since this project is exactly what you are looking for, let's go back and figure out what we can do to bring the job back into your price range." So now you are working together again to help the customers realize their goals.

In some cases, you may not have an answer for all their questions. Admit it and say you will get back to them. In most cases, they'll admire your honesty.

Finally, once you've answered a question and erased an objection, move along. Don't keep coming back to it, or apologizing for the miscommunication.

Follow Up

The contract is signed, the deposit check is in, and work is ready to start. But that doesn't mean the salesman's job is done. The next stage, the follow up, is as important as the preliminaries. It means making sure the job gets done the way you said it would. It means not forgetting your customers after the sale.

In many ways this is the hardest part of the process. Now it's your turn to follow through on all your promises by providing the product you offered. But this is also the step that, if it's done right, makes your customers happy enough to tell their friends about you — so you can start the sales process all over again. ■

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