



Article 350

June 15, 2014

The Secret of the Soft Sell

By Finance New Mexico

No one likes to feel hustled while shopping, whether it's in a retail store or trade show booth.

To attract customers without brazen hawking or downright pushiness, businesses need to refine the art of the soft sell. That begins by making the store or trade show booth an intentional destination for people who are truly interested in what the business sells.

SELL

Relationship Skills

While any business would like to sell at least one product to every person who walks in the door, that's the type of unrealistic goal that can turn sales reps into apex predators.

A long-term perspective toward potential customers focuses on developing a relationship that lasts longer than one transaction. It lays a foundation through attraction rather than persuasion.

A retailer might begin with an irresistible offer that draws customers into a store — say, 20 percent off on purchases over \$100 or one-day-only sales on a hot-selling product.

A trade show vendor might offer freebies to customers in return for contact information. Some vendors create a sense of urgency by offering something of value to the first 20 customers who sign up. A startup financial planner, for example, could offer a 15-minute consultation to the first 15 visitors as a way to build a client base.

The Light Touch

What happens after the customer responds to the enticement is what separates soft sellers from pitchmen.

Businesses should train their salespeople how to walk this fine line and demonstrate their commitment to this approach by rewarding employees not just for closing deals but also for opening relationships.

If it doesn't come naturally to them, sales reps should be trained in how to talk to — and listen to — a customer. Rather than starting with a sales pitch, the employee should approach each

customer as an individual who's looking for a product or service that will solve a problem or enrich his life.

It's the salesperson's job to find out what that problem or desire is and offer information about how a product or service the store offers might solve or satisfy it without appearing to push the customer in one direction or another.

Sometimes that means settling for handing out product information and getting people to sign the business' snail mail or email list. But that's a coup in itself. Obtaining contact information from a serious shopper isn't a failure; it's an invitation to build on an initial contact and make a sale in the future.

Many customers genuinely appreciate — and patronize — businesses whose salespeople give them time to review marketing or product information.

Room to Move

For the soft-sell approach to work, businesses need to consider layout and staffing.

The store or sales space needs to be big enough for customers and sales reps to talk without feeling crowded — and without having to shout to be heard.

And the sales rep/customer ratio has to be low enough that customers who want the undivided attention of an unhurried expert get what they need to become buyers.

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