

Sales Tips for the Non-Salesperson

With all the talk of a recession and many contractors struggling a little harder than normal, now seems like a good time to talk about selling. That mysterious trade that some contractors love and others despise. Think you are misunderstood as a contractor? Well, salespeople are some of the most misunderstood and disliked people on earth. I conducted a sales program in Canada recently and a national survey came out that politicians were the most mistrusted people in Canada. Salespeople were number two.

Let's start with a definition of selling that I have found particularly useful when speaking to contractors. Selling is communicating your trade and profession to the customer. Notice I never used the words coerce, cheat, force, push or swindle. Communication is the key. It is not your customer's responsibility to understand the difference between yours and competing bids. It is your responsibility to clearly communicate your trade, what your company has to offer and the kind of work you do.



The following tips are tips, suggestions, ideas and phrases you can use when talking with customers. There is no rhyme or reason to their order, merely tips and ideas ... things

you can choose to practice and try out with your customers.

Tip number one: "Tell me more about that." Selling is about gathering information. Try using broad questions that force the customer to talk to you and tell you what they had in mind. Sample questions are:

"Tell me a little about the job you are looking for."

"So we can do our best to meet your needs, help me understand the kind of job you are interested in."

When the customer offers some information, restate what they say and ask them to tell you a little more about that or some other phrase that flushes more information out of the customer.

"So you want an inexpensive job. Tell me a little more about that."

"So you want this done right away. Tell me a little more about that."

"So you already have one price and it is more than you want to spend. Tell me a little more about that."

"You feel our price is too high. Help me understand what causes you to think our price is too high."

I know this seems a little awkward, but you can customize it to your own terms. The idea is to get the customer to talk.

Tip number two: Answer a question with a question. Most of us were good boys and girls and learned to obey our teachers, big brothers, parents and other people of authority. This was a good strategy when you were eight years old. Being obedient kept you out of trouble and meant you were a polite child. Most of the authority role models in your life knew more than you and were only trying to protect you.

This logic does not necessarily work well for contractors when talking with customers. The customer probably does not know more about the job than you and probably needs some education. Blindly answering the customer's questions may not be in your best interest because the customer

may be asking the wrong question for the wrong reason. Answering a question with a question can help flush out more information.

Customer says, *"Do you guarantee your work?"*

Contractor says, *"We obviously stand by our work but are guarantees an issue for you? Is there a particular reason you are interested in guarantees?"*

I know this seems silly but at this point you may not have enough information to give the right answer. The other contractor may have offered a guarantee that they want to compare you to. Or maybe they bought a used car and the guarantee was worthless and they have a bad taste in their mouth. Maybe they had a roofer guarantee a roof and when they called in on a leak the roofer was out of business. At this point you just do not have enough information to start making assumptions.

Tip number three: Learn tag lines for objections.

When in the heat of battle, it seems like customers give you a zillion objections but in reality, less than 10 objections cover 90% of the objections contractors face. Price, third party authority, schedule and another contractor are just a few. It just makes sense to come up with some common lines you can offer to counter these basic objections. I call these tag lines, something you pull out of your pocket and say to the customer. Let's practice a tag line with that age-old objection, price.

Customer says, *"Your price is too high."*

Contractor says, *"I know it is a lot of money. Here at Acme Contracting, we decided a long time ago that we were better off to charge a little more than to deal with the problems that cutting corners causes. We have done over 300 jobs in town and I want to make sure that if I see you in the grocery store, I am proud of the work we did for you."*

Practicing a little and having a strong tag line just makes sense. This can keep you from being offended and blurting out something like, "If you buy a crummy job, you get what you deserve."

Now let's offer one for higher authority. Customers are famous for passing the buck by saying something like, "I have to talk to my husband," or "I have to call the home office for approval." Most contractors will tuck tail and run at this point. The more aggressive salesperson might reply, "let me talk to them for you." Neither are appropriate responses.

The best response at this point is to test the objection for validity. A simple reply indicated you appreciate the need to communicate to a third party but you want to make sure they are happy and is it OK with them because you will be working with them, not the third party.

A suggested response might be, *"I can appreciate you wanting to talk to your husband. I talk over major decisions with my wife. I have not met your husband yet and you and I are the ones who will be working together. Based on what you have heard, are you comfortable with us doing the job?"*

In summary, I have no illusions that in one article I can teach you how to sell. Selling is about communication and most of us communicate according to how our parents and other surroundings taught us as a youth. However, believing you can simply write an estimate and drop it in the mail and you get the job may be foolish. Hone your skills in talking with the customer. Practice a little. Simple communication can be a powerful tool. Try some of these tips and see how they fit. Lots of contractors use them successfully. What do you have to lose? The whole process might surprise you.



By Monroe Porter