

Customer Training or Stupid Customer Tricks

By T. Scott Gross

I had my eyes opened this weekend big time. I knew service was bad, but gee whiz! Hang with me as we review my service experiences, and I promise you will change the way you do business.

My first stop was the auto show. Every known brand had vehicles bumper to bumper at the convention center. Because there were too many to see, Buns and I worked our short list. It was almost time to buy another vehicle so we targeted the Toyota 4Runner, the fabled Ford Explorer, and the new kid on the block, the Honda Pilot.

At Toyota we were free to open doors, test out seats and accessories, and generally get to know the vehicle. When we had questions, a Product Specialist in the form of an attractive young woman chatted knowledgeably about the vehicle. If you had questions about available colors, she had the answer. If you wanted to delve deeper and discuss the horsepower and torque differences between the six and the eight, no problem. She had the answers.

At Ford the popular four-door model was locked and left to spin monotonously on a carousel. No touching, please! So we tried the two-door, a model entirely ill-suited for us. A salesman in western wear pushed a card at us saying, "I'd be happy to sell you one of these!" His product knowledge was no deeper than the paint on the hood.

Honda had the best looking vehicle. The Pilot is loaded with features but the show staff? They were nowhere to be found. I guess if you've got a hot vehicle, maybe it sells itself.

So our weekend started with questions.

We stopped at Hastings, our local bookstore, for the latest copy of *American Demographics*. I looked and Buns double-checked; no *American Demographics*. Kerrville is a small town and you can hardly expect them to carry the title. But we were there so why not ask?

"Excuse me! Can you tell me if you carry *American Demographics*?"

"What kind of magazine is it?"

"It's a business magazine."

"Did you look in the business section?" Duh!

What on God's green earth was he thinking?"

Saturday we tried Barnes & Noble in the big city of San Antonio and found our magazine on the first try. With time to burn we decided to browse.

Women browse by topic, men browse by title. Okay, I don't really know that to be true, but it is true that people have different shopping styles. Given five minutes at a Borders or a Barnes & Noble, Buns will head straight for the thriller novels to browse. Me? I conjure up my current list of wanted titles and go on a targeted search.

Hmmm, if I could only get my hands on the Barnes & Noble computer, I wouldn't have to wait for the girl with the tongue stud to get off the phone to look up my list. So, after a three-minute wait, I'm out the door heading straight for Amazon.com.

At Best Buy we had two items on the list, an up-right freezer

and a large screen TV. Winter is approaching and we're moving the act indoors. So we'll need lots of food and mindless entertainment. In the appliance department Sal jumped off the forklift to see if we needed help selecting the freezer.

"Where are you going to put this?" It was an odd question, but Sal plowed on saying, "If you are going to put this in the house, either of the two you are looking at will do fine. But if you are going to put it in the garage where it gets hot in the summer, you're going to need one with a fan to cool the compressor." All the while Sal was wrestling a 15 cubic foot model away from the wall so he could point at the compressor to show us why.

Good questions, Sal! You didn't wait for me to ask because you anticipated that I hadn't a clue—and you were right! "We'll take it!" At this point anything Sal recommends is now automatically approved by us!

In the TV department I noticed three middle-aged men, which included me, who were shopping with a tape measure! Who'd guess that you select a television based on where it will fit? It turns out that consumers want to squeeze the largest screen into the smallest space. Those of us who bought furniture before big TVs are now trying to get the 36 inch model into the same cabinet where we have our current, formerly humongous 25 inch set! 'Ain't no way, Jose! It's too wide!

Hint: If you were a manufacturer of television sets, should you put the speakers on the side of the set or on the bottom? If they were on the

bottom, the screen could be larger and the sound would not be compressed against the cabinet! If you sold televisions, what information would you put on the display tags? Why, set dimensions, of course! Best Buy does this, although the type is way too small for middle-aged guys to see. So we measured and measured in search of a theatre-size screen that will sit on a dime.

Around the corner is a Toys R Us where on the day we visited many things were being done right: face painting near the check-out and in the boys section you could build a wooden train engine. Across the aisle you could see first-hand how Barbie had evolved over the years. There were lots of things done just right.

Now tell me. At a store with a name like Toys R Us, what would you expect the response to be if you asked, "I have a five-year-old granddaughter who likes music and games. Can you tell me what would make her say wow this Christmas?" Or, "Do you have a list of the top-selling toys for five-year-old girls in various price ranges?" You'd think they would rattle off the information or perhaps just smile and hand you a printed list of suggestions. You'd think, but you'd be wrong.

And it's not just the big chains. A few blocks down the street I asked, "What do you have for my son who is in his mid-thirties and seems to own everything? Any recommendations?"

"Look around." (Be still my heart!)

I saw a locked display case that contained miniature radio-controlled cars.

"What's this?" I asked as I rattled the glass, in case I was wrong about the display being locked.

"Those are the next big thing in radio-controlled models," droned Mr. Personality.

"Cool! Do you have a demo model? I'd like to see one in action."

"No."

"I bet if you had a demo model, you'd sell these by the dozen."

"Maybe." Then he added just so he could be right, "They seem to be selling pretty good without the demo." I bought one anyway. When I got to the car and thought what my son would do with one hot radio-controlled car, I returned to the store and bought a second. Mr. Happy took my second 45 bucks. As I turned to leave, he looked over the top of his glasses and managed to say, "See?"

Here are a few questions for you: What questions do your customers have that perhaps aren't being answered? Why would you take the time to hire (forget train!) employees who are going to send customers to your competition with unanswered questions? What could you do to anticipate customer questions? How could you get the customer so involved with the product that it would sell itself?

Thinking Point

How could you make your sales process more proactive without being high pressured?