

Follow the Leader

Pursue customer relationships that enable you to follow up your current deal with future sales. By Rick Davis



Rick Davis is president of Building Leaders, Inc., a Chicago-based sales training organization. 773.769.4409. E-mail: rickdavis@buildingleaders.com

Reports from the last few months validate our worst fears for the industry. Just when we thought it could not get worse, it has. Threats to business are so prevalent that salespeople readily accept questionable sales opportunities at reduced margins. But challenging economic times do not mean sacrificing your sales vision. This is the perfect time to concurrently and proactively seek accounts with long-term benefits.

A great Sales Leader recognizes that every opportunity should provide follow-up—not the type that you dot your I's and cross your T's and ensure that you delivered what was promised (although that's certainly important), but rather the pursuit of sales that will automatically present follow-up opportunities.

Consider Sandy, a kitchen sales specialist who felt that homeowners were a waste of her time because they were merely one-time customers that offered no repeat business. She didn't consider the follow-up opportunities with the contractor and designer. In essence, she was leaving opportunities on the table because she didn't completely understand the client's construction process.

After attending one of my seminars, Sandy told me that her approach with homeowners improved dramatically by considering follow-up opportunities with contractors and architects. Rather than simply focus on the sales, Sandy started to ask every homeowner that walked

through the door for information about his or her contractor so she could cultivate relationships with businesses that provided long-term sales growth and stability. She later started to learn about the homeowner's designer, again in an effort to generate more follow-up leads.

Your sales mission should be to seek opportunities that create opportunities. Consider these angles:

1. Evaluate Future Sales Potential.

A young salesman was engrossed in preparing a proposal for 200 windows on a condo rehab project. The manager calmly noted that this was not the type of customer the salesman should pursue, calling the client a "homeowner" that would never buy windows again after this project. The salesman concluded that this deal wasn't a good follow-up sales opportunity. The moral: Rather than hunt for one-time projects from homeowners and commercial projects, consider that even a smaller sale from a repeat purchaser might provide more stable business.

2. Back Into Big Opportunities.

As more LBM dealers recognize the importance of cross-selling, the common practice for salespeople is to strive for a top-down sales progression in which a primary product, like lumber or millwork, launches the relationship. But the problems that builders often face in the market are with secondary items: exterior trim, fireplaces, insulation, and the like. Rather than push a product to a builder that is wholly satisfied with its supplier, discover the areas in which the builder needs the most help, even the little items. The small sale can launch a big relationship.

3. Find Cooperative Negotiators.

Salespeople nationwide lament the state of negotiations in the industry. It is evident that price competition is heating up, and combative negotiations are more prevalent than ever. But this should not blind a salesperson to what virtue there is; many prospects and clients continue to be compromising, even cooperative negotiators. The work is in finding them.

This crisis provides the chance to shine as a sales hero. But you have to work to stand out from the average performers that are waiting for a market change to save them. There are good clients out there, and finding them will take work. That is the job of selling. Work to find new follow-up opportunities, and you will discover that you can still make a difference to your company in the tough times. ■