

By Rick Davis

Taking Aim at Prospects:
Aside from being arguably
the best building mate-
rial sales rep in America,
Jackie Allmond also has
become an accomplished
skeet shooter who can
hold his own against pro-
fessional competition.



Top Gun

Who's the best LBM sales rep in America? We're putting our money on Jackie Allmond.

At 7:15 on a south Georgia summer morning, the sun is beaming and so is “Cowboy” Jackie Allmond as he stands in the parking lot of Choo Choo Build-It Mart’s Rincon yard. With 50 tasks on his to-do list, Allmond knows he’s going to be busy today. But he can’t dive in just yet: a fellow salesman has stopped Allmond seeking his advice on hurricane-rated floor fasteners, an important commodity in this coastal market.

Allmond doesn’t dismiss the salesman’s request with a hurried reply. Instead, he leads the man inside to show the exact piece he should offer the builder.

Top Gun



Command Center: The inside of Jackie Allmond's pickup truck is a veritable office on wheels. There's a laptop stand for his portable tablet-style computer, a top-of-the-line GPS navigation system, and a telephone stand. But Allmond also knows how to calculate things the old-fashioned way, such as with a ruler.

Only after providing technical advice does he move to his office, get organized, and prepare to take off in his tricked-out red Ford F-150 pickup for a day of deal-making.

I'm riding shotgun with the Cowboy today to help verify what I already suspect: Jackie Allmond may be the best outside sales rep in the LBM business. That's near-impossible to prove, I know, in part because yardsticks like total sales and share of market are pretty much useless given the vast differences between dealers and between markets.

But I also know this: In the decade I have spent running LBM sales seminars across the country, personally traveling with more than 200 sales reps, meeting thousands of other salesmen and hearing stories about yet thousands more, I have never met or heard of anyone at any LBM dealer anywhere who sells better than Cowboy. Over the course of this and several other days, Allmond's work habits, technical and technological savvy, and above all his organization and attention to detail proved to me that he's The One.

Take that to-do list. Like many sales-

men, Allmond keeps a running list of action items on a notepad. But unlike most, his notepad is a tablet computer in which he not only keeps a prioritized master list but also organizes his schedule into 18 subfolders, categorized by such topics as First Things, Orders To Place, Phone Calls, and Delegated Items. "You've got to put your personal items in there too or they won't get done," he adds. On this day, that Personal folder includes the need for new windshield wipers.

As a result, Allmond gets more done in his work week (typically 60 hours, he says) than other reps I've watched. Equally important, he attacks that to-do list in an organized, prioritized fashion.

"I have three categories of urgency," he notes. "Hot, meaning do it now; Normal, meaning get it done today; and the rest." Thus, on a day when he has over 50 tasks eventually to be accomplished, he is able to isolate and focus on the critical items of the day.

"I hate to say that I run an emergency room," he says. "But if you have a bee sting, I'll tell you to sit in the corner while I deal with the guy that is stuck beneath a tractor that tipped over on him."

Eye on the Target

That ability to focus on the now shows up often in Allmond's life. Four years after taking up skeet shooting as a hobby, he's competing against professional marksmen. At a recent competition, he shot 99 targets out of 100 (including 95 in a row) with a .410-gauge shotgun, the most challenging classification. When he decided he wanted to play guitar at age 8, his father, an accomplished musician in his own right, taught him the fundamentals. Allmond played that first night until his fingers blistered.

His intensity to succeed is the same at work. While reviewing his plans for the day, a trim carpenter popped in unexpectedly to discuss some upcoming jobs. He and Jackie bantered for a while as Southerners do before getting down to business. Even then the conversation seemed casual, but when the client left, Jackie swung into action. He jotted notes onto his computer tablet, highlighting in color the prices he quoted so they could be easily referenced later. He then inserted a to-do item on his task list.

Allmond also has developed an estimating spreadsheet he has preformatted to address a variety of construction plans, thus enabling him to create a quote sheet quicker than most. The spreadsheet includes a template that lists every possible product he might need on a particular job, helping assure he misses no materials. The tool also contains a template by which he ensures all materials are provided and clients can easily plan their projects.

Because of that spreadsheet, he believes his quotes are accurate to about 2%, and would be ashamed if they are off 5%. Most sales reps I've met can't make the same claim.

Years of practice have helped him create numerous tricks of which most lumber people are unaware. For example, he created a chart that he keeps next to his blueprint table to provide multipliers for dimensions of truss components based on the length of a roof joist. "It's just trigonometry," he declares. No big deal.

A phone call asking Allmond about an entry door ordered six months earlier gives Cowboy another chance to show his hand with technology. Within a minute, he has the details. In fact, he can tell you about every purchase order he's taken back to 2005 and every quote he's made since 2000, when he designed the estimating system.

"That's a task I'll deal with later," he says of the entry door call, his eyes focused on his computer screen. "It's not as hot as other things I need to do today so I'll get that done later in the week." Now it's time to make the rounds

in the Choo Choo facility here 20 miles northwest of Savannah.

He checks on deliveries, coordinates service calls, and spends time with Debbie Williams, his assistant. Williams processes orders, works with manufacturers, and schedules service, but Allmond insists on placing the orders directly with suppliers. Every unnecessary link in the communication chain increases the likelihood the message will get garbled, he believes. But that's not to say he won't rely on others. He just makes sure he and people like his operations manager, Shane Belcher, are completely in tune when it comes to sales planning, attention to detail, and customer service.

The ABCs of the Close

As with other top salespeople I have met, Allmond has trouble explaining how he closes a deal. That's in large part because these folks don't really "close" in anything resembling an all-or-nothing moment of confrontation with the customer. Rather, folks like Allmond base their sales success and closing skills on all the preparatory work they do and their ability to find the right resources for his clients. In essence, Cowboy doesn't sell products so much as he helps his clients make money.

His newest client, the builder of a project with over 200 lots, was seeking a special color of vinyl window for his upcoming development of homes. Allmond knew he couldn't provide a vinyl window to match the color specifications, and the builder was concerned using wood windows would trigger a dramatic budget overrun.

Allmond confidently asserted the extra cost should be passed onto the home buyers with an appropriate markup. He demonstrated how the builder could sell the upgraded product as an attractive feature. The result was a sale not only for the windows, but for the lumber and millwork as well.

Allmond could make his argument because he did the research needed to speak in a language builders will understand. He did that the usual ways—by reading literature, attending seminars

and engaging in technical dialogue with his clients.

That dialogue occurs over the roughly 40,000 miles Allmond drives each year in a 75-mile radius around Rincon in a well-kept red Ford F-150 pickup truck with 397,000 miles on it. (He put a new engine in at 393,578 miles, asking: "Why waste a good truck?"). Inside, Allmond has tricked it out with a portable control center: a laptop stand for his computer tablet, top-of-the-line GPS navigation system, telephone stand and blue tooth receiver. But Allmond is not about technology for technology's sake. He also has a small collection of archaic Motorola flip phones that enable him to replace the parts on the obsolete model he uses. "You've got make the technology work for you so you can do what is important," he says.

And don't think of him as a geek, either, for Allmond also is a people person. He knows the value of making a memorable impression—wearing a cowboy hat in south-east Georgia is a good way to be recognized—and when he sets down his 6-foot-1 frame, looks you in the eye and starts telling a story, you end up wanting to hear more. But even when it seems Allmond is there just to shoot the breeze, he's moving toward a goal.

"Jackie knows what I need," says long time client Freddie Long, the son a builder Allmond first conducted business with more than 30 years ago. "Some salespeople just show up, hang around, ask if they can bid on something and I don't have time for that," Long notes. "Jackie doesn't waste my time."

Bob Roche has been a custom home builder for decades and first did business with Allmond in the early 1980s. When Roche was working on a recent marketing campaign he needed an extra set of hands in his office. Allmond was the man he called. "My printing service sent mailers much before I expected them.

Why Allmond's a Joy

What makes Jackie Allmond so good? Salesmanship consultant Rick Davis sees these five traits that place Allmond above even the exceptional outside sales rep:

■ **Organization.** Allmond created a system enabling him to attack what matters most but not forget the other stuff, and when he needs to call up details he can get them in a flash.

■ **Technical Expertise.** Allmond not only knows his products, he knows how they should work. He can perform some tasks related to planning a building better than most builders.

■ **Use of Technology.** Allmond has turned computers and related technology into sales tools. But he's not a gearhead; if an older product works best for him, he'll keep it going.

■ **Philosophy.** Homespun aphorisms roll off Allmond's tongue regularly. Some are funny, some seem slight, but beneath the surface virtually all are profound.

■ **Direction.** Allmond knows where he is going with his career and his life.

They were already dated and put me under pressure to get them out immediately. Jackie eagerly came to my office to stuff and stamp envelopes."

Choo Choo won't let us report Allmond's exact sales figures, but we can say that this year they're in the upper single-digit millions. But that matters less than two other numbers. First, Allmond not only ranks annually in the top two of the several dozen working at Choo Choo Build-It Mart, his share of total sales is several times bigger than the company's typical rep. And second, Allmond's sales totals are down just 15% from their highs in 2004, back when production was going crazy and wood prices were stratospheric.

The business environment definitely has changed for Allmond over the years. But you only know the half of it.

Bumpy Road to the Top

Allmond's drive to success has included a lot of swerving and a few crashes in the 54 years since he was born in

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Georgia Cowboy: Jackie Allmond took up wearing a cowboy hat several years ago and now is seen just about all the time with it. That makes him a rarity in south Georgia—and thus more memorable.

Swainsboro, another small south Georgia town. Allmond's father, Carlton "Jack" William Almond, ran a barber shop and adored his wife Carrie. Jackie gave them plenty to worry about.

By age 15, he says, he was a regular guitarist in a local rock band and had a charge account at a bar. By 18, he was hustling people at pool with his gang, an unsavory group overly familiar with violence.

Carrie became so distraught by her son's drinking that, at the suggestion of doctors, she started sipping wine to calm her nerves and get to sleep. The slip into alcoholism came with astounding speed. On a sunny afternoon in 1974, Jack Allmond came home from lunch to find his wife burned across 90% of her body. Son Jackie supposes it probably was because she left a frying pan unattended to get a drink, returned, saw flames, tried to take the pan outside, and ended up spilling the hot grease on her body. Six days later, Carrie was dead. Jackie says he still bears strong guilt for the distress that led to his mother's alcoholism.

The troubles didn't end, though. Also in 1974, Jackie was arrested a second time for attempted murder. Luckily for Allmond, the judge knew his family, Jackie says, so he sentenced Allmond to

seven years of probation instead of jail time, provided he got a job and kept it

Allmond fulfilled his sentence by getting a job at Lowe's in 1975 as a truck driver. He earned an electronics degree Swainsboro Technical College and thought of doing something technical, but his employer persuaded him to stay and gave him a job managing the loading docks.

In 1982, Allmond took a job in sales at Savannah Lumber. For most of the next 15 years, he remained in lumber sales. For all of those years, he drank.

His turnaround began about the time Allmond landed a sales job at Choo Choo Build-It Mart in 1996. His drinking problems were now beginning to affect his health and a doctor warned him of severe consequences. So, on Dec. 31, 1997, he simply decided it was time to stop drinking. His last libation was at 11:45 p.m. and he says he hasn't touched a drop since.

Ask Allmond about his younger days and what he learned from them and you don't get much of a reply. But in hearing his stories and watching him today, one can see two traits that help explain why he has become such a good salesman. We've already noted his powers of concentration and organization. The second is his acceptance that what's past is past and that it's the present and future that count.

One day while I visited him at his home along the Ogeechee River, the water had run up to nearly flood level. But Allmond didn't fret. After all, he says, he had waterproofed the first eight feet of the house. Besides, it was just a house.

"This life isn't for the faint of heart," he says.

Cultivating the Fields

Custom builders used to be Allmond's bread and butter. His territory includes wealthy areas like Hilton Head, S.C., but for the most part his customers build relatively modest homes: the median price for a house in Savannah these days is around \$135,000.

Like everyone in the LBM industry, Allmond was affected by the economic

downturn. Unlike most, he had the foresight to prepare. It began by recognizing things were getting out of hand.

"I knew I was in trouble the day I drove by a subdivision without stopping to see what was happening," he recalls. I would have never done that earlier in my career and realized that something was wrong. I was taking business for granted." He made an effort to stop by subdivisions and get names of builders. He networked with the subcontractors and architects he knew in order to build an arsenal of sales leads that would get him through the tough times, keeping all of his contact information in a computer database.

His prospecting and networking efforts have paid off by yielding a diverse client base. By day's end, the trim carpenter with whom he exchanged barbs earlier in the morning will provide orders for six multi-unit dwellings. Roche still caters to the custom home market, and Allmond is working with remodelers as well. This wide base not only keeps him going better than most in hard times but sets him up to really do well once the economy recovers.

He also has the memory of his one-time co-worker and mentor, Richard North, to inspire him. He recounts the day he visited North's home on a day after North had retired.

"I told his wife what he meant to me," Allmond says. "I told her that he 'just knew' when he looked at a blueprint what had to be done. He was dependable. People looked up to him and respected his advice, and I decided then to model my life after him."

"Let me tell you," he says. "There is a big difference between knowing it and doing it."

Jackie Allmond is doing it. He provides a powerful reminder that, if you want to overcome big challenges, there are no substitutes for organization, empathy and hard work. He has much to teach any salesperson who wants to succeed. —Rick Davis is president of *Building Leaders Inc.*, a Chicago-based sales training organization. He writes the "Sell Sheet" column in each issue of *ProSALES*.