

Silence Sells

By Mark E. Gabriel

The image of the fast-talking salesman who has a ready answer for every question and always one more reason you should buy comes readily to mind for most of us. But did you know more sales are made by saying nothing?

Silence is not only the golden rule; it is the rule that makes you gold. Most business owners feel awkward when placed in sales situations. When asked why, most respond "I don't know what to say," Most of us stammer on, trying to answer unasked questions and fill in gaps where the customer is silent. Since silence tends to make us uncomfortable we just jabber on to no real point rather than suffer any lull in the conversation.

Fear of silence, fear of not knowing what to say, causes us to feel awkward and lose sales. We feel awkward because we do know what our goal is. Then we blame it on not being "a good talker". If the goal is to result in a sale, what we have to say takes a back seat to what the customer has to say. *The key is not talking, but asking questions and knowing when to say nothing at all.* Don't confuse being a "good talker" with being a good salesman. Being a good listener is more important than talking-and easier, too. But how do you make sales by being a good listener?

First of all, get out of your mind the concern with what you have to say. Although there is an endless list of books about sales, what it all comes down to is two people talking to one another. Start out by being friendly and courteous-"Good Morning. How are you today?" is a great start. This is a comfortable start to any sales situation, and much better than the tired "Can I help you?" heard so often (and which results in the equally automatic "No-I'm just looking.") Ask general questions to get the customer talking to you. Ask "Is this your first time to this store?" If you are selling a service, ask "How long have you been using this service?" Spend a minute just connecting with the customer before "getting down to business".

Now, that wasn't hard, was it? Now that you and your customer have taken a moment to stop and talk to one another, after exchanging pleasantries, it is time to move forward. Since there is very little chance you are going to guess what it is the customer wants, don't even try. Now is the time to start asking questions. Why not ask an open-ended question such as "What brings you to my store today?" Wait for their answer! Here silence is more important than talking. Imagine asking the customer what they want by listing everything you have to offer! The customer will tell you what you need to know about what it is they are looking for or having a problem with. Just wait-even if it takes a while. Remember that silence makes them uncomfortable, too; if you stay quiet they will eventually talk first.

Remember, you probably don't want to be a salesman and your customer almost certainly does not what to be sold! Resist the temptation to start talking and asking for a sale right away. Most of us like to buy, though. Help your customer to find what best suits their needs, and they will not have to be sold.

Asking your customer questions engages the customer, reveals their needs, and guides what you say next. It is important to engage the customer in the process of learning their wants and needs and discovering how your product or service will fulfill them. Open-ended questions like "What kind of lawnmower do you currently have?" or "How do you use your computer?" will give you the general areas of interest-a new product, a replacement for one that has worn out, etc. Your goal should be to get the customer talking about their wants and needs-you listen and respond by asking follow up questions that will help you to offer the right product or service to fit the customer's needs. If the customer says, "I have a problem with my computer" you would respond by saying, "Many people do! What problem are you having?" "I can't get my printer to print pictures," your customer responds. Knowing that you offer a wide variety of printers capable of printing pictures, you might answer "Do you print black and white, or color?" to narrow down the choices. Your questions follow their answers. You do not have to worry about having nothing to say because you are only responding to what the customer says.

By engaging your customer in a conversation like this, you will be listening to what they have to say and discovering their needs. Customers, like all of us, like to be heard! Ask enough questions, and your customer will talk themselves into the sale without your needing to "be a good talker". Be yourself-just listen, ask questions, be quiet and listen, and the golden rule will pay off.

Mark E. Gabriel has worked in sales since 1989, obtaining accounting clients. He has given a number of presentations at Comprehensive Accounting's National Sales Seminars and for local business groups. His articles have seen both web and print publication. For more information please go to www.comprehensiveacctg.com *This article may be freely distributed as long as it is unchanged and contains this biography box.*