

Don't sell. Help.

A new sales tactic for a new era

By Tom Wadsworth, CDDC

Here's my latest advice for salespeople in the garage door and gate industry.

Don't sell. Help.
Let me explain.

I love Ace Hardware.

I walk into Ace with a problem. When I see the red vest of the "helpful hardware man," I know that my problem will be handled correctly.

He won't bother me with chitty-chat schmoozing. He won't try to sell me anything. He won't steer me to the expensive stuff—unless I want it. Even though he's not trying to sell me, he gets the sale every time.

Sure, Ace is more expensive than the big box store. But the personal attention and the knowledgeable *help* are well worth it.

Several years ago, when Walmart built a new superstore only two miles away, many wondered if the local Ace would survive. But Ace thrived. They even had to expand their property, knock down walls, and double their floor space.

Conversely, I hate new car dealers.

As soon as I step into their showroom, I know the vultures will quickly descend. A couple of them may actually have a brief skirmish before the winning vulture glides up to me for the kill.

Frankly, I don't trust what they say or do. I hold my nose the entire time I'm there. As soon as I step out their door, I exhale a gust of disgust.

Don't sell. Help.

This concept is not new, but its viability is greatly enhanced by our current media culture.

Thanks to the internet, most people no longer need to deal with slick salespeople. We can buy almost anything online without any interference from some commission-seeking sales guy.

Online, we can instantly read detailed product information, look at photos and videos, and scan customer reviews. On our phones!

Since the pushy salesperson is almost obsolete today, the typical North American consumer is spoiled. Consumers now have zero tolerance for anything "salesy." That hatred even extends to include most advertising.



"Banner blindness"

"Traditional marketing will no longer cut it," said analyst Daniel Newman in a recent Forbes article about new research on millennials (people born between 1982 and 2004).

"In an age where information is shared instantaneously, the millennial generation is incredibly adept at filtering out everything except what they want."

A 2016 Harris Poll revealed that 74 percent of 16- to 39-year-olds object to being singled out by brands on social media sites. More than half of these millennials have reduced or quit using social media. Why? Advertisements.

In other words, people today hate salesiness *so much*, they even try to rid themselves of exposure to advertising. This hatred is so tangible, online advertisers are now acquainted with a phenomenon called "banner blindness." It means that people consciously or unconsciously don't even see online ads any more.

They want content. They want helpful information. They don't want to be sold.

Do no evil

Google recognized this massive aversion to salesiness from the get-go. Google's 2004 IPO contained its much-lauded manifesto: "Don't be evil. We believe strongly that in the long term, we will be better served ... by a company that does good things for the world even if we forgo some short-term gains."

To the modern generation, slick sales techniques and intrusive ads fall into the category of, well, *evil*. And if they think *ads* are evil, what will they think of *sales pitches*?

Google's zeal to help—not sell—is a key reason why it has become such a global power today. Throughout its early years, Google thoroughly devoted itself to helping people and providing incredibly useful and free services. And they earned our trust.

Facebook, too, understands the tricky task of providing helpful free services while offering enough non-offensive advertising to keep the business going. The result: 1,000,000,000 users every day.

Teach, don't sell.

In the last few years, a similar sales slogan has started to catch on among sales and marketing gurus. "Teach, don't sell" springs from the same reality of today's anti-sales consumer.

"Nobody wants your marketing," said Brian Sutter in a 2016 article in Forbes. "We're all up to our ears in advertising and marketing. We see 3,000 to 20,000 ads and brand messages per day."

Instead, he said, you can be "sales agnostic," but you can still get the sale. The idea is to provide the consumer with helpful information.

"As soon as you lapse into selling ... their suspicions will rise," he said.

As with Google and Facebook, the idea for garage door salespeople is to build a loyal audience and to avoid being salesy. "They don't want a whiff of sales pitch," he added.

"The goal of a marketing interaction isn't to close the sale, any more than the goal of a first date is to get married," said Seth Godin, the trendy author and entrepreneur.

"No, the opportunity is to move forward, to earn attention and trust and curiosity and conversation."

Teaching vs. helping

Teaching is a good approach for a garage door salesperson. When a customer calls, be the teacher who shares helpful information about R-values and U-factors, steel gauge, color options, cost vs. value, and especially curb appeal.

But I prefer *helping* to *teaching*. Teaching can be condescending, and it takes a certain amount of skill and savvy that you might not possess.

Plus, a teacher can approach the task from the wrong motivation. Teachers can seek to sell you, display their great knowledge, and sometimes bash competitors.

Not cool. Especially to millennials.

Helping is better

But a helping approach sets your heart in the right place. You simply want to *help the customer*.

While not everyone can be a teacher, almost *anyone* can be a helper. Helping is more an attitude of the heart than a skill of your personality.

To be a helper, you must ask about the customer's needs. *Why do you want a new door (or opener)? What didn't you like about the old one? How often do you use it? Do you have living space above the garage? What colors or styles would blend in nicely with your home exterior?*

The un-helpful hardware man

A helping salesperson is the opposite of Bad Bob, who is only out to help himself. A \$700 hardware overhaul might help your bottom line, but it doesn't help the *customer's* bottom line. You might have just forced him to miss a mortgage payment.

Sure, you might justify hardware overhauls as somehow "helping the customer," but I'm 100 percent sure that *you yourself wouldn't pay that price*. In this case, you are *not* the helpful "hardware man."

Your competitive advantage

Helping also gives you a competitive advantage.

Let's face it. You probably have competitors who have some advantages over you. Perhaps they're bigger businesses or have nicer trucks. They might be known for lower prices. Maybe they carry a kind of door or opener that you don't have.

But if you're like the *real* "helpful hardware man," your customers will only want to do business with *you*. They know that you'll help them. They trust you.

Your helpfulness becomes your greatest competitive advantage. A helpful garage door salesperson earns gushing Yelp reviews and, more importantly, *repeat business*.

Don't sell. Help. ■

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