

Eat your broccoli

“The customer is always right!” is an adage that few salespeople challenge. Business literature is filled with stories of people who bent over backwards to cater to the desires of their customers. While I agree with the motivation behind this type of thinking, practical experience has taught me that when it comes to advertising “The customer is seldom right!” Before I get burned at the stake for heresy let me explain myself.

Customers are experts in their field. They know everything there is to know about insurance, tires, plumbing or whatever else it is that they sell or do. This is why people pay them for what they do. Left to their own devices, most customers will not be able to develop an effective program that communicates the message they want to deliver to potential shoppers. Running their business and keeping current in their field keeps them busy 24/7, they do not have time to become advertising experts – that’s our job. That’s why we get paid for what we do. I am a professional. Do not try this at home!

All of us hate to spend our hard earned money. Business people are no different than the rest of us and this Scrooge McDuck tendency clouds their thinking. They want to live in a fantasy world where customers grow on trees and elves fill their cash register every night. A world where they don’t need to advertise and no competitors are out to win their customers away from them. I may be exaggerating a bit (just a little) but what most business people want to believe is that if they buy an occasional small ad it will bring in hordes of customers. Of course, to really get their money’s worth, they need to cram every possible bit of information about their business-products, prices, hours, coupon and the names of all their employees’ children and grandchildren – into a 2-inch ad.

Someone who gives the customer what they want is not a professional salesperson (an honorable title in my book) but just an order-taker. They do their customers a disservice by letting them waste their resources on ineffective programs. Anyone who has children knows they *want* the ice cream but a responsible parent knows they *need* their broccoli. You can’t make a prospect sit at the dinner table until they buy an effective program but here are some things you can do to convince them to eat their marketing veggies.

Educate yourself – Ask good questions to learn as much as you can about the customer’s business, their customers and their goals. This knowledge will help you to develop effective ads and to design effective programs. When you make your recommendation, use this information to present your recommendation in terms of how it will help them to realize their goals.

Educate your customer – The more the customer knows the more they will be willing to spend. A novice golfer will buy the cheapest set of clubs available at Wal-Mart; an experienced golfer will go to a pro shop and spend hundreds on a single club. To the novice a club is a club-to the aficionado the expense of a good club is justified because of the advantage the better club will give them over the competition. The more your client understands about the advantages your publication offers, the more willing they will be to listen to you and to invest in an effective program.

Think long term not short – Starting with your first call, talk about their long-term goals. Remind them that they are in business for the long haul and that their advertising should reflect this. Recently, I was with a rep whose customer wanted to do a one time ad. The rep told the prospect to use the money to take his wife out to dinner because a single ad would not accomplish his goal. The customer was surprised by this response and went on to purchase a 13 week program. We know that frequency is one of the keys to an effective program, allowing a customer to run a one shot ad is trading a quick commission check for any chance of building a long-term relationship. In most cases, a one shot ad will not produce measurable results and will confirm the client’s opinion that “advertising doesn’t work”.

Sell advertising not space – You know a cluttered ad will not be effective. You know a good headline enhances response. Use this expertise and take charge of the design and content of your customer’s ads. If the customer insists on doing the ads themselves, have the ad redone and show them the difference. They may not know how to do a strong ad but they usually recognize a good ad when they see it. I often tell customers “I would never claim any knowledge of plumbing (or whatever else they do), you’re the expert when it comes to that. My business is advertising and I like to think I’m good at it. If we take your knowledge of your business and put it together with my knowledge of mine, I’m sure we’ll end up with some great ads” Ads are your stock and trade, take pride in what you send out to the public.

Think value not price – Customers talk about price because price is easily understood. Everybody knows what a dollar is worth. You need to focus on value-what the customer gets for that dollar. Value is a much more complicated concept. You need to remind the customer that what they are buying is a secure future for their business. A buck is worth a buck, but customers are priceless. Whenever you or the prospect brings up price, you need to turn the conversation to a discussion of value, what they are getting for their money. One of the definitions of value is “desirability”. If you show the client the value, how desirable your publication is, they will find the money to pay your price.

Stand by your plan – If you base your recommendations on your knowledge of the business and truly believe that what you are proposing is in the best interest of



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your client, it is your responsibility to defend it when the client objects. If you back down immediately, the client will question your belief and sincerity. If it is a good program, you may just have to explain it to the customer more clearly. Find out what the true objection is. Is it truly price or does the customer doubt the value offered. I sometimes ask customers "What is most important to you, price or the response to the ad?" If the customer persists you may have to drop back to "Plan B" but don't let them go there without a fight.

When we go in for a checkup, we want to hear: "You need to eat more sweets, skip the gym and spend more time watching TV" but our doctors are likely to tell us just the opposite. Our physicians do this because they are trained professionals dedicated to telling us what we need to do to stay healthy. As professional advertising salespeople, we should be dedicated to telling our customers what they need to do to keep their businesses healthy. Like everywhere else in life, the path of least resistance is tempting, but we need to push our clients to do what is best for their business. This will help you to build your customer base (customers with good programs tend to stick around) and will allow you to hold your head high at the end of the day.