

# YOU CAN ALWAYS SELL MORE ...

## ***“You Can Always Sell More...When You Can Keep Your Customers Away From Your Competitors”***

by Jim Pancero

I got the idea for this month's discussion while I was waiting yesterday for my car to be serviced at my local car dealership. As I sat there waiting for my oil to be changed I realized what a truly exposed customer I was to this dealership.

I bought a car from them five years ago. The not very impressive salesman who sold me the car is no longer with the dealership. His sales manager has only talked with me once and that was to just shake my hand and to thank me for the business when I signed for the car. A few months after my sales rep left the dealership to become a real estate agent I did get a single voicemail message from a woman who introduced herself as my new sales rep, but we've never talked. The only contact since then has been for her to send me a birthday card each year hoping I make it a "special day."

For the last several years my only connection and communication with this dealership has been with their service advisors who write up my service work. I have a good relationship with the service people, they do a good job. But frankly that's what I'd expect from any dealer selling this expensive a car. I have no other relationship with anyone in sales at this dealership, and some time in the next 12 to 24 months I plan on buying a new car.

So how strong is my loyalty to this dealer? The reality is I have no loyalty, I feel no connection, so when it's time for me to start shopping for my new car I will definitely shop all three dealerships selling the same make of car I like and who're all within 20 miles of my downtown Minneapolis home.

Because of a salesperson's lack of initiative and attention this dealership has at best exposed themselves to more aggressive negotiations since I'll now be talking to three dealerships and at worst they might lose me as a customer.

### **So How Does All Of This Relate To You And Your Territory?**

So how does all of this relate to you and your territory? Do you have any customers like me? Ones who, because of a lack of attention and interest, are now exposed to your competitors? How many of your current or recent customers right now would consider themselves under-supported or ignored by your company?

One of the best ways to grow your revenues and territory is to not lose business you already have. How often are you contacting your existing customers? Do you have any systems or efforts in place to identify old or lower volume customers who might be interested in new or expanded buying?

Too many times we as salespeople only focus our attentions on those who are almost ready to buy. And once they buy we then "park" them with reactive support and service only responding when they complain or ask for help.

What kind of ongoing support processes do you and your company have in place? Do you have any type of formal or informal plan and tracking system helping you initiate some kind of proactive contact or offer of assistance on some type of regular basis based on their size and importance to your company?

### **Supporting Your Larger (And More Important) Customers**

The most important group to evaluate first are your largest, and most important customers. There are four types of ongoing support efforts you can be offering - how many of these are you initiating with your best customers on some type of ongoing basis?

**Ongoing Selling** - The first, and most common ongoing customer support efforts involve the salesperson working to sell more “stuff.” This is the traditional selling effort of working to sell more products or services to an ongoing and existing customer.

Though critical to your long term stability and growth with this customer, these types of ongoing efforts to sell more doesn't do much to strengthen your long term relationships with this customer or to prove their importance to you and your future. It's hard as a customer to believe you really care about me and my business if the only time you talk to me is when you want me to give you more money!

Next time you talk to your most important customers what questions can you ask, what suggestions or ideas can you offer, or what additional time can you take that can help strengthen your relationship by proving your interest in understanding their most pressing challenges and helping them improve their overall business?

**Ongoing Support/Technical Services** - The second most popular customer support involves the ongoing problem solving and support offered by your administrative, order entry and technical support teams. Ongoing support is critical to any business. Quality ongoing support also impresses customers but doesn't necessarily translate into overall loyalty to your company especially if your customers, like me with my car dealership, perceive the type of support being offered as standard to their buying expectations, and to your competitors

What can you do to help make your service and support team more sales aware and focused? The job of these support people is not to sell, but they are responsible for insuring their customers are happy and stable with the products or services they're buying from you and to help search out new or expanded selling opportunities.

**Executive Contact** - Just selling and supporting your customers is average stuff for most sales teams and is not likely to gain much of an advantage over your competition.

Your competitive advantage can be strengthened if you go the extra distance with your best customers. One way to help increase your value, relationships and customer loyalty is by getting your most senior management involved.

How often do you have one of your most senior executives initiate a conversation with one of your best accounts? These calls are not meant as sales calls and are best done when there're no outstanding customer problems or issues. The goal of these calls is to improve your company's relationship and connectivity with this customer. You want your executive asking questions like:

- “How are we doing?”
- “What do you like most about our products and relationship with your company?”
- “What would you most like to see us improve?”
- “What do you wish we were doing more of that you're already receiving from any of the other vendors you buy from?”
- “What can we do in the future that can help make us even more valuable and of benefit to you and your team?”

An executive is not a salesperson and is not supposed to sell on these calls. You don't want your executives “going for the close” or taking any power away from you as a front line salesperson. The role of an executive on this type of call is to receive feedback, offer support, thank them for their business and to learn, and share, longer term ideas that can help strengthen your relationship with this customer. Any selling efforts or ideas uncovered are then followed up by the sales rep when they go back into the account.

Customers tend to be impressed by these type of executive calls. What other managers besides your president or top executive can help by making these types of customer contacts?

**Proactive “Non-Selling” Help & Support** - The fourth and normally least utilized ongoing customer support effort involves your “non-selling” offers of help and support. The goal is to be doing something, anything ongoing that offers help for your customers involving more than just the purchase of your products or services.

Offering additional assistance that doesn't involve you selling anything is a way to help prove your professionalism and to show you're interested in more than just your customer's money.

Proactive “Non-selling” ideas can include publishing a monthly newsletter like this one. One of my clients has started a monthly “industry update” that's only sent to their most important top 30 accounts. Sent as a confidential e-mail, this brief monthly communications is written by the various executives of the company and offers opinions and insights into what they see happening to their very volatile materials supply availability and pricing.

DHL offers a monthly newsletter offering articles from various business experts, all aimed at helping their predominately small business customer base improve their business operations. Little in the DHL newsletter talks about shipping issues or the benefits of utilizing DHL.

Bridgestone/Firestone, like a lot of manufacturers who sell through independent dealers, offers free three day seminars for their dealer principals on how to best manage and grow their independent dealerships. Little is mentioned about tires in this dealer training.

A few weeks ago IndyMac Bank in Southern California became the largest regulated thrift to fail when it was taken over by the FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corp). One of my bank clients in the Southern California area immediately implemented a customer outreach effort. They had their managers and sales reps all contact their top customers to answer their questions, assure them their bank was stable and to make sure they had a contact name and number in case they had any additional questions or concerns in the future.

An animal feed supplier has a website that includes chat rooms that allow their customers to communicate with other producer/farmers asking questions and offering suggestions. They've established specific topic chat rooms to talk about the challenges of raising hogs, beef cattle, dairy, chickens and turkeys. Though their technical experts monitor and participate in the various chat rooms the majority of advice and ideas are offered by fellow farmers.

These types of extra support efforts will help contribute to your selling efforts and are great items to point out when presenting your “added value” services to prospects. But the major focus is to help and impress your current customers, especially your most important ones. You'll come across as more professional, more committed, and more interested in your customers and their business if you're doing anything to help that doesn't directly involve you selling them something.

The key here is whether these types of efforts are proactively initiated by you and your company or are just your reactive responses to demanding customers. You gain little if your customers have to request or demand these types of selling and support efforts. But you can help prove your competitive advantage and uniqueness when you're the one initiating these types of efforts.

What are you doing to help your customers - and to prove your interest and commitment to them? And are you doing more of this type of support than your competitors are right now?

### **Final Comments**

Each market is unique and every industry has different expectations from their vendors. How many of these ideas do fit your business? And how many of these types of ideas, if implemented, could help increase your competitive advantage and reputation within your markets?

I'm sure you've done a lot, if not most of these ideas at some time in your past. So now the question is how frequently are you doing these things, and could you increase the support and attitude your customers have about you if you did more of these types of efforts on a more frequent basis?

Success in today's more challenging and competitive markets is becoming more and more based on what you do that's above and beyond your competitors offerings. What can you be doing that can help increase your customer's connectivity with your company? And what else can you be doing that'll increase their loyalty and long term commitment to your business?

And unlike my local car dealership, are you even talking to all of your customers on a regular basis?

We know you're good, now the question is, are you good enough and committed enough to increase your support and reputation within your competitive markets?

Jim