



PATRICK D. WILLIAMS

THE PROFESSIONAL APPROACH

ON SELLING (OR BUYING) MERCHANDISE

I do not profess to be an expert on the techniques of selling in the shop. I do claim to be an expert in buying from the golf shop, because I have dropped a bundle to gain that kind of experience. Certainly, my experience has taught me something. So, this month, I'm going to focus on the golf shop, as seen through the eyes of a typical customer, taking into account his likes, his dislikes and his idiosyncrasies. I believe that by understanding the pro shop buyer, the professional will be able to understand how to sell, or even better, how to merchandise.

By tradition, there are two kinds of buyers: one who buys first and pays the retail price; the other, who takes the buying mistakes off the pro's hands, is the bargain buyer. In the final analysis, one is not better than the other, because both types have a place in economic trade. Most professionals would prefer that all their customers be in the total retail category, but things don't work out that way. So, the professional has to live with both types and cater to both. Finally, I must add that there always will be a goodly number of customers who never buy and probably never will. Naturally, the professional takes these people in stride; doesn't get too concerned about them; treats them with courtesy and respect and hopes someday that they will buy a package of tees or three balls or something.

The first impression a buyer receives as he walks into a pro shop is of the general physical layout. No customer will insist that a pro shop rank with Neiman-Marcus, but everyone would like to spend their money in a nice atmosphere. This first impression translates into—is the shop clean, organized and basically well-kept? If the shop looks sloppy or has no "sales eye appeal," I, as a customer, imme-

diately reject the thought of getting serious about spending my cash. In conjunction with this initial impression of neatness, is the corollary one of novelty. A store that always looks the same each time I visit it, becomes boring. Granted, a golf shop is the toughest kind of retail operation to change its impression visually, because customers may come in two, three or even four times a week. But changing it, even occasionally, must be done.

The second impression I receive as a buyer is the more important one of who is going to "sell" me something. As everyone knows, the right salesperson can overcome the physical deficiencies of any shop. The professional and his staff are the experts in determining what kind of person has just walked into the shop. Is he or she a retail buyer, a bargain hunter, a looker, or what? That judgement must be made immediately. Why? Because more sales are lost on the wrong opening sentence than for any other reason.

When my wife and I go shopping, we do so usually for one of two reasons. Either we are looking for places to spend money, or we are trying to find a specific item we need immediately. After we walk into a store and tell the salesperson we are "just looking," we expect him to stay away from us, to let us look around. If the salesperson hounds us, we will walk out. If, however, we have a specific item in mind, we'll tell that to the salesperson right away; then we expect to get the item immediately. If he tries to second sell us, we usually won't buy anything.

A tendency that I hope is not becoming a trend, is the blatant "I couldn't give a damn" attitude on the part of many salespeople. This attitude is intolerable and must be eliminated if it exists in the pro shop. The members at a club don't have to pay higher prices to get that kind of treatment;

they can go to the nearest discount store, and probably will.

The third impression I receive as a buyer is the available selection of merchandise offered in the shop. How many times have you seen men's clothes displayed prominently, in a really eye-catching way? You go into the shop eager to buy. All that is left are 48-longs and a pair of size 26 slacks. What happens? The customer gets angry, and disappointed. So, whatever merchandise is being sold in the pro shop, don't push it unless you have a good selection.

Product knowledge is the next impression. In the golf shop, this is unquestionably a key ingredient, because it separates you from the discount store. When a customer asks you about graphite shafts and you reply that graphite is what is in a lead pencil, the customer will leave. You must know the products you are selling. How many times have you asked a salesperson about a product, and he has to go look it up, or he tells you to read the instructions attached to the item. Too many times, I bet.

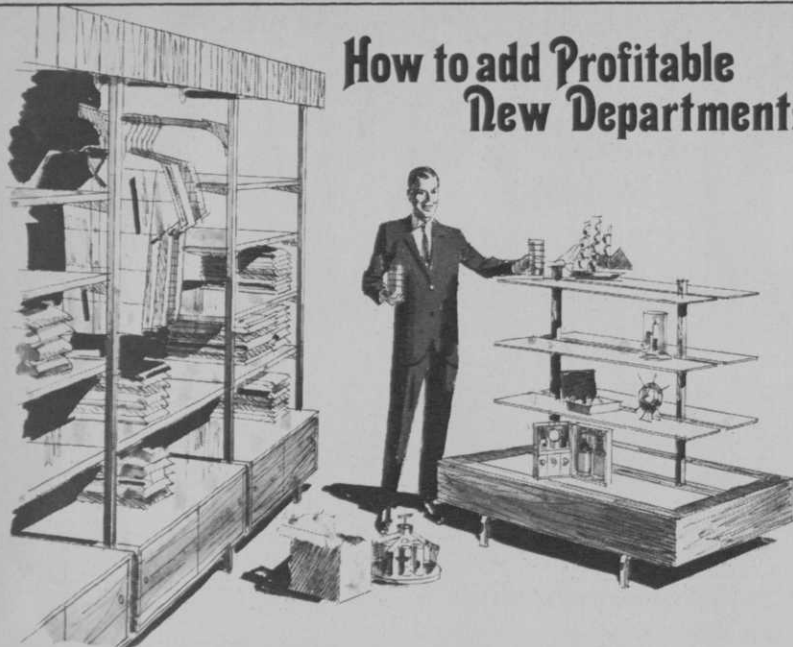
How about the impression the customer receives about the length of time consumed in winding up the sale? I've been in stores that would not take certified travelers checks, but would allow me to open a charge account and to charge the sale. I've also been in stores that "almost" would not take cash.

When people have made up their minds to buy something, they do not want a bundle of roadblocks to jump over. Make the paying easy, regardless of what method you use in the shop.

Finally, what about the over-all impression of the place? Are the people as nice and helpful immediately after the sale as they were during it, or are they now thinking about the next sale? Did they wrap up the item or fix it so it

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was convenient to carry? Did they take my name and address so they can call me when something comes in that I might want? Did they leave me with a feeling that they really enjoyed selling me something? These "little things" are very important to the rank and file customer. The antithesis of this impression was observed by me at a discount store in Kansas City, Mo. I quote a sign over the cash register: "We don't bag, wrap, sack or tie it. You bought it—you haul it."

The final impression is the one created when the customer comes back with the stuff because something is wrong with it. Now is the time when the professional has to be the champion of all champions, because you have the customer's money and he has your defective merchandise. The battle lines have been drawn. Here's an example of what not to do: I bought recently a color television as a gift for someone. At the time of the sale, I asked the salesperson if the set had been checked out. His answer was definitely yes, without question. Following the buyer beware principle, I plugged the set in when I got home. Not only was there no color, but the channels did not come in on the corresponding numbers on the selector dial. When I returned the set one hour after buying it, I was told to put the set in the shop, and I could get it back in a week or 10 days. Because my column is rated G, not X, I cannot quote here where I told them they could put the set.

Your attitude toward a customer when he returns defective merchandise either pushes him out the door or makes him a customer for life.

Earlier, I mentioned two types of buyers. The bargain hunter expects the same treatment and conditions as the full-retail buyer. Keep in mind that even at a bargain price, he really thinks you are still making too much money. The other side of this coin is that he is taking something off your hands. Treat him as you would your best customer.

Take a look at your shop from the customer's point of view. Not just from behind the counter, because that's the wrong side. Look at the entire shop. Set up a customer program that meets your demands as a customer in other stores. Take a hard look from the other side of the counter. □