

Sales, service with a smile

Do a better job, and everyone associated with the organization will profit financially and personally.

by James E. Guyette

■ While some green industry professionals may be reluctant to view themselves as sales people, those who encourage employees to hone their sales and communication skills will see the benefits reflected on the bottom line.

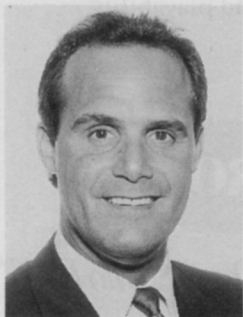
Being sales- and service-oriented creates a marked contrast to competitors who may have a surly attitude toward customers or a non-service "order-taking" mindset among the sales staff.

"Everyone in the company is in sales, in one way or another," says Phil Fogarty, president of Crowley Lawn Service in Cleveland, Ohio.

Even a line-level worker on a truck has an important role to play in the marketing effort. "If he goes up to the customer and looks shabby and doesn't know what he's talking about, it affects the sale," Fogarty explains.

Fogarty enlisted a nationally-known sales consultant, Dr. Hal Becker, to conduct a marketing seminar for Crowley's staffers. Later, Becker was tapped to conduct a similar session for the Ohio Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture.

"The application of common-sense sales techniques can lead to sales success," says Becker. The personal relationships built up between customers and employees are the driving forces behind sales success, he adds.



Dr. Hal Becker: Play the numbers game.

"The better the relationship, the better the chance that a sale will be made. With few exceptions, people buy from someone they trust and like."

Building up a bond of trust and likability involves several factors:

● **Be honest.**

"Treating customers fairly develops credibility," says Becker.

Fogarty notes that exaggerating service quality or pitching a price that's too low can backfire. "Our industry has learned that creating an over-expectation in the customer's mind just creates a high turnover," he says.

"It isn't even a moral issue—it's stupid to be dishonest," Fogarty stresses. A disappointed customer, he believes, will take his or her business elsewhere, and then extra effort is needed just to replace that account.

At Crowley headquarters, a sign reads: "If we don't take care of our customer, somebody else will."

● **Be organized.** "Develop a system so that you know when you called a customer and what was discussed during the conversation," Becker suggests. "Be consistent about following up with both current and potential customers. Keep up with the paperwork and cooperate with the sales support staff."

A daily calendar/organizer is standard issue at Crowley. "They all have organizers on their desks and I encourage them to carry them with them," Fogarty explains. Employees have a daily diary form on which sales and production information is recorded. But "any box with index cards will do the job," Becker notes.

● **Be persistent.** "Play the numbers game," says Becker. "The more prospects you contact, the more sales you make. Be resourceful by developing leads and creating new sales opportunities."

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Fogarty encourages his employees to initiate relationships with the neighbors of existing customers. If they like what they see in the yard next door, they're more likely to sign up.

Because estimates are made during the

day, "nine times out of ten, we don't see the customer," Fogarty observes. He insists that each estimate be clear and easy to read. And, of course, the follow-up phone call later is a crucial sales tool.

● **Ask questions.** Another sign at Crowley contains this Becker quote: "Selling is asking, not telling; listening, not talking."

"We can learn a lot about the person's needs by what they ask us," says Fogarty. Then they listen some more. "Anyone who's had inferior service in the past is happy to have someone to listen" to the reasons, Fogarty attests.

And don't interrupt. "Listeners will still be writing orders while talkers talk themselves right out of a sale," Becker warns.

● **Push the benefits.** "Too many salespeople just talk *features*, but you must describe *benefits*," says Becker. "Simply put, a feature is what it does, a benefit is what's in it for the customer."

"We're selling the *benefits* of lawn care," Fogarty says: convenience, knowledge that the job's done right, and having a green, environmentally friendly lawn.

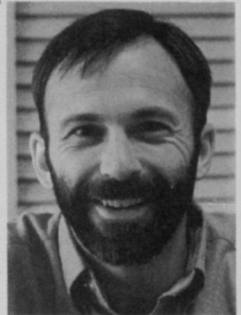
● **Be service-oriented.** Good service drives customer satisfaction and retention. "Always ask what the customer wants and listen to what he or she says," Becker advises.

"It's just being Johnny-on-the-spot," Fogarty adds. "If your price is competitive, the person has to realize that you are the best *value*."

● **Don't win arguments.** Becker says it's good to "remember not to win the battle at the risk of losing the war."

If customers have a complaint, ask what they want us to do, says Fogarty. "As long as it's within reason, we'll do what they want to resolve the problem." Most people are reasonable, he adds, and request smaller favors than might be expected.

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Fogarty: Sell lawn care benefits.