



[leveraging your people] Pull—Don't Push—Your Way to Clienteling Success

BY MARTIN C. SHANKER

I define “clienteling” as proactively creating and managing client relationships so clients are more likely to think about, visit, and buy from your store when they have discretionary dollars to spend. I've seen top sales associates increase their traffic by as much as 30 percent and their sales by 50 percent through superior clienteling. If you're not clienteling, you must.

The major resistance to clienteling comes from sales associates who are hesitant to contact clients outside the store for fear such contact would harm their relationships. This is a legitimate concern, and I advise strongly against forcing contact when a good sales associate shows resistance.

I've found that the most successful stores follow our training programs that teach their sales associates behaviors that lead clients to want follow-up contact. Creating such “pull”—as opposed to “push”—greatly reduces sales associates' inhibitions and resistance, motivating them to follow up with clients on a regular basis.

Adopt the platinum rule. The golden rule says to treat others as we want to be treated; the platinum rule says treat others as *they* want to be treated. Establish authentic relationships with clients that place them—not sales—in the center. Become a trusted advisor who can help clients realize their needs and dreams more quickly and with less

effort than they can alone.

Collect the right information. To be a good advisor you need to know three things about your client: What merchandise she'd like to be contacted about (e.g., a particular collection or a specific piece of jewelry she's dreamed of owning), the best times to contact her (e.g., when inventory first arrives or prior to birthdays or holidays), and how she would like to be contacted (e.g., via e-mail, by phone, with the sales associate's name, or the name of the store).

To acquire this information, you need to ask appropriate open-ended questions throughout your interactions—not hold the clients captive and grill them at the end of a sale when they're ready to leave. You'll need a good system for storing what you learn so you can easily add information and retrieve it throughout the year.

Gain permission. If a client gives permission for later contact, there's no reason to fear the relationship will be harmed when you follow up—

so ask! It might sound like this: “You mentioned earlier you love estate jewelry, especially watches. Shall I contact you by phone or e-mail when new inventory arrives with unique pieces?”

Prioritize and plan. Rank your customers by their “purchase potential” based on multiple criteria such as size and frequency of past purchases, affluence, and interest in your collection. Know how frequently you have contacted the 20 percent of customers who likely accounted for 80 percent of your sales last year—and exactly when you plan to contact them this year. Include both active and inactive clients on your list as well as some nonclients you draw from sources such as the society pages. Finally, remember contacts don't always have to be about sales. Part of building authentic relationships is reaching out to acquaintances on special occasions, such as a birth, simply to congratulate them.

Execute daily. Hit-or-miss activity seldom produces superior results. Know how

many hours a day you want to clientele and be disciplined in doing so. Expect a slow process and don't become impatient. The goal is to be top of mind when clients think about spending discretionary dollars, not have them buy every time you contact them.

Sharpen your core selling skills. Exceptional selling skills rest at the core of exceptional clienteling. This includes elements like breaking the ice, active listening, strategic questioning, persuasive presentation, ability to recognize buying signs, and asking for the order. As you begin your journey toward doubling sales through clienteling, don't forget to work on the fundamentals and to strengthen your selling skills. ■

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