



ISSUE NO. 101

ACCELERATE SALES:

Greet for success

Ineffective greetings elicit “No thank you” and drive customers away. Here’s how to increase sales by determining the right moment to offer assistance to a prospect.

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What's in a greeting? A great deal for retailers concerned with productivity. Effective greetings create opportunities for relaxed conversations with customers. Ineffective greetings that elicit a "No thank you" drive customers away while leaving sales associates unaware of how their actions contributed to a lost sale.

Here are some important questions to consider:

- Do your sales associates greet visitors to your store in ways that avoid "I'm just looking" or "No thank you" responses?
- Can the sales associates read the body language of visitors and adjust their greetings accordingly?
- Are your greetings for new and repeat customers equally successful?

If you answered no to any of these, you have an opportunity to improve productivity—the rate at which you convert visitors into paying clients.

I recently heard a store visitor respond to a greeting with the familiar, "No thank you, just looking." Not long after, I heard the same person say, "I seldom shop here. I like to look before being pounded on—they make me feel that I have to know what I want to come in."

The sales associate was unaware of how his behavior had affected the visitor. The "No thank you" was a message to the associate that the visitor had been approached too soon and didn't like it. Moreover, the sales associate didn't make any attempt to re-engage the visitor, deciding to wait until he was asked for assistance.

Appraising the Situation

Here are additional questions to evaluate how well you're greeting visitors:

- Do visitors often approach a second sales associate rather than continue to talk with the person who first greeted them?
- Do even your best salespeople greet everyone in a similar manner, rather than flexing and adjusting to individuals?
- Can your sales associates identify cues that indicate how and when a visitor can best be approached?
- Do your sales associates have successful strategies for approaching "just looking" or "No thank you" visitors later?
- Do you have the data you need to answer these questions?

Best Practices

Becoming a skilled, highly productive greeter takes practice and hard work. Here are some recommendations to help you and your staff get started:

Forget the Golden Rule. If “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is the golden rule, the platinum rule in retailing is “Treat others the way they want to be treated.” One greeting does not fit every visitor. “What brings you in today?” might work for one customer, while seeming pushy to another. Don’t get into a rut by greeting everyone the same way.

Learn to distinguish between “now” and “later” customers. “Now” customers are looking for help and can be approached immediately. “Later” customers want to browse, so early questioning can damage your relationship with them. Look for cues in eye contact and body language to differentiate the two. Someone who comes in and immediately turns to the side, begins to chat with a friend, or casts a downward glance is sending a signal that he or she is not ready to be approached. Don’t risk turning the “later” customer into a “never” customer by approaching him or her too quickly.

Look for opportunities to re-engage the “later” visitor. Let her browse, but watch for natural opportunities to initiate a nonthreatening conversation. For example, if she stops to examine a particular piece of merchandise, you might comment on its origin or mention that it’s part of a collection. It’s important to make your approach before the customer has explored two-thirds of the store. By this point she has often decided to leave and is unlikely to change her mind.

Greet visitors with open-ended questions. Once a visitor sends a signal that he or she is open to being approached, greet with an open-ended questions such as “What brings you in today?” rather than a closed-ended question that can be answered with “Yes” or “No” such as “Can I help you?” Each “No” or “No thank you” response has the potential of harming the relationship. In addition, open-ended questions tend to elicit longer replies with more information.

Measure what you need to manage. Learn your success rate at re-engaging “Later” or “Just looking” customers as well as in greeting new versus returning customers. You don’t have to track every interaction. Random sampling can provide excellent estimates. Dedicate time each week to observing and recording the outcome of greetings for both new and repeat customers, and you’ll increase your understanding of how sales associates are doing. Here’s a suggestion

that's easy to do:

Simply count the “No” or “No thank you” responses that different salespeople elicit during a fixed period. Top salespeople typically receive a lot fewer negative responses.

The people who visit your store have not been socialized to spurn a friendly greeting or a genuine offer of assistance, but poor greeting behaviors may have made them wary of unauthentic boilerplate greetings. Approach your customers in ways that make them feel welcome and at ease browsing through your store and watch your productivity climb.

About Shanker Inc.

Martin Shanker is the founder and president of Shanker Inc., a Manhattan-based international management consulting firm for such companies as Burberry, Cartier, The Estee Lauder Companies, Ralph Lauren and Van Cleef & Arpels. Described as a 'behaviorist' by The New York Times, Martin specializes in helping global brands accelerate sales and profit by growing their companies from within. By addressing the tough issues of sales and management teams, and the behavioral dimension of retail relationships, Shanker Inc. offers a unique, multi-dimensional way for companies to achieve success through their own people.

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