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Accelerate Sales:

Missed opportunities that cost you money

Ten common mistakes sales associates make that costs both them and your company money—and how to correct them.

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I recently returned from a countrywide swing visiting luxury retailers and observing sales associates, noting what I consider missed opportunities. Here are the 10 most common and how to address them.

Beginning with the wrong goal in mind. Clients know when a sales associate genuinely cares and wants to solve their problem as opposed to trying to makea quick sale. The best way to communicate authentic caring is to really care. Set caring and problem solving as your No. 1 goal each day.

Eliciting the wrong response to your greeting. Note how often a greeting elicits “no thank you” or “just looking.” These reduce a sales associate’s credibility as someone who can help and can make clients think they shouldn’t enter the store without knowing exactly what they want. Use open-ended questions and allow customers to browse if they want.

Poor questioning. You become a favorite salesperson by finding something that fulfills a client’s need or dream that they wouldn’t have found themselves. To learn about needs and dreams you must ask questions. Even when someone knows what she wants, one or two quick questions can help identify the right item plus possible add-ons. But ask the fewest questions possible to get the needed information.

Failure to make a persuasive recommendation. Don’t show merchandise; prove a selection is right by linking it to a stated need or dream. Here’s an example: “Since you said blue is your favorite color, and you love silk blouses, I’ve selected these three.” Focus on the client.

Showing mistrust in your prices. Many luxury customers are more concerned about overpaying than whether they can afford the purchase. If the customer questions the price and you defend the quality without asking the client what merchandise they’re comparing, your answer may not reassure the customer.

Failure to embrace objections. Objections are a gift. They indicate interest and provide an opportunity to ask questions and discover more about likes and dislikes. Don’t respond negatively to an objection or send a subtle sign of disappointment. Check in repeatedly with clients to learn what they’re thinking, and ask questions to discover what’s behind objections.

Waiting for clients to close themselves. Many people need a slight nudge to make a buying decision. Don’t passively wait to take an order. Order takers are found in restaurants, not among elite sales associates selling luxury goods.

Assuming the client doesn’t want to make a second purchase. Don’t assume your relationship with a client will be harmed if you suggest a complementary purchase. Try a simple statement like this: “The jacket fits you very well. Here are the matching pants." Let the client tell you when he or she has seen enough.

Failure to agree on how you will later contact the client. Strive to establish long-term relationships that allow you to provide ongoing service and advice. Once a client has made a purchase or expressed an interest, ask how you can make future contact. Establish the reason for contact (e.g., to introduce a new line) and how you'll reach him or her (e.g., by phone, e-mail, etc.) before the client leaves the store.

Taking "no" personally. No matter how good you are, eventually you'll lose a sale. Don't take it personally. Selling is hard enough without sending yourself into an emotional slide that creates low energy and a negative demeanor. If you can't recover quickly, you may be in the wrong business.

One missed opportunity often leads to another. A greeting that elicits "no thank you" makes it difficult to establish rapport and ask questions. Not asking questions leads to an unconvincing presentation and difficulty asking for the order. Not asking for the purchase reduces the closing ratio, which creates fewer opportunities for add-on recommendations. Avoid missed opportunities and watch your sales grow exponentially.

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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