

SALESMANSHIP

by Laurence R. Hall

What is a salesman? It seems in our industry we too often classify an order taker as a salesman. Consider the difference. Webster's Dictionary says a salesman is a man employed to sell; salesmanship is the ability or skill of selling. The key word in both definitions is SELL. The dictionary definition of sell is to cause to take or exchange for money; to persuade a person of the value of; to establish faith, confidence, or belief in; to be widely approved or accepted.

With the current economic conditions, very few, if any of us, can afford to be order takers. Most people in our business, with some degree of confidence and capability, could go out and estimate a residential job and take an order to do the job. But how many of us, when there is resistance to this order taking, will carry the situation into a true sales scene. How many of us actually create a sale, as opposed to merely reacting or responding to a call.

The talk of recession often panics many in the business community. If handled properly, a recession can help us sharpen our sales skills as well as our managerial skills. It forces us to plan and analyze with more care. It forces us to actually sell rather than just take orders. It makes us more aware of the value of each customer. Robert Louis Stevenson once said, "Everyone lives by selling something." This statement, in varying degrees, is very true. Let's take this premise and carry it to extremes. First of all, how is the initial contact made with the commercial arborist? Let's assume that it is made by word of mouth. Mrs. Jones had a satisfactory dealing with Ace Tree Service and recommends them to her friend Mrs. Smith. In this instance the initial salesperson was a satisfied customer. Or perhaps Mrs. Doe saw your truck driving down the street with your company name and phone number. Perhaps your crew was working next door and Mrs. Doe observed an efficient and business-like approach in the men on the job. These are scenes familiar to most of us and this premise could be carried out to unnecessary extremes. The point I am trying to make is that the

people out on the job are often our first and perhaps most important contact with Mrs. Doe. We can't over-emphasize the importance of neat equipment and personnel. A cheery "hello" or "good morning" from the men on the job, an enthusiastic response to a customer's questions. This positive attitude is, in itself, an important sales tool and is long remembered by the customer.

These impressions are passed on to others and should create many phone calls in to your office. How this phone call is handled is another very important phase in the sales picture. A courteous, cheerful, and intelligent response on the phone is impressive and of great value. It should be made clear to those fielding the initial phone call what the salesman's status is in regard to responding to this call. Will it be within hours or days, or whatever, so that they can tell the prospective client what to expect? When the phone call is from a known customer it is very flattering for them to be acknowledged as such, and when they offer their phone number and/or address, suggest that we are aware of it and our salesman will get back to them as soon as possible.

A prompt return call is the next obvious requirement on the salesman's part. When your calls build up to a point where it may be a day or two before you respond, you should make this clear to those fielding the initial call. I sincerely feel that all calls require a response.

If your company has established a fee for an estimate, or a minimum charge for work to be performed, it should be stated in the initial contact. This often saves making a nonproductive sales call. Our company has no charge for an estimate but we do make it clear that we have a \$52.00 minimum charge on any spray job and a \$72.00 minimum charge on any production work. We do charge if we are giving an appraisal or consultation. We have a \$65.00 minimum charge for this type of service. Too many of us give away too much free advice. A new customer should always be given an idea of what the charges will be, or

better yet, an established contract price on the job.

When you, as the salesman, are responding to any call in to your office for an estimate or appraisal of work to be done, it is proper procedure to establish an appointment. Set a definite time and day and be there on time. If you find yourself running late, have the courtesy to call and suggest setting a new date, or if acceptable, set a time later in the day, but do call. Arriving late for an appointment is an insult to the client. It suggests that your time is more important than their's.

Any salesman will acknowledge the fact that he is not going to make a sale with each call or contact. My former boss, and mentor, Archibald Price, stressed this point to me on many occasions. If you are a good salesman and you are making a sale to 75% or more of your new customer contacts, your rates are too low. If you are making a sale 50 to 60% of the time with the new contacts, your rates are about where they should be. Of course, if your sales are consistently less than 50% of your contacts, your rates are too high or your approach is wrong. This, of course, would not apply to contacts made with established customers. As most of us know, we all sell 100% of our established clientele.

On the subject of established clientele, do keep in touch with them, either by phone or an annual visit to the property, by a newsletter or flyer in the mail. Keep your name prominent in their minds. I have found it very rewarding to hear words such as, "Mr. Hall, when I think of trees I always think of your company." That is the best advertising you can get. Don't neglect those people. When a customer moves out, be sure to stop in and see the new owner. Often your name has been left with them, but if it hasn't, stop, introduce yourself, and suggest that you would like to continue to care for those trees.

Keep your mailing lists and customer files up-to-date. The telephone is a sales tool that is often neglected and abused by our industry. With the great cost of gasoline today, I do feel that many of us are going to use the telephone more than we have in the past. The only way we are going to be effective in telephone sales is by having accurate and up-to-date records on each customer. In

reviewing a job's past history, it can often be discussed and sold by telephone contact. This is especially true with spraying and fertilizing. Even with production work, a week or two after submitting a proposal to a customer, why not call them and let them know you want their business.

In the course of normal job duties, most of us will pass by a client's residence. When you do, observe the trees and take notes on any problems you may observe. I carry a small tape recorder with me. (I decided to buy this after running off the road several times trying to write notes and drive at the same time.) It is a worthwhile investment. When you get back in the office, make a phone call and tell your client what you observed and what procedures you recommend. It is best to refer back to the customer's file before you call, and suggest something like this: "Mrs. Doe, I was passing by your property this morning and I did observe some chlorosis in that front yard pin oak. In checking your records I find that it has been two years since we last fertilized that tree. I would like to enter an order to do this, may I?" People appreciate attention such as this, and often respond with an order. Learn to use the phone more and make life a little easier on yourself.

How many of us try to sell the total picture? If we are called upon to give an estimate on spraying, do we only do that? Why not at least discuss the other facets of the business? If pruning or fertilizing or cabling are needed, it should be suggested. We should act as professionals and point out all that we see. If the client doesn't buy, we have at least made them more aware, and probably paved the way for future sales. How many of us have run into situations such as this: we sell an early spring pruning job, let's assume on some pin oaks and crabapples. We complete the work in April. Come May or June you receive a call from this customer suggesting you ruined her trees. The pin oak is in leaf and the leaves are a sickly yellow in color. The crabapple leaves are all spotted and falling off. Shouldn't we feel foolish at that point suggesting to this person that a fungicidal spray should have been applied to the crabs and that the pin oaks should have been fertilized? Wouldn't we feel rather triumphant at this point if we had suggested to this person when we sold the pruning that the

spraying and fertilizing should be done also, but they elected not to in spite of our advice? The point is, be aware. Know your product. Sell the total picture. Be professional. Do this and you have covered your tracks.

This is where your diagnostic skills come into play. I would suggest that any person selling tree work should carry a diagnostic kit containing such things as increment hammer and borer, soil profile tube, hand pruners, field glasses, plastic bags for samples, small shovel, pocket knife, 10X glass, etc. Things such as this are important and they also impress the customer and help to sell. Don't be a know-it-all, but if you are asked a question and don't know the answer, be honest about it. We have many sources we can turn to for information. Use these sources and then get back to the customer. They will respect you for your honesty and willingness to research their problem.

Answering complaints is a very important part of the sales picture. The complaint call should be responded to quicker than the sales call. I again refer to my former boss and mentor, Archibald Price. He drilled this into my mind time and again, and he practiced what he preached. When I was just getting into sales under Archie, I often marvelled at his ability to follow-up on a complaint. He often would walk away not only with a satisfied customer but with another sale for some future

work. The quickness of his response and his immediate concern to right whatever went wrong was impressive to the client and when he suggested they enter their order for future sprays or fertilizing or whatever, it seemed to take them by surprise, and often they agreed to the order. After a few years of observing and admiring this technique, I got up enough nerve to try it myself, and believe me, it works. Try it. You'll like it!

To summarize, we all sell in one way or another. A positive attitude sells. Develop this within yourself and you will find that you, in turn, will motivate others. Think positive about yourself and your job. Talk positive. Believe in what you are doing and you will have no trouble selling others on the magnitude and importance of your job.

Trees are important to man's survival and well being. Those of us entrusted with the care of trees must get the message out to the public. Tell and sell it, not only customers, but the people you live and work with. Do this sincerely and with enthusiasm and you will find that you have not only sold others but you have sold yourself in many ways.

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