

**PART 1**

# How to Sell

Proven tips for  
furniture retailers

# More Furniture

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**FREE  
eBook**

Many business people assume that marketing must be expensive to be effective. Of course, advertising in any media is expensive, but the definition of marketing includes everything and anything you do to increase sales and promote your business – whether it costs money or not.

There are many ways to market your business free of charge, or at least at very low cost. For example, emailing your customers, asking for referrals, alliance arrangements with complementary businesses and improving selling skills.

This ebook looks at selling skills, and the important stages at the start of the sales process. In our next ebook, we'll look at closing the sale.

Is selling easy? Well, just like any other skill, trade or profession, you can make it as complicated as you like, but the simple answer is yes.

Or rather, it's easy if you know how. As the English philosopher Francis Bacon famously put it: For Knowledge too, is itself Power. Or as we say it today – knowledge is power!

Are you and your staff/colleagues great salespeople? If so – good for you, but if not, don't worry – even though it is widely accepted that truly exceptional selling skills are quite rare – selling is a highly teachable/learnable skill.

The fact is that most people employed in the retail industry, especially within the independents, have had relatively little effective sales training compared to some other big-ticket retail trades.

Most motor retailers and direct sales companies do, but only a small number of furniture retail companies, mostly the retail giants, employ a specific, structured sales process and regular training program.

The results speak for themselves. But don't despair, this means that there is massive scope for some easy and rapid improvement!

Of course, not everyone can become a natural sales superstar. As with anything else, natural talent will set you apart in any field, but we can all improve because selling is a highly learnable skill. Unfortunately, in many sales staff, there is strong resistance to learning about sales techniques.

Many wrongly believe that they have heard it all before and are too quick to conclude that sales techniques are too pushy or won't make any real difference. So why is it that some sales people, who are never pushy, seem to consistently get all the best sales? Are they just lucky?

Imagine this scenario and see if you recognise it: A couple leave your store empty handed after looking round. The manager pops his/her head round the corner and asks the sales person "what did they want?" To which the sales person replies, "nothing special... said they were just looking... but said they'd be back". The manager/owner accepts this and returns to the desk.

"They were just looking..."

I suspect that, not only do you recognise this scenario, but it occurs in your store many times every single day. Oh dear. Let me put it this way - if the same scenario occurred within some retail trades such as motor, property, home improvement, etc. the sales person concerned might well be marched into the sales manager's office for a 'little chat'.

Please understand that we do not advocate pushy selling or tyrannical sales management regimes. On the contrary, we train our sales people to be laid back and friendly in their manner. The very best sales people give their customers plenty of space, time and show professional courtesy.

The customer should enjoy the experience of buying from you and feel that they want to return to deal with you again, and recommend your firm.

However, make no mistake, here at Greenwood Retail, we firmly believe that the outcome of the sale depends on the attitude of the sales person, rather than the customer.

Some customers are quite happy to talk to sales people. Some customers may even demand immediate attention. But these types are in the minority and do not present a problem for even the most inexperienced shop assistant. These confident customers are the exception, not the rule and unfortunately there are not enough of them coming into your store. This is why we need professional sales people.

Ask yourself the following questions:

Why did the customer enter the store? We all lead busy lives. Even some retired people wonder how they ever found the time to work, so why would anyone be wandering around a furniture shop if they were not interested in buying some furniture? Fact - No one walks into the store unless they want to buy.

The truth is, that at some conscious level, they were looking for something in particular... regardless of what they said.

I repeat, regardless of what they said.

So why did they say that they were just looking? The psychology is well documented but basically, if you said to someone "Old Macdonald had a ..." and then paused, most people would automatically respond with "farm!" Ok, some folk might give you a puzzled look and start backing away from you, but most would automatically give the expected habitual response.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, if you ask a customer “CAN I HELP YOU?” you are going to get the habitual response of (yes, you guessed it) “JUST LOOKING”. You will often get this response even when the customer knows exactly what they want and are ready to buy! I once observed a sales person get this response - “just looking... erm, no, actually I want to buy this sofa” from a customer who had just stumbled over the exact item they have been looking for, credit card in hand and was just about to find a salesperson to take the order! They really can’t help saying “just looking”. It’s programmed in to all of us as an automatic habitual response, to any question such as – can I help you?

“I’ll come back...”

Why don't they simply ask for what they want? Most people (customers) are naturally shy and prefer to look around alone. In some cases, the potential customer's inhibitions about talking to sales people can be so strong that they would rather leave the store and carry on searching elsewhere than engage a sales person in conversation. We all use one-liners such as “just looking” and “I’ll come back” to avoid engaging a sales person when out shopping don't we? I certainly do. So, why should we believe everything that customers say to us?

Is there an easy way to solve this problem?  
Yes, absolutely and it could not be easier!

Volumes have been written about selling. The most effective sales training teaches the psychology of the customer as well as the many separate selling steps, each covered in great detail, but for simplicity, retail selling can be boiled down to four very basic elements: Approach, Qualify, Demonstrate and Close. To be fair, many sales people have a wonderful approach, and most can demonstrate their products well, but the majority fail in the two most important parts of the job – Qualifying and Closing.

While most sales people could regurgitate sales training material they have picked up, or tell us something about qualifying or closing, the truth is that very few truly understand these two processes and even fewer actually put these vital skills into practice.

That's because too many sales trainers or managers fail to demonstrate the importance of, and effectively teach the principles of, these key basics.

Instead sales people are turned off with the same old overcomplicated material, left doubting the benefits of qualification and remain mystified by what closing really is all about.

I will never understand why so many salespeople want to do all the talking. They seem to want to tell the prospective customer all about the product knowledge ins and outs of a product – before they even know whether or not the customer is even vaguely interested in the product they are going on and on about! The reason for this is that they too often guess or assume what the customer might want, rather than actually find out what they want!

The Secret of Easy Qualification...

I am going to let you in on the secret. There is a very special technique you can use to easily and quickly find out exactly what a customer is looking for. It is used by that elite group of mysteriously successful sales people every day. Also, it is widely used by the police, military and especially the intelligence services.

This technique is also regularly used by politicians, doctors, lawyers, teachers, business people and professionals of every kind. In fact this technique is commonly used by all of us (except ordinary sales people) every day so that we can do our work and live our lives. This special technique is simply known as 'asking questions'.

Questions really are the keys to successful selling, but before you denounce this revelation as far too simplistic, read the following examples and see if you can relate to them.

A customer is wandering around your furniture store...

Example A. (Typical untrained approach)

Sales: "Hello, can I help you?"

Customer: "No thanks, just looking"

Sales: "OK, just shout if you need any help"

Customer: "Thanks, will do"

Here, our untrained sales person made a nice friendly approach but then made the classic mistake and no rapport has been established. The initiative to continue with the sales process has been left with the customer and they will either (with luck) ask for what they want or most likely leave the store to look and compare elsewhere.

Are your sales projections based on hope?

Is trusting to luck a good enough sales strategy for you?

Should hoping that they will instigate a purchase or return to do so, be the basis of your business plan?

Should the initiative to buy be left entirely with the customer? In the absence of any conscious and considered salesmanship, luck and hope is all you have to rely on.

Is this good enough? Might there be a better way?

## Example B. (Professional approach)

Sales: "Hello, are you looking for a particular item... something special?"

Customer: "Well... I'm not sure until I see it!"

Sales: "Yes of course... is it a sofa? Or a bed? Or... (Pause)"

Customer: "Oh... a sofa"

Sales: "Ok... do you prefer fabric or leather?"

Customer: "Leather"

Sales: "Modern or traditional or ...?"

Customer: "Well... I like that style there, but you don't seem to have it in a two seater do you?"

Sales: "That's no problem... you can order it in blah blah blah "etc. etc.

Do you see the difference? Clearly this sales person is in business straight away and it wasn't down to luck!

Assume that both of our sales people made a nice, timely and friendly approach.

The only difference was that our professional was not afraid to ask (in the correct manner) a few key questions which helped to get the customer talking and to establish the basic needs and wants of the customer.

This is known as 'qualifying the customer'.

However, I am uncomfortable with the term 'Qualifying'. It causes confusion during sales training, as it does not seem to be the best word to describe the process.

To call the process 'Discovery' rather than Qualification is perhaps far more appropriate. It's just about asking the customer what they want! And yes, it really is that easy to do it!

Discovery should be started the moment you have finished your approach and greeting. Start asking questions straight away to discover their requirements. It is best done overtly and with confidence to show that you are a highly professional sales person who is genuinely interested in helping them find what they need. There is nothing to hide or fear.

There's no script. You must be your natural self and use your own words, but for example, you could start by asking questions such as: "Have you been in the store before? ... "What brings you in today? If your approach is accepted, then move onto direct questioning as shown above.

Most customers will respond positively and begin talking to you, but if a shy person cuts you off, simply respect their discomfort by backing off with a friendly assurance that you'll leave them to look around and will be available for help if needed.

Now watch them discreetly to look for those buying signals. If they won't tell us what they want verbally, they'll show us by their actions and behaviour in the store.

We can always make a friendly second approach, if and when appropriate.

Don't forget, you cannot discover what the customer wants unless they tell you. The only way they can tell you is by talking to you. Asking questions is the easiest way to get someone talking to you.

Don't make the classic sales persons mistake of talking too much. Going on and on at your customer like a hairdryer will drive them away. Product knowledge will not interest your customer unless they need and want the product you are talking about. Don't be boring. Don't talk at the customer. Start gently asking questions and then listening carefully to find out exactly which product the customer is in the market for, before offering them any information.

Discovery usually takes less than 10 seconds. The professional sales person wastes no time in asking the right questions before deciding how to take the sale further.

During Greenwood Sales Events, our top Event Management Contractors, can often contribute individual personal retail sales figures, on behalf of our clients, of £30k, £40k, even £80k in sales during the first week of an event – without any of those customers ever feeling ‘harried’ or ‘sold’ in any way whatsoever.

It’s one of the many secrets of our success and the main reason why the majority of Greenwood clients book us again and again. When the crowds have gone they’ve gone, and it’s too late to say, “they were just looking” or, “they’ll definitely be back.”

We know that 'assumption' is the mother of all misunderstandings. Only when you truly know what they are looking for can you demonstrate the relevant products and take the sale nearer to a successful conclusion. Of course, there is no guarantee that you'll get the order, but you certainly stand a much-improved chance now that you are talking to the customer about the relevant products, rather than using guesswork or assumptions.

And that's what it's all about. No sales person can win them all. It's about doing everything possible to increase your chances of winning the business with every prospective customer, each day. The difference in sales performance will be obvious at the end of each Month.

In our next ebook, we'll look at the all important part of how to close the sale.

## **About the author**

Bernard Eaton is the managing director of Greenwood Retail, a sales event company specialised in the furniture retail sector. For more information about Retail Sales Promotion for your business contact Bernard Eaton directly on 01625 521010.

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