

The shopkeeper versus the salesman: Part I

Treat your truck as a store front to keep customers coming back

BY PHIL SASSO

Q I'm a new dealer and I'm still getting my bearings on this business. My DM says I need to work on being a better salesman. But an old-timer who's route borders mine says I need to be a store on wheels and focus on my stock and merchandising. I'm confused. Who's right?

A Both. I hate answers like that. Don't you? It sounds like a kid asked to choose between chocolate and vanilla ice cream at a birthday party. But, that's my best answer. You really are part shopkeeper and part salesman.

The veteran dealer is right, too. Once upon a time, being a dealer was much more about being a shopkeeper. But, especially in the new economy, the ability to sell has grown in importance. Having a truck well-stocked with all the best-selling



doesn't mean you can't do all the things it takes to be a successful salesperson. It may mean a little more work, but it also means a lot more revenue.

Over the next two columns, I'll focus on each role separately. First, let's look at being a shopkeeper. There are many aspects of being a good shopkeeper but there are three big retailing areas: stocking, organizing and merchandising.

Stay stocked up

You can't sell what you don't have. So it's important to keep tabs on your inventory and keep well stocked -- especially on your most popular items. Remember: a well-stocked truck is a well-shopped truck.

Sure, you can always take custom orders. A good customer will be willing to wait for the odd specialty tool or the expensive equipment purchase. But no one wants to wait a week for the tool you should have in stock. They don't want to wait a week or two for a deep-well SAE socket set when they can get one tomorrow from another dealer.

Also remember customers love to see new things. So try to have a spot on the truck where you feature a new item every week or two.

"I had someone [on my truck] yesterday and he told me 'You have a bunch of cool stuff on your truck,'" says Dave Bryant, an independent tool dealer and a 15-year veteran. "I've been looking at the same stuff -- well not all the products are the same, but most are -- for over 15 years. You get cynical."

And don't let your inventory run too low. Low inventory says more than you may realize about the state of your business. A truck that looks half-stocked says either the dealer doesn't care or is struggling. No one wants to buy from a dealer who may not be there next month to service his warranty.

Keep it clean

You've heard it a hundred times: Customers buy more from a neat and tidy truck. And a well maintained inventory is easier to stock and manage than one that's in constant chaos.

Dust, clutter and disorganization are the death knell for a tool truck.

It's easy to let that stuff creep up on you. It happens so slowly that you hardly even notice it. It's like the cobweb in the corner that seem to appear overnight. Or the closet clutter at home that you know



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tools does not guarantee a bank account full of cash. Today, you have to know how to ask for sales to get sales.

Sometimes there's a bit of a battle between those two roles. But they aren't mutually exclusive. Just because you do all the things it takes to be a successful retailer

is there but never realized how bad it is until you decide to tackle it.

Let me confess, I know how it can happen. It's easy to let things get out of hand when you have so many things competing for your attention. But every piece of the tool truck puzzle is just as important as the next. Part of being successful is being able to juggle it all.

Your truck layout and merchandising needs to lead your customer through your offerings the moment they walk through the door.

If you don't keep up on things, it gets overwhelming. An extra ten minutes tidying up every day is a lot easier than a wasting a half day on clean-up after months of neglect. Also consider a quick weekly once-over to keep things in order. (This makes a good job for a child. Consider it a lesson in responsibility.)

The right layout

"What do you want your customer to see?" That's the first question Charles Carstens, owner of Atlanta Commercial Display Vans asks when his company is designing a new tool truck.

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Often when dealers get a new truck, their sales get a boost, says Carstens. When he asks dealers why that is, many say that the excitement of having the new truck is contagious. But many dealers also attribute the bump in sales to a new layout.

"Typically, when [a customer] went on the guy's old truck, they knew where everything was, so they weren't looking at everything," says Carstens. "Now they are seeing all this 'new' stuff that was always on the truck... and has been there for years."

You don't have to buy a new truck to

boost sales. You can just rotate inventory to achieve the same result. If things are a little different every time a customer is on your truck, it keeps them interested in looking around.

Creative hang tags and shelf talkers can direct a customer's attention to new products, promotional packaging and sale

items. Walk through any grocery store and notice all the techniques that are being used to draw your attention to items on the store shelves. Try to pick up some ideas that might work for you on the truck.

Bottomline: Think of your truck like a store. Keep it well stocked, organized and laid out. ■



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