

What to do about 'badmouthing'



**By Phil Sasso
Contributing Editor**

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Q. A customer told me a competitor of mine has been talking trash about me behind my back. This ticks me off. What should I do?

A. Badmouthing is bad business. So, first and foremost, avoid badmouthing him back. Retaliation will only make you look bad and will likely escalate things.

Ignoring him is probably the more mature decision. But let's get real; odds are, this isn't going away on its own. And it sounds like this will eat away at you until it's resolved. The best solution is to approach him and deal with it head on. But take some steps first to prepare and don't just blindly ambush him.

I don't know your back story. Is he a new dealer trying to win your customers? Or are you the new dealer and he feels threatened by you? Or is there a history of bad blood between you? Have you even ever met or spoke to him?

Each case may require a different approach, but I suggest you take this general path:

Ask Your Customers. Is your customer blowing this out of proportion? What exactly did the competitor say? Is this just a

misunderstanding? Was this just an isolated incident or has he said things to other customers? Ask around. If it's a one-time comment, I'd just let it drop.

Ask Yourself. This next step is hard: Ask yourself if there's any truth to his comments. It's easy to dismiss criticism. It's harder to admit we may have earned it. Is there something to learn from what was said? Are you always understocked? Have you treated a customer badly? Have you not kept a promise? Did you wrong the other dealer? If so, remedy the situation first.

Ask The Competitor. High-priced management consultants and marriage counselors call this "confronting." I prefer "approaching." "Confronting" sounds like you're throwing the first punch. Throwing a punch puts the other guy on the defensive. You're trying to defuse a bomb, not trigger it.

The rest is classical conflict resolution: Meet in a neutral place. Lay your cards on the table, without judgment. Ask for his side of the story. Listen. Avoid turning it into a shouting match.

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(More tips on approach and resolution are in the next question.)

Unless he denies it, ask him to stop. Realizing you're "onto him" may be enough.

If he doesn't stop, most customers will eventually realize if the other dealer keeps badmouthing you and you stay quiet that the issue is with him, not you.

Q. Lately, a customer keeps trying to egg me into a fight. Until now I've sidestepped it, but I'm fed up. Should I just tell him I'm done doing business with him?

A. Don't be afraid to fire a customer. But it should be your last resort. First try to resolve things. If that doesn't work, remind him this is your business. If he wants to buy from you, he has to play by your rules. Be friendly, but firm.

I'm not sure what the issues are, but disagreement happens in the best relationships. You don't always want to avoid conflict thinking you're keeping peace. That's not peacekeeping; it can send the wrong message. Ignoring him can put him in control.

Here are some ground rules to help resolve things:

Don't make a scene. Try to keep emotions under control. And avoid approaching him around others. Keep



it one-on-one. (Unless you feel threatened. Then I might have others around.)

Know when to hold your tongue. If you're having a bad day, don't get into a discussion with your customer. You'll likely just have a blowout and not settle anything.

Keep focused. When you get emotional, it's easy to go overboard. Don't let the customer steer you off course. If the issue is his or her poor payment habits, for example, don't let the discussion stray into your price, quality, or back orders. Stick to one issue.

Remember it's not personal. Your truck is a store. You wouldn't take a comment from a clerk at Home Depot personally. Think of this the same way. Avoid getting personal or taking it personally. It's just business.

Know when to walk away. Sometimes things can get out of control. As the business owner, know when to shut it down. Flaring tempers and heated words won't accomplish anything. If things get out of hand, end the discussion. Walk away or ask him to leave. Otherwise, you're wasting your time and making things worse.

If it seems your customer wants to fight just to fight, then settle his account and let him go. You can't reason with someone who just wants to argue. There are enough good customers out there to make a living. You don't need the stress.

Q. The flyer for a tool I sell is very negative about the competition. Am I alone in disliking that?

A. As I said earlier, badmouthing is bad business. A good tool will stand on its own merits. Any toolmaker that feels bashing the competition is marketing doesn't understand marketing.

Don't get me wrong, I like comparisons. They're useful.

A comparison chart can help focus on unique features and benefits. And comparisons can help you justify a higher price. But comparing isn't badmouthing.

Remember, the tools you promote reflect on you. Sell bad tools, you'll get a bad reputation. Promoting tools in a negative way reflects on you, too.

If you don't like the literature, dump it. Or, if you can, dump the tool and sell the other brand. ■

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