



**BY PHIL SASSO**  
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Contributing writer Phil Sasso answers the following questions:

- I have a customer that is a real talker. He wastes a lot of my time and really doesn't buy all that much. What should I do?
- My route is full of terrible customers. What can I do to change them?

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# Tips on how to deal with customers

Some advice on late payments, repos and how to handle chatty customers.

**W**hen I informally ask veteran dealers what they *like best* about being a mobile tool dealer, “dealing with customers” usually makes the top-three list. It’s right up there with “working for myself” and “financial independence.”

When I ask newbie dealers what they *hate most* about being a mobile tool dealer, “dealing with customers” often makes the top-three list.

Either the newbies that hate dealing with customers bail out before they make it to my veteran dealer category or something changes in their attitude about customers to get them over the hump.

I’d like to think it’s the latter. Learning to deal with customers may be one of the things that will take you from novice to dealer-of-the-year award winner.

Here are some ideas that just might help you earn a trophy at your next annual dealer meeting.

**Q.** I get really angry when a customer drags out payments. What should I do?

**A.** You should be angry. It’s your money. But, raging and fighting rarely resolves anything.

Realize that many customers don’t know that it’s your money on the street. Rather than starting a shouting match, try explaining that when they buy a tool it’s money out of *your* pocket. Let him know that when he doesn’t pay on

time that it affects your paycheck.

Whatever you do, don’t let anger get the best of you. There will always be slow-paying customers. Don’t take it personally.

**Q.** I have a customer that’s a few weeks behind. He always seems to be on a test drive or out to lunch when I show up at his shop. What should I do?

**A.** Give him the benefit of the doubt. Call his cell phone. If it takes you to voicemail, leave a message and give him a day to get back to you. I once had a deadbeat client block my number. Calls to his cell phone just went dead. So, I kept calling from different phones until he realized he couldn’t avoid me.

You might even try spoof-card.com. They sell a calling card that let’s you change or “spoof” what comes up on caller ID. But I’d consult a lawyer on the legality of that, first.

If he’s unresponsive, text or leave a voicemail saying you’re charging the credit card you have on file for him tomorrow for whatever is past due in full. (You *do* have a card number on file I hope, don’t you?)

If he calls or texts you back to protest, good. You’ve hit a nerve. Better to get a reaction than to keep getting ignored. Share the blame. Explain you’ve missed him the past couple of weeks, and he needs to catch up on missed payments ASAP.

If he can’t pay everything at once, ask him what he can do. Be friendly but firm. If he sets the payment plan, he can’t complain in the future that you pushed him to pay more than he can afford.

Don’t have a credit card on file? Let this serve as a lesson: always get a credit card when you open a new account. And check it quarterly to be sure it hasn’t expired. Even the most honest guy in the world can have a streak of bad luck and start avoiding you.

One dealer I know catches his “deadbeats” off-guard, by stopping on a different day and time than usual. If your customer is not expecting you, he won’t likely have a planned escape route! It’s much harder to avoid paying someone face-to-face than it is by text or phone.

**Q.** How far should I let a customer fall behind? What should I do if he’s too far?

**A.** One week behind can be too far behind. But once it gets to be two or three weeks, it’s time to become firm with your customer. Your first goal is to increase his weekly payment, not stretch it out more. If you can’t do that, you need to keep a short leash of weeks.

What if you can’t come to an agreement or he fails to honor his agreement? It’s time to repossess the tool. It’s awkward, but don’t be embarrassed. It’s not your fault.

## SALES Q & A



Effectively dealing with customers is crucial to the success of any distributor's business.

Avoid being rude or angry. It's not likely he started out not planning to pay you back. Just explain in a business-like tone that you need the tool back. A good strategy is to offer to hold the tool for a couple weeks until he can get together the cash to pay you in full. That may make it less awkward.

You may want to repossess the tool in his bay, or follow him to his bay to

get it. I've heard a horror story or two about a disgruntled customer breaking a tool before returning it.

If he can't come through on time, sell the used tool to someone else for at least what he owes. He can always buy another new tool – cash upfront.

And once you've been down this road, I don't think I need to tell you that he becomes a cash-only customer for a long, long time to come.



**Q.** When should I fire a customer?



**A.** Just short of never. There are very few situations where firing a customer make sense.

If you have a personality conflict, try to work it out. If they're buying from you and paying on time, there is not much reason to stop doing business. If they aren't buying exclusively from you, don't worry about that.

The only customer to fire is the one that's not paying you. In that case, see my first few answers.

"Dealing with customers" often ends up on both the love list and the hate list of many veteran dealers.

I believe it's not the customers. It's how you deal with them. **PD**

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