



**BY PHIL SASSO,
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**

Phil Sasso is president of Sasso Marketing Inc. (sassomarketing.com), a technical marketing agency specializing in tools and equipment. Subscribe to his free marketing tips at philsasso.com/blog

What's pneumatic: selling compressed air systems

Getting a customer to appreciate a product's value is one of the most difficult parts of selling.

Selling the cheapest product is not salesmanship. Providing the best product to fit your customer's needs at a fair profit is what salesmanship is all about. That's what justifies your paycheck.

Not all compressors are created equal, and no one unit is a fit for every shop. Few customers even think about their compressed air system until it's time for a new compressor. Then they tend to focus on the lowest price and fastest delivery.

Here are some thoughts on the technology and sales techniques.

Q. **All compressors do the same thing: make air. Other than the name on the front, aren't they really all the same to a customer?**

A. When shopping for a compressor, knowing what's "under the hood" and the unique features are what makes one brand or model worth a premium price over another.

"Because a compressor is a big ticket item, customers tend to focus on the price tag and want to save a dollar," says Dan Leiss of Jenny Products. Say you're selling to a body shop: they likely spend far more on paint in a year than they will on this compressor. But they buy paint in much smaller



Air leaks cost shops hundreds of dollars a year in energy costs and compressor wear. Find most leaks after hours by just listening for them when the shop is quiet.

increments. So, they don't always see how paying a few extra nickels per gallon of paint may cost them far more over a year than the couple hundred dollars they'd pay for a better compressor. That's often because they see a compressor as an expense and not something that makes them money. You need to change that mindset.

Your job is to help your customer see the benefits of one compressor over another. The best way to do that is to start selling before the customer needs a compressor.

Q. **How do I sell a compressor before a customer needs one?**

A. Start by selling your customer the small things he needs to keep his system running smoothly, like new filters and couplers, fittings and lubricants. Then educate the customer on topics like



Piston compressors (here, with an exposed piston), are the most common systems in the U.S.

horsepower, consumption and lifetime operating cost.

It's only air. And air is free, right? Not compressed air. Add up the cost of hardware, maintenance and daily electrical costs and the compressed air system may be the most expensive "utility" in your customer's shop. Especially if it's not working at peak efficiency.

When a compressor is working smoothly, it sits unnoticed in a corner of the shop. But when there's an issue, a shop's operations can come screeching to a halt as a frantic call goes out for repair or replacement, says Leiss.

Go online to read more

Sasso answers the following additional questions:

- What is an air audit?
- What is the difference between replacing an existing customer unit, and helping find a suitable replacement?
- How hard is it to sell and install aluminum air piping systems?

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At that point, the customer doesn't want an education. They want a working compressor – and they want it now. And although you probably appreciate the order, you still have a route to run and other stops to make.

Q. Most customers wait until their compressor fails to buy a new one. Is there a more proactive way to close a sale rather than under time pressure?

A. “Most shops purchase a new compressor at the time when their current unit fails,” says Richard Campbell, vice president product management North America, compressed air systems and service, Ingersoll Rand. “At that point, it’s not about price, it’s

about who can deliver a new unit quickly and get the shop back up and running.” He suggests dealers carry a trusted compressor brand from their flag or a warehouse that can deliver quickly.

“Pneumatic systems have a finite life before the parts have to be serviced or maintained,” says Ben Echtenkamp, commercial product manager with Campbell Hausfeld. Knowing the life for various components and compressors can help drive the sales, build trust and avoid downtime. “Work with the shop to develop a maintenance/replace schedule that would help for budgeting and planned purchases.”

Budgeting? Planned purchases? Those probably sound like foreign concepts for your customers. But it’s a smart idea. If you are the go-to dealer for fittings, hoses, filters and consumables,

you can help a shop customer plan expenditures and have a timeline for their next compressor purchase.

“The time dealers spend training customers on the basics of air compressors is time well spent,” says Ingersoll Rand’s Campbell. “Helping customers understand cfm, psi, horsepower, electrical – that creates a lot of value. Upselling premium features like low-oil protection switches, auto drain valves and air-cooled after-coolers can help dealers become more profitable.”

No matter how hard you try, often compressor sales will still be made under time pressure. But if you can get just a small percentage of customers to think ahead, you can do an air audit and help them plan ahead and buy based on need – not just in a rush in the midst of an emergency. **PD**

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