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BUILDING A BUSINESS ONE CLIENT AT A TIME

There was a time when it took real machismo to build a business. To build sales, you would send the troops to sales seminars, run contests, install a track program, have them memorize a script, teach them proper qualifying, features and benefits, and how to close. And you'd better improve every year, because you will have fewer and fewer customers to use these techniques on. Fact is, if you have to use these techniques nowadays, you haven't built a strong enough base of loyal, if not fanatical, clients. If you had done so, your new clients will arrive pre-sold based on the recommendation of others.

Whether you are providing a product or service, your overarching strategy should be to care deeply that each and every client becomes a cheerleader for you, your product, and service. Notice the use of the word "client," not customer. The word "client" implies repeat transactions, which should be the goal of the business. If you sense, or survey, a dissatisfied client, drop everything and turn that person around. Overkill the problem, throw money at it, wildly exceed the clients' expectations, even so far as to unwind the sale if need be. If it costs you, attribute the expense to the advertising budget. The industry we earn our living in is too small to do otherwise if you plan on being around for the long haul.

Trust is the foundation on which client relationships and sales are built.

Trust is built through credibility and honesty. Credibility means the client can take what you say to the bank. At Albury Brothers, this starts with never, ever, being late. Sound like fantasy-land? Hardly. All you need to do is under-promise. If it takes six weeks to build a boat, tell the client his boat will be ready in eight or 10 weeks. 100-hour outboard service? Add a couple days to your usual standard. This leaves you room for breaking a bolt, having a defective part, a technician calling in sick, etc. You're a hero when the boat is finished earlier, and you will feel much less stress to meet your self-imposed deadline.

A friend tells a story of a high school job he held in the snow-ski department of a sporting goods store chain. He was honest enough with his customers to tell them when competitors had better products or deals on certain items. In a short period of time, he was deluged by new customers. His sales figures went off the chart and executives from corporate came to investigate the phenomenon. Brutal honesty demonstrates to the potential client you have no agenda and are not trying to manipulate them. Once the client believes in your honesty, they will hang on your every word and take your advice.

We often interview a potential client to see if our product is right for them. A mismatch is bad for both parties because a person will be out there

By Jeff Lichterman

telling everyone the boat doesn't do what they expected. More often the opposite occurs, clients want our product because they feel they have been given the facts and allowed to make their own, educated decision. In other words, don't exaggerate the top speed, don't claim your boat is the best on the flats and in the Gulf Stream, and don't put down another brand. When being compared to other brands, don't take offense. We openly point out the good qualities in that brand. After all, the client knows your product is not the be all and end all in boating and your credibility meter will shoot through the roof. In the words of another successful builder, "Sales are simply an education process." I completely concur and will add a bit of ancient wisdom; yin & yang (the unity of opposites) applies to sales. You sell less by trying to sell more.

One of our production employees says he "cringes when he hears me talk to a potential client" because I "tell them too much." I reply that I will never have to cringe when the client calls after the sale or I hear people discussing our product at the sand or tiki bar. I often wonder if people believe me when I am telling them the "truth." They don't know me and, after all, I am selling. To create trust and build credibility, the most important asset we have are testimonials from existing clients. We collect testimonials like a starving man collects food. These testi-

monials are stuffed in our brochure, displayed on our Web site, on signs in our showroom (and employee break room), and featured in our advertising. "Don't take my word for it, here's what our customers have to say" is a phrase I often repeat.

Once you have given a potential client all the facts, including lead

the client. The client's anxiety level is reduced and confidence is built by providing these regular updates. It is an opportunity to point out where you did a little something personal or special for them. It also doesn't hurt to point out the little flaws that all humans make. When you show your client minor flaws, they often say,

same good boy after the sale and provide killer service. Pick up, deliver, or provide dockside service with a high degree of urgency. Give your client a little lagniappe (something extra) if there is a service issue. Lagniappe is an inexpensive way to create a big warm and fuzzy for your business. Buy them lunch if they are inconve-



Albury Brothers invites its clients to stop by its facility at any point during their build process and e-mails digital photos to its clients at each stage of completion.



time, prices, and the ordering process, they may elect to do business with you. Here is your first opportunity to strengthen the client relationship. At Albury Brothers, we let the client know when we start laying up their hull. The client is invited to stop by any time to inspect. We have a little keel laying ceremony (if the client is local) and fiberglass a coin or memento in the keel. At each stage of completion, a digital photo is e-mailed to

"No big deal, don't worry about it." When the client catches a flaw, you can expect it to be on a punch list.

All the good will and credibility you have created so far is for naught if you don't handle the post-sale properly. Your clients are just waiting for you to blow off their punch list or warranty issues! This is what they expect. Clients fear you have been a good boy so far because you have not extracted all their shekels. Be the

nienced, throw them some T-shirts, an engine cover, or trailer lock; anything that says we appreciate you as a client. At Albury Brothers, our clients stop by from time to time and they never leave without a small token reminder that they belong to our esteemed community of owners.

You don't have to sell a premium product to provide a premium experience for your growing base of fanatical clients. 