

Assumptions – The Hidden Sales Killer

Assumptions can kill a sale. In my sales training workshops, I frequently discuss the importance of not making assumptions about a person before, during, or after the sales process. Participants frequently nod and tell me that they NEVER make assumptions. One person (Doug Maquire, www.MaquireMarketing.com) sent me this story of a situation that occurred in a department store he worked in many years ago.

“I was the 'young kid' who had signed on to take the 9 month Management Training course for a department store chain. Sales people were generally assigned specific areas to cover within the store but being a 'management trainee' I had to learn all departments.”

One day, a rough looking middle aged fellow entered the store. He was dressed in well-worn workpants, work boots, and a soiled red and black plaid shirt just like you'd expect a lumberjack to wear. No one approached him (I guess he didn't look like a good sales prospect) and he didn't move from the front entrance; he just stood there surveying the store from left to right. I walked up to him and asked if I could help. He said, “I need a pair of wool socks. No nylon, no cotton, just wool socks.” We went to the Menswear Department and both watched as the sales person assigned to that department walked away from us so he wouldn't have to waste his time going through the full selection of hosiery just to find a single pair of wool socks.”

I then started asking questions about style, colour, size, price range, etc., to help narrow down exactly what the customer needed. “It don't matter.” he replied, “Just wool socks. I work back in the bush and we only come to town every three weeks. Nylon makes my feet sweat. Cotton's okay but it don't last long. I need socks I can wear at work everyday and that's wool.”

So, I checked the content label of every style and colour of sock that we had in stock and eventually found a pair of 100% wool socks. “Good”, he said, and we walked up the checkout counter to ring in the \$3.95 pair of wool socks. The man left and I got a bit of ribbing from the sales person in the Menswear Department about my 'big sale of the day' and how 'not to spend my commission all in one place!’”

Three weeks later the customer returned. He then walked over to me and said, “I need more wool socks like that last pair”. This time he decided that he'd take 6 pair. We took the socks up to the checkout counter and rang in the six pair of \$3.95 socks. The customer paid cash, said thanks, and walked away with his purchase. This time I didn't get quite as much ribbing from the sales person in the Menswear Department.

Exactly three weeks later the customer came back. He walked through the front door and made a beeline for me. “I need more of them wool socks”, he said. “The boys at camp want to know where I got them and want some too. How many have you got?” I checked the display area, the stockroom, and our new stock shipment and told him I had 58 pair. He paid cash and bought them all.

I never found out exactly how many people he worked with, but every three weeks he'd show up at the store and ask what I had in the way of tee-shirts, long johns, plaid wool shirts, work boots, gloves, caps, toques, coveralls, work jackets, etc., and each time he arrived, he'd walk right up to me for service and we'd both go to the proper department and select what he needed for himself and for the guys he worked with. He always paid cash and always thanked me for my help.”

If Doug had made the mistake of following his coworker’s footsteps and made the same assumptions about the customer, he would have lost thousands of dollars in sales.

It is easy to make assumptions about our customers and prospects. A person’s appearance, age, gender, nationality, or role within the company, often influences us. I have made this mistake when speaking to companies in the past. Upon learning that they only had a few salespeople, I made the assumptions they would not be willing to pay my standard fee. I later learned that this assumption was completely inaccurate and that they were fully prepared to invest in their teams’ development.

As a consumer, I have often noticed that most sales people will approach well-dressed customers before they talk to people who are attired in jeans or casual clothing. Avoid this fatal mistake and go into every sales interaction with an open and clear mind. This will definitely have a positive impact on your sales.

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