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Why Should We Have To 'Close' a Sale?

WHY SHOULD WE HAVE TO 'CLOSE' A SALE?

A good question, really.

The conventional wisdom in retail suggests that if you are able to successfully 'identify' your customer and merchandise accordingly, then it's all about price and location. Right? Isn't that what the old adage says? You need three things in retail: *location, location, location*.

So if it's all about putting yourself and the right product in front of the customer, why should we have to bother so much about this 'closing' thing?

Take a look at the Big Box stores. Do you think they do any 'closing?' Do their employees do any 'selling' at all?

No, they don't. And hence, they have no need to close. They do what they do with 'demand urgency' techniques, merchandising, price structure, display and other methods of gentle persuasion.

For example, have you ever noticed how similar the layouts of a Big Box store are to a Vegas casino?

Everything in a casino's layout is arranged in such a way as to lead to the slot machines. That's where they make their money. Not the tables, not the card rooms. The slots. "The Drop" is the way Vegas characterizes the money 'dropped' into the slots each day.

So a big casino will do everything it can to see that the customer is forced to frequently 'fly by' the slot area; all paths in the casino lead to the slot area. And in addition, the customer is subjected to all manner of blinking, alluring distractions, almost like the mythical *Sirens on the Rocks*, beckoning to him.

The Big Boxers do something similar. Their success hangs on methods of leveraging their customer's opinions and attitudes—not from the direct sell.

They start with price, selection and ease of access.

The average WalMart or Bed, Bath & Beyond store layout is very much like a casino: There are never any windows, so we can't see out. There is never a clock anywhere, so we don't know what time it is, or whether it's even light outside. There is a confusing labyrinth of aisles and walkways such that we get disoriented until we've forgotten why we came into the store in the first place.

We can take something from what the big boys do and fit it into our particular circumstances. (Please no emails and letters: I'm not comparing fine art galleries to Big Box retailers, but there are some things we can learn from them.) In addition, display techniques from one gallery to the next may not always apply, given the adjacent variables. But customer behavior, on average, doesn't change.

For example, studies have shown that a customer entering a place of business, unless forced to do otherwise, will turn to the right. Unless forced to do so, most customers won't want to walk down the center of the gallery; they tend to hug to the perimeter of the space, first. Accordingly, it (may) stand to reason then, that if we have a work of art that we want to accentuate, it pays to place it to the right of the entrance, toward the periphery. A place where our customers are likely to start.

We also know that customers need a moment or two to adjust to having entered. They need some 'breathing' room near the entrance to get acclimated to what they are seeing and to the navigational options open to them. This is a prime place to treat as the gallery's Wow! area.

Every gallery, indeed every retail space, needs what I call a DWZ—the Designated Wow Zone—a place in the gallery adorned with some kind of object which is guaranteed to make the customer stop and say, "Wow!"

Remember the Jiang horse? A terrific example. It was a stylized horse, about the size of a Cadillac Escalade, created by Fingerhut's wonderful artist, Jiang, and cast in actual foundry bronze. Walking by the gallery in an upscale mall, the customer encountered that sculpture immediately when they walked in. It had a palpable effect on the perception of what was offered in the gallery and sent an extremely powerful message to the customer about the level and quality of artwork inside. Or consider the Lassen Gallery in Las Vegas with a twelve foot aquarium at the front door.

Across the country, even more modest galleries have seen the benefit of implementing some version of this concept.

To whatever degree possible, I feel that all galleries benefit from a

DWZ.

DON'T GIVE IT AWAY

Another merchandising infraction in art galleries which I often see is that of over-extensive glazing. Galleries proudly display their artwork in open, airy, floor-to-ceiling windows in the front or often at street level. It violates an old retail tenet I learned many years ago: *Don't let the customer shop you from the street.* Sure you want fabulous windows, but you also want to arrange them in such a way as to only allow a peek-a-boo of what's inside. Make 'em squint to see inside. Make 'em come in. Where your salesperson will interact with them.

If a customer can stand in the front of the gallery and see everything it has to offer, that gallery is not offering up its merchandise mix; it's giving the customer a reason *to rule himself out as a buyer.*

The Wow Zone acts in both capacities: It serves to not-so-subtly woo the casual passerby, but also to hinder her ability to see everything that's inside.

DISPLAY AND MERCHANDISING ARE PART OF CLOSING

So, yes, the Big Boxers and department stores have done a lot of research on the methods they can employ to influence their customers based on what they see and how they tend to move about the stores.

We can learn quite a bit from them about those aspects of running a retail establishment, whether it's art or framing.

Now, this is not a book on display and merchandising, but one can see

how important the subject is when you consider the amount of research that is done on it by the larger retailers.

Concepts such as:

- product merchandising
- space design & floor planning,
- aisles and traffic patterns
- fixtures
- hanging techniques
- display composition
- cases, pedestals and shelving
- glazing

The science of customer behavior is carefully considered by large retailers, including the Big Box stores. And why is that?

Obviously, in the abstract, all of the topics listed above relate directly to the notion of the sale. To selling. But I also believe most stores like BB&B put a great deal of emphasis on those areas of retailing because they realize that to a large extent, the customer is *on her own* while in their stores.

WHAT ABOUT CUSTOMER SERVICE?

Large retailers—not all, but many—go to great lengths to train their staff in what they refer to as “customer service”. And, oh yes, the term has become extremely gentrified over the last ten years. It’s the word whispered in HR meetings and the concept is bandied about by sinking airlines

and warring cel phone companies.

Many of them actually follow up with it; many of them have specific training programs to which all new hires are subjected.

And for the uninitiated, “customer service” has become synonymous with “selling.” In fact, nothing is farther from the truth. Really, what are they teaching the staff? Showing a customer the location of a little-known product in a labyrinthian big-box store is not selling. That’s guiding. Standing at the front door and saying, “Hello Welcome to CostMart,” is not selling. That’s roboting.

The Big Box stores know they can’t teach an hourly employee how to care about selling. They can only teach them how to care about keeping their jobs.

That is the advantage that small retailers have, especially those of us in the art business. We can truly teach our salespeople how to be actual *salespeople*—as well as how to serve our customers.

ROCKET SCIENCE?

Why then don’t more small retailers do it? Why is it that so many dealers rent a space, put in carpet and lights, hang art on the walls and a sign on the roof and call it a gallery?

I don’t know the answer to that question. I do know, however, that you are holding this book, and hence, I do not count you among that group.

I also know that without a salesperson, a customer will rule herself out as a buyer if given the slightest opportunity.

All those slick merchandising techniques and methods of display and location positioning will bring a customer to the point of interest, even to the brink of temptation. But without a salesperson, she will not be tempted purchase, but rather *to not purchase*.

In my seminar, I always like to say that:

CLOSING STARTS WHEN YOU SAY ‘HELLO’

Actually that’s an understatement: Closing should really start much sooner than that—by virtue of the way the customer is treated before she even enters the gallery and certainly before anyone approaches her once in the gallery.

ONE WORK OF ART IS AS GOOD AS ANOTHER

I was asked to address a large convention of publishers some years ago in Salt Lake City. Four large and powerful art publishing companies decided to conduct their own art fair exclusively for their own constituency and customer base. It was attended by about four hundred small gallery owners.

During my address I had the unmitigated audacity to state that: “One work of art is as good as another...”

You can imagine the reaction. The publishers all gagged and the retailers were ready to hang me. But here was my rationale:

Take our ideal customer—the married female between the ages of 25 and 45—and put her into a mall, with 40 galleries up one side and 40 galleries down the other. And if you walked her into each gallery and showed

her every work of art, I guarantee she would find something she liked. And probably something in each and every one of those galleries. Something that would be perfect in that hallway or in the bedroom.

So, what makes that woman purchase one work of art over another? Why will she buy in one gallery and not the other if there is something she likes in all of them?!

Display? Merchandising? Location? Uh.....price?!

“Nope,” (I said to the stunned Salt Lake City audience), “it’s you. You, the salesperson.”

People buy artwork from other people. Not from punchy, display end-caps, not from easy locations, not from busy, overloaded merch mixes. They buy it from people. I believe they do it more willingly after having heard a compelling reason to do so. A *sales presentation*. And that sales presentation must culminate with a close.

I’ve said *this* a million times, too: *what good is it to do all the rest of it correctly—greeting, bonding, qualifying and a terrific presentation—if you don’t close the sale?*

So what is this “closing” thing, exactly?