

Establish credibility with **YOUR Customers**

BY JOHN STANLEY



One of the main challenges manufacturers and retailers have is establishing credibility with the customer. According to research the consumer is more likely to trust information received via their own research, on the web or from friends that from a salesperson. Some industries have an easier job of getting the credibility message across than other, for example a vet is likely to be more trusted and credible than a second hand car salesperson in the consumers mind. Whatever industry you are in the important rules of the game is to get the credibility message across quickly as the consumer has not got the time to wait and do the research on you to provide them with the confidence they need. What are customers looking for in the credibility stakes?

This is my list of essential attributes for the credible salesperson.

1. First Impression based on what you wear

I have heard salespeople say that it does not matter what they wear when dealing with the customer as it is their knowledge that is important. We live in a society that, for better or worse, judges people on first impressions. What you wear does matter. There is a dress code for nearly every job. Some of those codes may be quite strict with little leeway, others may be looser, but a code still exists. You cannot get away with wearing Bermuda shorts if you are a bank manager, outside of Bermuda. The consumer will judge you on what you wear; you have to play by their rules, not yours.

2. Watch the body language

The consumer will believe you if they feel you are confident about what you are talking about. That means you need to watch your body language. Use positive, not negative, body language when dealing with the client. This means that facial expressions are as important as having an open body stance. We pick up the little clues at a sub conscious level when talking to each other. You need to show you are confident in what you are saying. How you say it is as important as what you are saying.

3. Have a Business card handy

It still amazes me when I am presenting conferences and ask for peoples Business cards, the number of people who tell me they have left them at home. Business cards are an important tool in your armoury and should be with you all the time. When you cannot present a business card your credibility declines in the customers mind straight away.

4. Use Open Questions to start the conversation

To gain credibility with the consumer you have to start the conversation in the right way to obtain the information you require to gain the credibility. Open questions, those that start with How, When, Where and Why allow the consumer to explain where they are in the process, what information they already have and what information is missing in their mind. This allows you to fill the gaps for them.

5. Listen

Credible people are listeners, not only do they listen, but they show that they are listening. Perfect those listening skills and the customer will be more open with you and more trusting of you. Do not butt in at the wrong time or interrupt and finish the conversation for the customer. The golden rule in a successful transaction is that you talk for about 30% of the time and listen for about 70% of the time.

6. Tell your team what is happening

Listen to the customer and follow up in the correct manner. I am in the process of changing my car with a reputable car company. I have agreed a format for our dealings with them. In the last week I have had letters from at least four people in the organisation asking for details I have already supplied to the salesperson; their credibility is going downhill rapidly. Why did they not communicate with each other in house before they harass the customer?

7. Follow up with an agreed Timetable

Set out a plan on when and how you will continue the communications journey with the customer and then stick to that plan. We are still waiting for a plumber to phone us from three months ago after he promised he would ring back straight away. Credibility is about agreeing to the ground rules and keeping to them.

8. Credibility is based on the weakest team member in your team

Remember that you work in a team and the weakest member in the team actually sets the ground rules for the consumer. You will be judged on your weakest performer, not the best performer.

9. Keep up to date with trends around what you do.

Keep up to date with the trends that your customer is keeping up with that surround your product. This may mean reading the same magazines. A car salesperson may need to keep up with Top Gear and a garden centre retailer may need to keep up with fashion magazines to keep up with colour trends.

Consumers are looking for salespeople they can trust and whom they feel are credible. It is your role to make sure you move past customer service and start building credibility.

RETAIL TRENDS 2010

I have received a number of articles over the last few weeks that have predicted the trends for 2010.

Most have been up beat predicting the downturn we experienced at the end of the last decade as something that is well and truly behind us. Many have been theoretical and offered few action plans for retailers to enable them to make a difference in their business I believe we can define some trends that will define the new market place and provide an action plan to enable us to make a difference in 2010 and grow sales in our stores. My action plan would be as follows:

1 Online is Essential

There was a lot of retail trade done when your store was closed on Christmas Day, it all went online, some went to traditional retailers who have an Online shop presence while some went to new style retailers who have no physical shop. The real trend we need to focus on is that from here on Online shopping will be part of everyone's retail mix. To ignore it will be a mistake Retailers who are planning for the future will have some form of Online offer for the consumer. This may be a standalone offer or a partnership with another supplier, but more and more consumers are going to expect to order products Online. This will result in some major changes in retailing as we know it.

2 Training Team Members will become Urgent

When I started my career in retailing product training was a weekly affair, it was part of doing business. In recent years I have noticed that more and more retailers have done less and less team training in product knowledge and customer service. A result of this is that generally customer service standards have declined. This has meant that some consumers have drifted into Online retailing as a result of this lack of training. My daughter recently went to buy a tent in a local camping shop, she ended up Online in the shop looking at the manufacturer's webpage as the salesperson could not help her with the information she required. Successful retailers in 2010 will start investing more in training their team members. The consumer is not interested in the product, they are interested in the service they receive when they visit a store and companies will be judged on their people, not their product.

3 Retailers will twitter along with their Customers.

Indicators are showing that there are fewer people using FaceBook than a year ago. This does not mean the end of social networking on the web, it does mean people are becoming more selective in how they use social networking. Consumers are already talking about you on the social networking pages, or you hope they are. What we will see is more and more businesses using Face Book and Twitter as a means of communicating directly with their consumers. The social network will increasingly become a marketing tool for retailers in 2010. More and more businesses will start experimenting with Twitter and the other social network systems available to see what works best for them and their customers

4 Where does it come from?

Over the last decade few consumers have been concerned on the origin of products. This will change for various reasons.

Consumers are going to be asking the origin. Some will be doing it for ethical reasons, others because they prefer to support their local businesses whilst others are more focused on the carbon footprint and transport miles the product has travelled. Whatever the reason, retailers will have to justify more and more why they are sourcing a product from a specific source.

5 Price Challenges will prevail

2009 was a year when we trained the customer to become more price focused than they have been for a generation. It will take a long time to refocus the consumers mind, but successful retailers will have to refocus the consumers mind on value rather than just price. Providing genuine value offers will be a harder sell than in the past, but it is something that retailers will need to concentrate on if we are to retrain the consumer and improve the bottom line for the business.

In summary I would encourage you to embrace the social network and find out what works for your business, invest in your people so they stand out from the crowd and start developing genuine value offers for your consumers

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