



Back to Basics – The Key to Recession Proof Your Business!

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Closing speaker at 2008 Convention

Happy Holidays to those of you I met in Puerto Rico and those that didn't attend the 2008 convention! When times are tough it's important to focus on those things we can control. That means getting everyone on your team executing the basics well. Most of your staff will read this article and say, "Oh, I know that". The real question you need to ask is, "Yes, but are you doing it consistently"? To help you recession proof your business, I will summarize some key points from my program and outline some key activities and exercises you can do with your staff to grow your business in 2009.

1. Stop Order-Taking, Start Order-Seeking and Consult with Clients

The days of order-taking are over. To survive this downturn, we must build deeper relationships with customers and position ourselves as *business consultants*. Your staff must confidently and proactively engage customers in conversations and turn incoming calls into opportunities. Everyone must be a sales ambassador for your business.

Their job is to first discover the *pain* or *dreams* of your customers and then offer the appropriate solutions. This means focusing on building a relationship of trust. This is not possible until your customers feel you are looking out for their best interests and not just trying to sell a product. More so, you can't develop this trust by doing the *product knowledge dump*!

It is amazing how many sales reps forget the power of *consultative selling*. The premise is you ask good questions, listen carefully and when you uncover a genuine need, only then do you offer your solutions. It is based entirely on providing service, value and seeking long-term relationships. While we all know this intellectually, few firms reinforce it as a best practice.

To keep it simple, I recommend you state a fact and then ask an *open-probing question* that demonstrates you really care about your customers, for example:

"John, many of my customers tell me business is down right now. I'm curious, what you are doing to get through these difficult times?"

"Protecting the beauty of your tile is important. What are you currently doing to maintain and clean it to ensure durability and longevity?"

Try this exercise at your next meeting. Print out the handout at (insert link or attach), see the list of partial open probing questions on page 2, and develop your own "pain and dream" questions. Next, type up all the open

probing questions on a tip sheet and challenge everyone to begin working them into their conversations. Be sure to ask frequently, “let me know if you find a *“pain”* or *“dream”* today and recognize them for the effort. Listen closely to calls and customer interactions to make sure your people are using a consultative approach. Observations and feedback is critical in this economy—you cannot afford to lose any business by complacent staff.

At the top of page 2 in the handout, see if your staff can guess the top three sales sins and fill in the blanks. The answers are:

1. product knowledge dump
2. pains or dreams
3. benefit and value

As an owner or sales manager in your business, you must be willing to reinforce and coach these skills. Praise anyone you hear using these questions and stating value, even if it doesn’t lead to immediate business. Remember, it takes some effort to turn an order taker to an order seeker — and its well worth the effort!

2. Pre-Call Planning – The Key to Differentiate and Win Business

With orders down, you can’t afford to have your sales reps winging sales calls and losing business. Many of your seasoned inside and outside sales reps believe a good sales call is giving a presentation on a specific product. As stated above avoid *product dumping!* Remember, the customer should be doing most of the talking about their needs and challenges. The real key to win business is with thorough *pre-call planning*. See page 3 in the handout.

Pre-call planning is a process that ensures *advance* preparation is done to increase the chance of getting a sale or expanding the relationship with a prospective or existing customer. I recommend any employee that is going to be talking with a customer in person, returning a call or following up, consider using the pre-call planning form on page 4 and 5 in the handout. Everyone in your business is an ambassador and can impact revenue. While there are ten items on the form, let me highlight several:

- **Objective** – Have an objective clearly in mind with a Plan A and Plan B. Is your objective to walk away with a sale? Learn more about their business? Is it simply an introductory call? Give some thought to the outcomes and have options.
- **Gather Client Intelligence** – Visit the customer’s website and Google their name and company to learn about their current practice, talk to people who know this person, and check all current data bases and client files for past business and conversations. Also jot down anything personal you can use to build rapport such as asking about a recent vacation.

- **Prepare Open-Probing Questions** – Anticipate what they might need and develop some key open probing questions to engage the customer. The key is to ask questions to draw out the customer’s PAIN (challenges or frustrations) and/or DREAMS (future goals). See number 1 above
- **Opening ice-breaker/purpose of the call**– Imagine how you will begin the conversation and jot down some notes.

As an owner or sales manager, it’s your job to ensure there’s a structured and disciplined process for pre-call planning. By planning with your team members, observing or listening in on a phone call and giving specific feedback—you can raise their performance. Focus on the activities that will get you results. I recommend you make pre-calling planning a best practice activity by collecting a minimum number of the forms until you feel it’s a habit.

3. Engage Your Staff To Deliver On Your Service Brand Promise

A sale is when you make a promise and service is when you deliver on the promise. In this very challenging economy we must do everything possible to retain loyal customers and generate repeat and referral business. You can’t possibly deliver on your brand promise if you don’t first get your employees to understand it, live it and have a high sense of urgency.

The Four Seasons Resorts is an excellent example of an organization that consistently delivers on its brand promise and engages all their staff in the customer experience. Nearly everyone you interact with takes ownership and appears genuinely happy to serve you. While their properties are remarkably beautiful and luxurious, it’s their dedicated and engaged staff that truly brings their brand alive.

How do they get thousands of associates worldwide to buy-in and commit to their philosophy? Certainly they haven’t done it by just mandating service standards, delivering rote training and crossing their fingers, hoping for the best. They get their staff participating, engaged and on board!

Involving your staff can do wonders to revitalize those that feel isolated or complacent. If you want to get your employees to internalize—and deliver on—your brand promise try the following:

1. Be sure everyone understands the most important goals and priorities in your business. See the exercise on page 1 in the handout.
2. Ask your staff to mystery shop your competitors or other businesses and discuss how you compare.
3. Create a SWAT team from different departments to make thank you and follow up calls
4. Invite customers to speak at your staff meetings or host a customer panel at your Staff Appreciation and Education Day.

5. Invite employees in support areas or removed from the customer experience to go on a sales call or visit a job installation.
6. Get your staff involved in measuring service with follow up calls.
7. Create a team Dream Board and have each employee do an individual one as well. Block out an hour and have your staff cut out photos from magazines with colorful pictures of travel scenes, golfing, skiing, kitchens, and homes. Then invite some to share why they selected a certain scene. This powerful exercise will teach your staff the power of focus, goals and uplift their spirits. More detail is provided in my book, Dream Big! What's the Best That Can Happen? (To order see the website below.)

Chances are you and your employees are feeling a bit apprehensive. So to encourage everyone--work your game plan, go on the offensive and be determined to build a winning team! I'll be in your area periodically so let me know if I can help. I'm happy to take questions regarding this article at:

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Happy Holidays!

Barbara Sanfilippo is an award-winning speaker, coach and author of Dream Big! What's the Best That Can Happen? and contributing author of The Service Path—Your Roadmap To Build Strong Customer Loyalty. She delivered the closing keynote at CTDA's 2008 Conference in Puerto Rico. To sign up for her e-tips, inquire about speaking, training and audio CD's, visit www.Barbara-Sanfilippo.com . For availability contact Rich Tiller at: (800)222-1556.