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What Is Your Retail Sales Process?

Now, more than ever, the strength of a repeatable retail selling process has become a key differentiator for those operating in a more competitive marketplace. You must constantly ask yourself these important questions:

- “Why would someone choose to do business with me or my retail business?”
- “What process will make the buying decision easier and more intuitive for prospective customers?”
- “How do I help them self-discover their need to buy without putting pressure on them to buy?”

As you ponder your own process, I want you to keep in mind that retail sales is a profession to be proud of. It exists to create great memories and experiences for the willing buyer or customer. Retail gives you the opportunity to share your valuable expertise to help guide people into making the best possible decisions and to make choices that they are excited about and comfortable with, by drawing emotion into the mix and creating positive experiences that are often shared with others. Last but not least, retail gives you the ability to earn money while helping others.

In other words, your retail sales process should help you have fun, improve people's lives, and make money. That's what I am about to share with you in this book.

Done properly, an effective retail sales process is simply this:

- An ongoing series of authentic real-time conversations in which the customer's expectations are consistently exceeded through a well-modeled, skillfully crafted series of consciously designed interactions that take into account basic operating principles of human behavior and psychology on both the buyer side and the seller side.

And here's what a retail sales process isn't:

- It's not a script you memorize. (See "authentic" above.)
- It's not something you improvise, either. (See "well-modeled interactions" above.)

- It's not high-pressure.
- It's not a default setting that connects to what was familiar or comfortable to you years ago.
- It's not based on win/lose thinking. (Instead, it focuses on mutually beneficial outcomes.)

Note that while some of what follows is applicable to virtually any retail setting, the bulk of what I will be sharing with you is relevant to upscale consumer purchases that take place in a traditional brick-and-mortar retail environment.

THE “WOW!” RETAIL EXPERIENCE

A friend of mine, Marcy, recently told me of a recent “wow!” retail sales experience. She was fortunate enough to be the customer. Naturally, I wanted to know all of the details that helped create this experience for her.

Marcy told me that she had been in the market for a hot tub. She had looked up several names of dealers and had proceeded to a particular store based on its convenient location and the positive online reviews it had received. For the entire time she was at this retail hot tub and spa outlet, she experienced no pressure whatsoever. Alexandra, the sales professional working with her at this store, answered Marcy's questions, learned about what she was interested in, asked pertinent questions about her lifestyle and background, and ultimately guided her to make the best possible decision based on what had been discussed. Marcy found her time

with Alexandra to be easy and informative. She enjoyed herself and was excited when she finally made the purchase.

When I asked Marcy to tell me a little more about Alexandra, her newly crowned “favorite” salesperson, her reply to me was that she felt Alexandra was one of the best salespeople she had ever worked with. Out of curiosity, I asked if it would be OK for me to get Alexandra’s contact information and call her myself. Marcy agreed.

I reached out. I wanted to get another sales professional’s perspective on the retail selling environment and find out exactly what process had created this “wow!” experience for my friend. It was clear to me that Alexandra had a process, and I was curious about what it was.

From the 30,000-foot level, it was exactly the process I’ve already shared with you. It was:

- An ongoing series of authentic real-time conversations...
- ...in which Marcy’s expectations were consistently exceeded...
- ...through a well-modeled, skillfully crafted series of consciously designed interactions...
- ...that took into account basic operating principles of human behavior and psychology.

Let’s break down in more detail how Alexandra pulled this off.

In answer to my question, “What creates wonderful experiences for your customers?” here is what Alexandra had to share.

- **A welcoming attitude.** Alexandra's belief is that people who walk into her store, whether they believe themselves to be browsing, buying, or even looking for help, are to be treated like human beings at all times. I have compared this concept to welcoming a guest into your home. This is the feeling to be conveyed to anyone walking into your store or retail establishment.
- **Being competitive (in a good way).** Alexandra is proud of the fact that she is competitive by nature. She loves to win. This is what fuels her true desire to get out of bed every morning with a purpose.
- **Writing down goals.** Alexandra puts her goals into writing. Not just business goals, but goals for every part of her life, including financial, social, community, health and fitness, and so on. In my experience, this puts her in the elite as far as sales professionals go—I would estimate the top 3–5%. Yes, you read that correctly: 3–5%. Although some very successful individuals keep their goals in their head, Alexandra goes the extra mile by writing them down. Her motto is, “If you see it, you can achieve it.”
- **Passion.** Alexandra is truly passionate about what she sells. When I asked her what she sold, expecting to hear about all of the hot tub models, shapes, sizes, and newest technology, she simply said: “I sell experiences and memories.” This, to me, was a great answer. She's not

just selling hot tubs. She's selling experiences and memories that happen to connect to hot tubs. Talk about an emotional connection with the buyer. This was one of the first things my friend noticed about Alexandra. Alexandra genuinely cares about the customer experience and the memories they create; she knows that the sale extends well beyond the transaction at the register. In addition to her passion about what she sells, Alexandra told me she is also very passionate about health and wellness and about family as well. She said that many of her customers purchased their models from her because they wanted to spend more time with their teenage children, engage in more relaxing conversation, leave their cell phones out of reach of the tub (for the benefit of both the people and their cell phones), and enjoy more much-needed quality time with their family members. Placing a premium on emotionally powerful issues like family, quality time, and wellness moves Alexandra's discussions away from a simple, one-dimensional conversation about who has the lowest price.

- **Curiosity.** Alexandra is committed to finding out what people need. She has truly mastered the art of asking great questions, which helps her help her customers. Being cared for by these insightful questions from Alexandra lowers a buyer's "defense walls" and causes them to open up and enjoy the experience.
- **Being approachable.** Alexandra befriends everyone

who walks into her store. Living the rule of “people buy from people they like,” she prefers to make friends with her customers. At the same time, she does not seek approval or validation from prospects or customers.

- **Being interested.** Alexandra shows authentic interest in the people she talks to. She lives Stephen R. Covey’s famous rule from his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” This level of person-to-person interest goes a long way in creating differentiation from the competition.
- **Being OK with “no.”** Alexandra knows she, her products, and the store she works for are not for everyone. She also knows not everyone is going to be qualified to be her customer. That is perfectly OK with her—and therein lies her success. She does not appear to be needy in any way. Although she would love to earn the business, she is not tied to this outcome emotionally. This eases any pressure a prospect might experience from other salespeople.
- **Following through effectively.** Alexandra is committed to professional follow up. Once a customer leaves the store, she always sends a handwritten note, thanking them for their interest. In that note, she always includes a reference to something she learned about them during the sales process, such as an upcoming anniversary or the name of a teenage child.

- **Asking for referrals.** After installation of a hot tub, once the customer has had the opportunity to enjoy the new purchase, Alexandra circles back and asks how things are going. She also asks if her customer knows anyone else who is in the market. Word-of-mouth recommendations to the customer's friends, associates, and relatives has led to many other referrals and additional business. Although this sounds like a great idea, it amazes me how many retail professionals don't actually ask for introductions and referrals.

A side note is in order here. Recently, I referred a friend who happened to be in the market for a hot tub to Alexandra. You can bet on the outcome: another new customer for Alexandra. Why? Because my friend Marcy had had a great experience with her. Every experience that exceeds a customer's experience pays compound interest.

WHAT IS A HIGHLY EFFECTIVE RETAIL-SELLING PROFESSIONAL?

The descriptions I just shared with you of what makes Alexandra so successful connect to some timeless success principles of retail selling. Alexandra is a professional. The following definition, I believe, summarizes the essence of highly effective retail sales professionals like her.

Highly effective retail sales professionals:

- Create and support the self-discovery process.

- Facilitate, with integrity, the uncovering of the prospect's needs and wants.
- Facilitate action on those needs and wants.

Let's take a closer look at the three elements of this definition.

Highly effective retail sales professionals create and support the self-discovery process. Buyers have to discover things for themselves. Unlike the traditional model, which is all about telling, the most effective selling occurs when buyers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions. High-pressure tactics simply are not effective. This self-discovery process is critical to professional selling, in the retail environment and everywhere else. To “create” and “support” self-discovery, the salesperson must foster an environment of mutual trust and openness. The absence of pressure and the salesperson's ability to ask effective questions are two critical factors that facilitate the self-discovery process. Recall that Alexandra never pressured my friend in any way.

Highly effective retail sales professionals facilitate, with integrity, the uncovering of the prospect's needs and wants. Alexandra focused on supporting discussions about family and wellness to uncover powerful emotional gaps between where a prospect really was and where they wanted to be in life. This stands in stark contrast to most discussions with retail customers. All too often, the customer walks in fixated on one or two things—price and availability, say—and leaves the store without ever having been engaged by the

salesperson on an emotional level about what's working and what isn't working in their world.

Highly effective retail sales professionals facilitate action on those needs and wants. Alexandra applied zero pressure to my friend's buying experience. But when Marcy was ready to make a decision, Alexandra was there to guide her. Often, this is accomplished by means of a simple question, such as, "How would you like me to help?" or, "What would you like me to do now?"

OTHER BEST PRACTICES FOR RETAIL SALES PROFESSIONALS

Alexandra exemplified a number of other best practices that I have seen in highly effective retail sales professionals. These best practices are worth understanding before moving into the main section of the book. I've summarized them briefly below.

Have written goals in multiple areas. These include, but aren't limited to, sales goals; also include business, financial, personal, health and fitness, community, spiritual, and so on. Alexandra wrote her goals down. Have you written yours down? What, specifically, do you hope to accomplish in the coming three months? Six months? Twelve months?

Know and commit to the most important business goals. These include the building blocks of personal success: repeat business and referral business.

Create and follow a proactive plan. Highly effective retail sales professionals don't simply wait for the next customer

to walk in the door. You will see many of these champions involved in local networking groups and joining smaller groups of like-minded professionals dedicated to helping each other with referrals. Many of them are also members of local boards and charities.

Have an overall positive outlook. Anyone in sales can tell you that it can be tough at times. This is a high-rejection business. Think-it-overs, stalls, get-back-to-yous—these are all part of the world of retail selling. Maintaining a mindset of opportunity is essential. Alexandra’s outlook matched up with the classic formula SWSWSWSW: Some will. Some won’t. So what? Stop whining! Consciously adopting this mindset and rejecting the pessimism best exemplified by the donkey Eeyore in A. A. Milne’s classic children’s book *Winnie-the-Pooh* is one of the distinctions that separates superior retail sales professionals from everyone else.

Take responsibility for outcomes. Highly effective retail sales professionals avoid the “blame game,” the habit of identifying as many external factors as possible that might be inhibiting sales, foot traffic, or “yes” answers. (For instance: “It is very slow,” or “The internet has taken a lot of business away.”) These professionals are open to learning from each and every challenge they encounter; they adjust their retail selling process accordingly. The result is steady, incremental, and consistent improvement. Personal responsibility is one of the paths to selling mastery.

Cultivate self-confidence. Customers and prospects are

more drawn to a retail salesperson who exudes confidence, not arrogance, in order to provide the information necessary to help suit individual needs and wants. One aspect of self-confidence is product or trade knowledge; another is being conversant with store procedures, operations, and policies. Yet another is the certain knowledge that they do not need approval from their prospects and customers. Although it is nice to be liked, effective salespeople know that focusing too much on making friends can undercut the task at hand, which is to help the other person make a sound buying decision. Sales is not the place to get your emotional needs met.*

Consistently control emotions. Highly effective retail sales professionals maintain even-keeled interactions with customers, even the challenging ones. They know there will be challenging customers—they know not everyone is easy.

Recover quickly from rejection. Great retail salespeople are perfectly OK with a customer telling them, “No, thanks.” Why? Because they are tied to the process of selling, not the outcome of an individual discussion. They also understand that not every prospect is qualified to be their customer. This understanding of a mutual process of qualifying takes the pressure out of each opportunity and replaces it with a relaxed exchange of information in order to see whether there is a fit. This places much less pressure on the customer (and the salesperson).

* Source: David Sandler.

Become comfortable with money. When it comes to money in the retail selling universe, there are two different ways that salespeople deal with it: technical and conceptual. “Technical” refers to the manner and process in which money is discussed. “Conceptual” refers to the salesperson’s own internal money messages—messages that can come from childhood. These can tend to be early childhood messages of apparent scarcity, abundance, or the appropriateness of the topic itself that might have come from places such as dinner table conversation with parents. I will discuss this more in detail later in this book.

Proactively pursue new business through referrals. While retail selling may involve a brick-and-mortar destination, there is a new breed of retailer or retail sales professional who seeks to find both customers and referral sources outside of the store. They take advantage of marketing events and promotions, generating additional foot traffic. I believe this trait is vital. Ask yourself: How many referrals have you gotten recently? What is currently preventing you from getting the levels of introductions and referrals you would like?

Develop effective questioning and listening skills. Highly effective retail sales professionals possess mastery in how they pose questions and are constantly learning new things about their prospects and customers. They are present with their customers, learning as much as they can with limited distractions, giving the customer the (accurate) impression they are the most important person in the world

at the moment. In short, the best salesperson is more customer focused than self-focused.

Create early bonding and rapport. Great retail salespeople are well-schooled in how to approach potential customers, breaking down any type of buyer defense wall. They understand the buyer's communication style, engaging them in a professional and friendly manner. Instead of a traditional ineffective greeting, such as, "Can I show you something?" or "Can I help you?" or "Is there something in particular you were looking for?" they simply greet with a warm "Hello" and proceed to engage about the customer first, creating comfort and the early stages of trust.*

Discover the real reason prospects and customers buy. The best retail sales professionals understand what motivates their buyer. How would the customer feel after investing in that new item or service? What would they expect to happen as a result of that investment? Great salespeople get buyers comfortable enough to share this kind of critical information. They set the stage for an experience that will exceed expectations. This can only be accomplished through expert rapport building and superior questioning skills. In addition, they also understand the personal journey of the buyer from a more emotional place, as opposed to a presentation of the product's features and benefits.

Get commitments from prospects and customers. With

* Whether they realize it or not, they are following a Sandler selling rule: People buy from people they like and who are like them.

each comfortable customer or prospect who the expert salesperson engages, truthful dialogue emerges. This leads to clear next steps and the lack of wishy-washy phrases (like, “Let me think about it”) said to avoid giving any commitment.

Possess a strong desire for success. The best retail salespeople are tenacious. They are what I refer to as “climbers,” not “campers.” Consider two different types of mountain explorers. The climbers will ascend to the heights and ultimately to the summit. Campers are satisfied to pitch camp when things get challenging and stop before they reach the peak. In the world of retail selling, climbers are those who are willing to learn, who are unsatisfied with the status quo, and who always seek new ways to improve themselves. Climbers see every day as an opportunity to learn valuable lessons and push out of their own comfort zone by being proactive and growing with each customer-facing selling experience.

Have a strong sense of commitment. For highly effective retail sales professionals, this means doing what they say they are going to do regardless of how they feel about it. Specifically, they are committed to growth, to success, and to learning as much as they possibly can about their product or service and their market. This creates an excellent experience for their customers, who come to feel they have been dealing with an expert who is committed to helping them make a good decision. Those satisfied customers refer additional customers based on their shopping experience, which is driven by the sales professional’s personal commitment.

Consistently build a network and create customers for life. Highly effective retail sales professionals create positive buying experiences for their customers, leading to a wealth of proactive referrals and recommendations from family and friends. By exceeding their customer expectations, they create a “wow!” experience, making the shopping experience a common topic of discussion in their network. They routinely hear things like, “Alfonz and Seandra recommended I meet with you to talk about how you helped them. They speak very highly of you.”

Always learn and improve. Highly effective retail sales professionals are their own lifetime project. As a result, they are open to receiving feedback from their peers and management on possibilities to improve their work with prospects and customers. I call them Retail Champions.

SUMMARY

Notice that, although the environment of retail selling and selling in general has changed over the past several years, these timeless principles, based on keeping the lines of communication open, are shared by Retail Champions everywhere. They remain unchanged. They are the roadmap to excellence in the noble, demanding, and exciting profession of retail selling. Now let's get started!