

# Merchandising

by Keith Evans



## Sell with your ears, not your mouth

The stereotypical salesperson is superficial — outwardly friendly, but with only his interests at heart. He'll fast-talk you into buying something you may neither need nor want.

But the fact is salespeople drive businesses, and the most successful salespeople have your best interest at heart. How do they know what's in your best interest? They sell with their ears, not their mouths. This is particularly true of the most successful registered beef cattle breeders.

I know a breeder who never takes customers out to look at bulls right after they arrive at his place. Instead he invites them into the kitchen for a cup of coffee or a soft drink. He gets to know them better as he asks questions and carefully listens to what they have to say. When it's time to look at cattle, he knows a good deal about them and their operations. He also has a good idea about which of his cattle should fill their needs best.

Some customers arrive, look around, kick clods, mutter to themselves and leave without giving you a clue as to what they were wanting. When they don't say much, you may feel that you need to do the talking. You might talk about your cattle, your breeding program or anything else that comes to mind in order to avoid the discomfiting silences. It's important for customers to understand your program, but it is just as important for you to understand theirs.

**You need to ask** questions and to listen. Some breeders need a psychiatrist's couch in their office. Then, while customers relax, the breeder can ask questions that encourage them to disclose what kind of herd they have and how they expect you and your cattle to help. But a couch is a little impractical. The next best thing is to slow

things down over a friendly cup of coffee, while you ask questions and make mental notes.

For some people — who seem to be naturally born salespeople — this comes easily. They are inquisitive, they like to ask questions, and they display an obvious interest in what potential customers have to say. They ask questions that can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Their questions elicit detailed responses, and the responses bring up other leading questions.

You may feel self-conscious about asking what seem like personal questions or believe the customer will think you are prying. But put these thoughts from your mind. It's a fact that most of us love to talk about ourselves, especially when the listener is interested and keeps asking intelligent questions.

I know that I have a lot more to say about my business and myself than most people are interested in hearing. But give me a good listener who asks encouraging questions, and I will talk on and on about my work, my ideas, my family or whatever. And most people are a lot like me — they find your questions flattering.

When customers open up and tell you about themselves, their cattle operation and their goals in the cattle business, they provide you with useful information that can lead to a sale and to a satisfied customer.

How many cows are they breeding this year? What is the genetic makeup? Do they breed most cows artificially, or will the bull for which they are looking sire most of their next calf crop? Do they have children in 4-H or FFA or youngsters who are interested in heifer projects? What kind of performance records do they keep and use? How do they market their cattle?

Get answers to enough questions like these, and you can determine in a hurry

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what they need, what price range they have in mind or can afford, and which of your bulls or heifers most likely would satisfy them. You won't waste the buyer's or your own time showing everything on your place.

That great herd-bull prospect that will bring top dollar from the right person may not be suitable for today's customer. The bull with an outstanding milk expected progeny difference (EPD) probably won't be right for the customer who already has as much milk bred into his cows as is needed. The top yearling-weight bull may not work for a herd owner whose average cow frame score is already reaching the top limit. Simple stuff, but if you don't know it, you are more or less selling in the dark.

**Sales professionals** — that includes you — can't live on onetime sales. They make their living by solving problems and developing satisfied customers. Satisfied customers come back year after year and recommend you to others. Businesses thrive on repeat business and word-of-mouth advertising. It's much more efficient to bring back a satisfied customer than it is to attract and to sell to a new one.

Sure, we all grew up laughing at the stereotypical salesperson in movies or television — the person who would stretch the truth while he twisted an arm and charmed or even intimidated the customer, all to make a quick sale, then would move to the next sucker. Some salespeople still try these tactics.

But the best salespeople understand their customers, sometimes even better than the customers understand themselves. They look to solve a customer's problems by selling them a product that performs at least as well as, if not better than, expected. These salespeople know how to sell with their ears, not their mouths.

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