



# Merchandising

► by Keith Evans

## The customer isn't always right

*But don't let him know it.*

*Always assume that everything you say will be repeated to your very best customers, because at one time or another it probably will be.*

### Mind your manners

A registered cattle producer who, early in his career, worked as a county Extension agent in Minnesota lived by this motto, "Never say anything about anybody. They're all related."

Over the years it has become apparent to me that the producers who gossip and complain the most about their customers and other people in the cattle business are usually the ones who have the most trouble making sales. I suspect this is true in virtually every business.

Minding our manners when dealing with unhappy or even unreasonable customers, while we smile and keep our mouths shut, can be especially difficult. But the fact is that when we give the complaining customer a piece of our mind and send him away in a huff, we will have given that same piece of our mind to a good many other people in our business.

Word travels fast on the grapevine. Research has shown that a dissatisfied customer tells some 20 or more people about his bad experience. That's why good marketers go to great lengths to avoid controversy with a customer.

### Case in point

A southern Missouri registered cattle breeder and lay minister once told me a great story that illustrates this point. Some time after Joe (not his real name) had sold a bull to a local farmer, the farmer telephoned.

"Joe, do you remember that last bull you sold me? He's sterile," the customer said.

Joe thought for a minute, then said, "You know we always want to make things right. You bought that bull three years ago, why did you wait so long to call?"

It was quiet on the other end of the line, then the embarrassed farmer shot back defensively, "I don't care what you think, that bull is sterile, and so are all his sons!"

Being a part-time preacher may have

helped; anyway, Joe swallowed hard and told the man he was sorry the bull hadn't met his expectations. He told him to bring the bull back and said he would give the man a full refund.

As it turned out, the animal had grown considerably in three years and was worth more as a slaughter bull than what the farmer had originally paid for him. So Joe got the last laugh, and the customer was happy.

### Don't take it personally

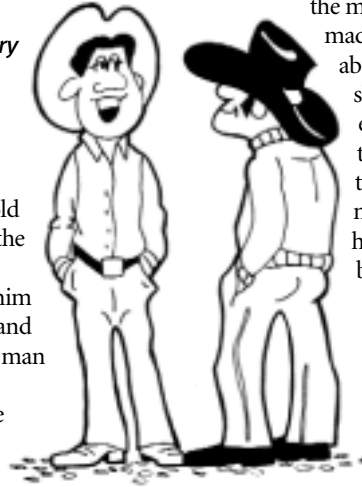
Another difficult situation for many marketers is how to deal with a good customer who suddenly takes his business elsewhere. It's often a temptation to unload your frustration and disappointment on the errant customer or someone else when this happens. After you have served this customer well for years, doing everything possible to make him happy, he shows his gratitude by deserting to a competitor. What's a marketer to do?

Some time back a thoughtful reader sent me a column about Bob (not his real name), a small business manufacturer. One year Bob lost all the business from his best customer, who had decided to buy from a Taiwanese manufacturer who offered a lower price.

The buyer was sure that he had alienated Bob, even though he felt obligated to check out new sources of supply. After all, the two of them had worked together for years. He feared what Bob might say or do when they met again. The customer even considered not going to an important trade show, just to avoid seeing Bob.

He needn't have worried. At the trade show Bob, despite his disappointment,

greeted him like a long-lost friend, not like a customer who had deserted him. He showed the man some improvements he had made in his product and chatted about the business in general. In short, he acted as if nothing had ever happened. Later in the day the buyer stopped by Bob's booth to place his entire order for the next year. It wouldn't have happened if Bob had taken the buyer's business decision personally and let it disrupt their long-term business relationship.



### Human nature

It is human nature, or so it seems, for some people to want more than they are entitled to.

When you run into a customer like that you have two choices: (1) do what is "fair" or (2) do what it takes to make the customer happy. In most cases the wise decision is to send customers away happy if you can afford it. Whatever the case, say nothing cross to the dissatisfied customer or nothing angry or derogatory about him to anyone else you might meet.

Also remember that it is only good business for buyers to check out other sources for quality, price and service. That's another good reason why a registered cattle breeder should never take these actions as a personal rejection. Life is short and there is nothing to be gained by alienating someone who was, until recently, a good customer. Hostility will seal the breakup because no one wants to do business with a person who makes us feel uncomfortable or guilty. We all have felt the sting of harsh words at one time or another and will go to great lengths to avoid additional unpleasant encounters.

A pastor and friend wrote me, after I had been careless and broken my arm, "It is hard to believe how one moment of incaution can produce months of inconvenience." The same can be said about dealing with customers.

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