

Sales & Marketing

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MARKETING WORDS THAT WORK

Despite sea change in customer attitudes, companies are still talking down to their clientele. All it takes is a subtle shift in your marketing language to produce noticeable results

By Shelle Rose Charvet PROFITguide.com, February 12, 2004

There's an old joke about Canadians: How do you get 25 Canadians out of a swimming pool? Tell them to get out of the pool.

When it comes to sales, those days are over. A shift in customer attitude over the past two decades means that now, more than ever, customers have switched from needing external direction to deciding for themselves whether or not to buy a product. They treat the sales pitch as grist for the mill, which they compare to other offers on the table.

In other words, they've gone from compliant to resistant — they no longer want to be told what to do. But while many companies understand this shift on an intuitive level, they have yet to take the right tone with their customers.

Firms that invest in uncovering exactly what makes a customer buy have had great success. They use the information to create their branding, design advertising campaigns and to train their employees on the exact language to use (or avoid) with customers — and they report astonishing results. Here's how you can get in on the action.

Rethink your marketing message

The shift in consumer attitudes means you need to change how you address your customers. Some companies are still touting themselves as "the best" or "the right choice." Discount fashion retailer Winners' slogan is "You should go." These firms essentially tell customers what to think and what to do, which is no longer an effective strategy.

To test this out, notice how you respond when told what to do. What's your reaction when you're presented with unsubstantiated claims? Don't you scoff when large corporations insist how much they care about you through their TV advertisements? When you enter a retail environment, doesn't it raise your dander when you are told to go to another store to get an item that's

in the retailer's catalogue and should therefore be available at all stores?

Have a good look at your marketing materials and look for examples of commanding and suggestive language.

Tweak your sales approach

Once you incorporate the right language in your advertising, your next step is to properly train your staff. Otherwise, you risk raising and then dashing your customers' expectations.

Listen to your salespeople as they advise customers. Do they make suggestions or assertions? Ask them to try out the following kinds of phrases with your customers and notice the response:

"Here's some information to consider"

"Only you can decide ..."

"Why commit before you know? Give us a try and judge for yourself."

There is a world of difference between "This is the best option for you," and "Here's what I suggest for your situation." The first is a statement of fact and implicitly issues a command to the customer, while the second is a suggestion to consider.

The challenge, of course, is getting your sales staff to follow your instructions to use suggestive rather than command language. You may wish to use suggestive language when explaining what you want.

Customers' attitudes are changing in many ways, and this shift from being externally motivated to buy to making the decision internally is just one of them. But even if you only address this one change, your customers will notice and appreciate the difference in approach. Of course, there's only one way to know for sure — try it yourself.

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