

RUG #1 NEWS

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Beyond the Fuzzy Side Up

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Walking the Market

Sy and Steve's Top Ten List or Beyond Fuzzy Side Up

By Sy Mahfuz and Steve Boodakian

Ok. You have a great location and wonderful product. You need a sales staff. What do you do? There is always Bob, your long time delivery man, or Sarah from the office, who knows your business as well as you do. Perhaps the best idea is to place an ad for someone new and train them, beginning with "fuzzy side up". Whichever way you go, having a properly trained sales team is as important as offering the right product mix.

The fact is that product development in our industry, key to its vitality, goes on at a frenetic pace. Meanwhile, the legacy of knowledge about our great products and how to sell them is being allowed to lie fallow and, in fact shrivel away. It is absolutely imperative that we concentrate as much on education and motivation of sales teams as we do on stocking our stores with the best colors, designs and qualities.

As more flooring and home furnishing companies enter the hand knotted, hand made, and better quality machine made area rug arena, product alone will not win the day. Long termed success can only come from educating everyone to look beyond simply responding to the customer's wants and effectively satisfying their needs. To think otherwise is fatally short-sighted.

With all the challenges that store owners have to deal with in order to remain strong in this highly competitive market, how many of us give this the time it deserves? We believe that it is by paying attention to training your sales team that you will separate yourself from your competition and not only gain and hold onto a greater market share but sell at better margins. More business + better margins = higher profits.

All too often we hear traditional retailers moaning about competing with the large chains and the internet. The key is to have a smarter sales team, who is not preoccupied with the competition but rather prepares themselves to become the competition.

To help you get there, we have prepared our "top ten list" of what makes every sales person, especially new hires not just good, but great! Share it with all the new and even "not so new" sales people who need to focus on what is important.

This list goes beyond the textbook advice that applies to selling in general and focuses on what we see, based on over 35 years experience, as hugely important to being the best of the best when it comes to selling rugs:

10. KNOW THE PRODUCT

Pay attention to the product. Not only what you carry in your store but the industry as a whole. Learn how different products are created and the strengths of each, so you can educate your customer. Believe us when we tell you that no

generation wants to know more about what they are buying than this one.

Also, understand the power of the brands you represent. This begins with the company you work for. Some of the best and most immediate results we see from our seminars revolve around a renewed enthusiasm with the store brand. This begins with management putting together a company "Blow Your Own Horn" packet and educating the sales team about the company's achievements. You would be surprised what a strong tool this is when it is used in a two to three minute presentation to new customers.

9. DEVELOP A RELATIONSHIP WITH SUPPLIERS

Just like retailers, suppliers have a personality that includes strengths and weaknesses. Larger ones may have a greater breadth of offerings while smaller more specialized suppliers will often be able to move more quickly responding to special requests. Make sure that you understand what to expect as far as delivery times and consistency of product. Your customer relies upon you, not the supplier, to manage the process of getting what they order on the floor when promised.

In our seminars to supplier reps, we stress the importance of their taking time to develop a relationship with not only the owner and manager but also each member of the sales team. Really get to know both your on the road rep and your inside contact at the supplier. They can best teach you about the product, and dealing with any "blips" in the process will be much smoother.

8. BUILD CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

Learn to Dance

For us, selling is like dancing. Someone has to lead, and that's you, and your partner (your customer) will appreciate working with an expert. Like dancing you want to get the second dance and not give your customer a reason to look for another partner. Make it memorable. Make it magic. You must connect in that all important first encounter.

Listen

When it comes to selling the most important skill is learning how to listen. The tendency of the new sales person is to jump right in and try to impress the customer with all that he/she knows. This derails the process of understanding the customer's real needs--the important first step after greeting the customer and making them feel comfortable in your environment. Learn to ask the right questions and make notes on the responses. Work to understand the life that the rug will lead. Then, and only then, can you efficiently take them through the process and "ring the cash register."

Be Honest

Many of the hand knotted Oriental rugs we sell are works of art. Even the high quality tufted and machine made area rugs many of us sell bring to life magnificent historical motifs and are a tremendous value when we stop to consider all the work that goes into their development and making. Our industry is fraught with salespeople who embellish beyond truth. This only works to perpetuate a reputation that we as an industry need to work to improve. If you develop a real trust with your customers you will stand above the competition and not only make the sale but build a solid foundation for that "second dance" and future business.

7. KNOW YOUR COMPETITION- DON'T FEAR IT

All too often we hear traditional retailers moaning about competing with the large chains and the internet. The key is to have a smarter sales team who is not preoccupied with the competition, but rather prepares themselves to become the competition by understanding both their strengths and weaknesses. Know what they do right and do it better. Know what they do wrong and don't do it

6. GARNER RESPECT FROM YOUR PEERS

This is one of those intangibles that has far reaching benefits. You gain that respect by working hard at your craft and doing what you promise. Remember, the reputation of the company you work for is affected by what you say and do in your community, in the store, and with your suppliers. Community connections will drive business to you personally. In the store, it may lead to promotion. With suppliers it gives you needed credibility. You simply cannot buy this at any price; and, if you lose it, it is very difficult to regain.

5. ASK FOR THE REFERRAL

There is only one sale easier than a repeat customer and that is a referral. As the old adage says, "Birds of a feather, flock together." Don't be afraid to ask a satisfied customer for referrals.

4. BE PRO-ACTIVE

Sales people are the front line. No one should understand the customer better than you. Let management know what the customers like and don't like. This will help guide them with inventory choices as well as company policies.

Check on back orders before the due date and call the customer. Delays are accepted much better if the customer is notified without calling you.

If you send rugs out on home approval, call your customer and get their reaction. This is so important especially when it does not work. Take this opportunity to either prepare a selection that may better suit their needs for their return or make an appointment to go to the house.

Make a follow-up call after the rug is delivered and on the floor and ask them how they like it. Customers love to bubble over about how beautiful it looks and, if they have any

concerns, you can deal with them rather than let the customer stew over them and go away not 100% satisfied. This is the best time to get those all important referrals as well!

3. CREATE A SIGNATURE

A store distinguishes itself by the selection it carries and the selling environment it creates. Stores spend a lot of money on inventory and work very hard to get customers in the door. You must distinguish yourself by creating a unique and memorable experience that dazzles your customer to the extent that, if you have the rug they love, they wouldn't even think of buying it anywhere else. Give memorable service, and they will be back when they want to buy their next rug and more importantly recommend you to their friends.

2. BE POSITIVE

Selling can be frustrating; buying can be, as well--especially when it comes to shopping for a product that you know little about. You only have about five minutes to capture their attention so take control from the start. Dazzle them. Don't prejudice. Treat the last customer of the day like the first. Make it fun and the relationship will be off to a great start

That brings us to number 1, which is the essence of what we teach.

1. DEVELOP A PASSION FOR THE PRODUCT

Fostering a true appreciation for our wonderful product is the job for all of us who sell rugs. Being a rug professional includes a commitment not only to know the products--all the products--but also to feel the passion that the founders of this industry felt over the centuries and the vigor with which our industry develops and brings to market take-your-breath-away rugs year after year.

This handmade and high end machine made rug business complains about losing its identity. I hear people in our business all the time groaning about rugs becoming a commodity and no longer being special. Why is that?

The problem is not the product. A visit to any of the major rug markets will show you that! The vitality of our industry depends on all of us who sell these great rugs

Sy and I were lucky. As young men we traveled to the market with our fathers. This was one of the most eye opening experiences of our lives. To see and touch the great variety of beautiful rugs and interact with those who put their hearts and souls into their designs and weaving, made us appreciate the product far beyond what we could have experienced on our own. This is where our most valuable education truly began. We made it our job to learn about this business from a generation that understood the great artistry of what they sold.

The product lives but the passion is shriveling away. The future of rugs, both handmade and high quality machine made, relies upon your commitment to educate yourself about the product and the art it represents. Develop and nurture a passion for this great art form and, in turn, instill excitement in your customers.

We did not, at any point, include price in our discussion. It

is because we strongly believe that if you pay attention to your customers' needs by doing what we outlined above, price becomes much less important than you may think. Competing on price is fragile and short lived. Dazzle your customers and give them a signature level of service. You will separate yourself from your competition and build relationships that will increase business with your existing customers, gain referrals from them, and turn heads when you approach new ones.

Results will be both immediate and far reaching. You win. Your customer wins. Your company wins. And our industry wins 🌸

Sy Mahfuz and Steve Boodakian have been in the sales and service of Fine Rugs and Carpets for 3 generations and are partners in MERA Consulting Group which focuses on product education and motivation for area rug and home furnishing professionals.