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*Charlie Fewell helps business leaders improve vital business outcomes through keynote presentations, on-site training, or multi-day consulting engagements. He works with people in the automotive industry to build strong relationships inside and outside the company, create a sustainable financial model, and develop the potential that resides within the workforce. He has spent more than 30 high-octane years in the automotive environment, having worked with business-to-business sales professionals, franchisees, and customer service employees in the wholesale distribution environment. He authors the Fill 'er Up with Fewell newsletter and series of training guides, and is a frequent speaker for national trade associations and corporate organizations. His vision is to help people in business improve their performance by fueling change to transform business results.*

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## Gloomy Business Outlook?

How you can thrive when times are tough.

Let's make one thing clear from the start: you have no control over the state of the economy or the potential loss of revenue and profits that may occur when times are tough. You do, however, have total control over your behaviors during an economic slowdown. Many companies pull back and reduce overall spending in an attempt to preserve the bottom line. My consulting and coaching experience has shown me that in many cases, proactive customer outreach totally stops during tough times, because "consumers aren't buying anyway, so why waste the money?"

### Outreach

Call me insane, but I am convinced that in tough times your outreach program needs to kick into high gear. If people are going to exercise more frugal spending practices, then you surely need to be top of mind when they do decide to purchase. Further, remember that everything you do creates images in the customer's mind of your products and services. If you "disappear" for all practical purposes, some of your customers will determine that you have gone out of business. Customers don't typically sit around at night and discuss all the potential vendors for products and services like yours—unless they are in need. The question is, if they are in need, are you on the list?

Take a moment to define your current plan: the process or strategy you currently use for staying top of mind with current customers. How do you contact them, and how often? Do you use direct mail, radio, personal sales calls, Internet, telemarketing, or TV? Of course, based on the product, service, and buying cycle, this can vary. If you sell groceries, you will see your customers much more often than you will for heating and cooling system services. Certainly the way you stay in contact with customers and the content of the information will be different than a grocery retailer. What is your annual budget number (% of sales) for marketing and advertising?

Do you produce a newsletter for your customers? Do you use incentives to help current loyal customers bring you names of potential purchasers of your products and services? Do you use incentives with your commercial accounts to promote preventative maintenance practices? My work with business leaders and sales teams has taught me that there are some common reasons this happens. Due to the fear of being pushy, we let customers buy what they currently want or need, and have no clearly defined process to follow-up and help the customer know everything we can supply to meet additional current or future needs. Another reason is that some days we are operating like our pants

are on fire, for various reasons, and we simply give the customer what they ask for and move on.

Let me emphasize that if you don't have the processes in place to deliver excellent customer service and create advocates for your business from your current customer database, then there is no need to attempt to ask for more business from them or to ask for referrals. You must deliver whatever you sell with excellence, or you will be frustrated when attempting to obtain referrals. A pre-cursor to this is knowing your customer satisfaction rating, and if it is not in the "exemplary" range, fix it.

### Slowing Down the Sales Process

Selling is both an art and a science. Successful companies have a well-defined selling process, yet allow their sales team members some flexibility to drive creativity. Remember that every employee is in sales. They each represent your business, whether it is a B2B or B2C company. In the B2B environment, one important part of the selling process is the interview through which customer needs are revealed and understood by the sales professional. Many sales persons have an agenda and are charged to "sell the special" rather than slow the process down and understand customer needs. By this I mean both present and possible future needs that could be met by your products and services. In my selling model, I emphasize the importance of asking appropriate questions with sincerity, in a genuine attempt to understand how to meet relevant customer needs.

With commercial accounts, we must never presume what their needs are, or that they are the same as they were just a few months ago. As I write this, I am reminded of the pressure that comes with the dramatic increase in fuel prices we are currently experiencing. What can you do to help your commercial account customers reduce overall operating costs of their fleet? Just this week I have conversed with a representative of a paving company, with a high percentage of fleet equipment fueled by diesel. I also spoke with a representative of a freight transfer operation, with all of the equipment fueled by diesel. I'm sure you can guess the hot topic on their minds: profitability concerns due to rising fuel costs.

If a commercial account comes to your business with a component failure from a piece of on-road equipment, what do you do? Of course you repair or replace the component, but do you think how many more of these types of failures the account could experience? Do you know how

many of these pieces of equipment the fleet operates? Do you think of how you may be able to design a program for this account to reduce the possibility of an on-road failure and the related expense that would occur should one happen?

In the B2C sales process, courtesy, respect, knowledge, and delivery of an exemplary experience are key. You can also introduce other add-on items that may be relevant to customers. In addition to making customers aware of additional products, customer education is a great way of increasing customer loyalty. Are you continually educating the retail customer on the benefits that accrue to them by conducting proper maintenance of the heating and cooling systems on their vehicle? Do you have a selling cadence at the retail customer level? That is a carefully organized process, containing regular reoccurring actions, moving toward a sales goal.

The server's job is to ask and allow you as the customer to say yes or no. A few months ago I was in a meeting with almost 50 other attendees. We went to dinner together and were seated in the same area in booths of 6 and tables of 8. One server and an assistant came to take care of us. The

assistant brought water and the server began taking orders. She asked every person for the drink order and the appetizer, every time. Less than 10 percent ordered the appetizer, and she never became weary, for her job was to simply ask and allow the customer to say yes or no. She didn't vary because she was busy, and had a number of us to serve. She faithfully followed the cadence that her employer outlined. What's your cadence?

**Customer Education**

When times are tough, we sometimes pre-qualify that all our customers are pulling back, waiting for things to improve, not interested, or don't have the money now. Thinking in this way causes us to become paralyzed. So if you are convinced that customers aren't going to buy, change your thinking to: "How can I help educate my customers now so when they are ready to buy they can make a more informed decision?"

I don't buy into the premise that pre-qualifying is ok—I think it is a terrible mindset. If you and your sales team members are stuck in this rut, resetting the mind from selling to educating can help

you get out of it. Here's how it goes: Make a list of all the products and services you provide. Alongside each product or service, create a value statement or a statement of benefit that will accrue to your customers who purchase them. Now look at a list of current customers, especially the roughly 20 percent who make up 80 percent of your business. In the past 12 months, has your sales team member responsible for developing and maintaining a relationship with those customers shared the list of products and services with them?

Through a detailed needs-analysis approach, you can uncover customer requirements that you did not know existed. Further, you will educate your current customers on needs they didn't even know they had. If done well, you may even garner referrals that you would never have received without using this kind of process.

Are you reaching out enough? Are you discovering needs or thinking your customers aren't going to buy because times are tough? What's your selling cadence? Are you educating more than selling? ■

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