

# NEW HORIZONS

Long-time home furnishings and lighting veteran and ALA-accredited speaker Mark Okun has embarked on a new career path that utilizes the educational skills he honed from his 30 years in retail.

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**M**ark Okun has been a familiar face at the Dallas lighting markets for 10+ years as Vice President and General Manager at Restoration Lighting Gallery in Hartford, Conn. – a sister company to the ARTS Award Finalist Connecticut Lighting Centers – and was well-established in the furniture industry as Director of Sales & Training at Bob's Discount Furniture chain for 11 years. This Spring, he decided to forge a new path that combines his talents in a unique way.

With the launch of Mark Okun Consulting & Performance Group, he will be sharing his most effective sales strategies and systems with retailers, manufacturers, and rep agencies who do not have the manpower in place to offer comprehensive training and coaching to their staff. According to Okun, the role of a salesperson is changing faster than ever and the techniques and tactics that worked in the past are no longer as effective. His approach goes beyond Product Knowledge (PK) sessions to delve deeper into the sales process to help associates deftly handle objections, seize opportunities, and understand how to present each product to the customer properly.

At its core, the philosophy is that every product in the showroom should be treated with the same level of importance – regardless of price point. Whether it is a lightbulb or a chandelier, customers want (and should receive) the same level of enthusiasm and professionalism from the sales associate.

“There hasn't been a lot of training beyond PK sessions, and I see a need out there,” Okun states. “What do you say to start a dialogue with customers that builds a relationship? How do you handle price objections? Each area is unique; for example, there's a lot of conversation involved in selling a lampshade – and that lampshade sale can be a [profitable] one if handled correctly. Today, being able to discern the transactional customer from the relational one is important to continued growth.”

Becoming a successful salesperson involves more than practicing certain words or phrases

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product categories, from how to sell an entryway chandelier to devising a lighting plan for a kitchen or how to effectively follow up with customers. Since selling skills were taught for each area of the showroom, sales associates felt confident selling every category instead of specializing in a niche.

And despite the sizable amount of vintage lighting available at the lighting showroom he managed – antiques might not seem to be a natural fit with cutting-edge technology – he reports, “Our store’s sales of LED bulbs was strong because we discussed beforehand how to talk about it with customers.”



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Part of Okun’s sales management philosophy includes making sure the staff implemented the ideas learned during the meetings. “One of my greatest claims to fame was having mystery shoppers come in to see if those techniques were being applied,” he recounts. His meetings were also effective for helping sales associates troubleshoot any areas they felt needed improvement. Okun believes that by coaching each sales associate, their performance and confidence are improved along with their sales skills.

Besides being passionate about those categories he has had decades of experience selling, Okun is committed to instilling that level of enthusiasm in others. “I love the profession of selling! I grew up on a retail sale floor; it’s in my blood. Most people in sales are either there because they can’t find anything else or they’re passionate,” he states. His goal is fire up the salespeople’s passion for what they sell.

In his consulting business, Okun describes his approach as fine-tuning rather than re-inventing the wheel. “It’s about little changes you can make and continually execute that allow you to become more profitable – whether you are a manufacturer, retailer, or rep agency,” he states, adding, “I see myself as a coach or like a personal trainer in the gym. As specialty retailers, lighting showrooms need skilled people to offer a human-to-human connection, which is more than consumers can find on the Internet or at home centers. I want it to be like they have a friend in the lighting business!”

Okun’s consulting practice is flexible, depending on the client’s needs – whether that entails flying to the customers’ location for individual coaching or running educational sessions online. Similarly, there is no designated length to the training program. One size does not fit all, although there are foundational aspects that are brought forth to each client.

“The first step is to evaluate what the client wants to do and tailor an approach to his or her needs,” Okun explains. Some solutions might only require several visits, another might take several weeks, and others might require one year or longer to implement. The primary purpose is to help each client increase sales, build brand awareness, and gross margin.

Okun will be giving two educational seminars for the American Lighting Association during the June Dallas Market. ❖

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