

Why “Can I Help You?” Helps No One



Lighting industry veteran Mark Okun, of Mark Okun Consulting & Performance Group, explains how the right – and wrong – greeting can either engender loyal customers or send them running out the door.

If you're working in a face-to-face sales environment, such as a lighting or home décor store, you probably already know that the greeting “Can I help you?” is the best way to turn off a customer – so why is it still so prevalent on the sales floor? When a customer enters a retail store in the 21st century, they are not surprised when the detached, disingenuous, and stereotypically unfriendly clerk blurts out in a loud voice, “Can I help you?”

For as many decades as I have been involved in retail sales, I still cringe when I hear it. Not only is it a horrible greeting, but it is a closed-ended question typically answered with “No, just looking.” Why start the sales process with a negative customer interaction? Using the question, “Can I help you?” is only appropriate if the customer is waiting in line at the

counter and catches your eye, clearly wanting attention. It is less offensive than yelling “Next!” but as a greeting, it stinks.

In sales, developing good questions is part of the process, but it should not be how we start the dance. How you approach your customers – and the image you create in the first few seconds they are in your store – will set the tone for your entire interaction. That is why it is so important to get the greeting right and to pay attention to this critical first step of the selling process.

An effective greeting allows professional salespeople to move through the remainder of the sales process with greater ease. Of course at every step there is the opportunity for misfires, mistakes, and taking steps backwards. However, the step back

from a bad greeting is being unable to interact with the customer at all, or worse, having them walk out the door! That is why the greeting is so critical.

In fact, I'd say the greeting or approach is the most important step in the selling experience sequence. According to research, it is estimated that 85 percent of most sales are impacted – positively or negatively – in the first 15 seconds of a salesperson's interaction. Think about that for a moment! What a salesperson says in greeting shouldn't be whatever happens to come to mind. The initial approach in greeting requires thought, care in its preparation, and practice. Understanding and practicing effective greetings can improve the sales relationship dramatically. In addition to generating more revenue, it leads to a more rewarding sales experience for both the customer and salesperson.

GREETING IS NOT SELLING!

Think of the greeting as setting the stage; it is getting off on the right foot. It should not consist of qualifying questions, even though it can be super-easy to fall into this trap if the sales associate confuses clerking with sales.

Here are examples of qualifying questions as greetings:

- What brings you in today?
- Are you looking for something in particular?
- What kind of X are you looking for?

Equally as bad are questions such as these, which serve no point:

- How are you?
- How are you doing?
- What's up?

Effective retail selling means that a relationship needs to be established with each and every customer. Successful salespeople want customers to be comfortable so that they share their needs, requirements, and pinch points with them. With their greeting, these sales associates convey that they are happy to be in the store and that they will be happy and excited to work with the customer.

By using such a greeting, they have clearly expressed the following in 5 to 15 seconds:

- You care.
- You are the professional they are looking for.
- You have passion.

While the greeting has a lot to do with what you say to a customer, what is equally important is the action taken to support those words. To that end:

- Make eye contact.
- Have a great smile and welcoming body language.
- Never address a customer from behind (it's scary and creates unneeded pressure).
- Don't pounce on a customer; let them get in the door.
- Address the customer from a reasonable distance (not too close, not too far)

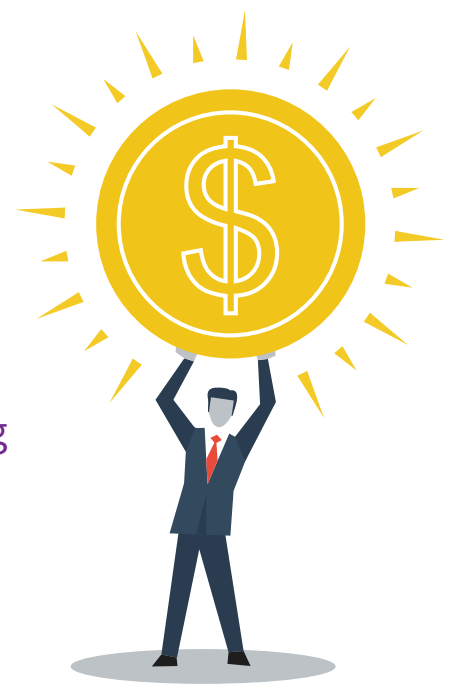
START WITH EYE CONTACT

When we look directly into a customer's eyes, we are implying honesty, interest, and attentiveness. Think about the feeling that you get when someone is avoiding direct eye contact with you. This is why it is important to always maintain good eye contact when listening and speaking.

BE SURE TO SMILE

As the saying goes: “Smile and the world smiles with you.” There's nothing like a sincere smile to create a good first impression. A warm and confident smile will put both you and the other person at ease. Is there such a thing as too much smiling? You bet. Don't go overboard; people who take smiling too far can seem insincere, sleazy, or a manipulator. Just think of some of the politicians you see on TV. Get the picture?

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Mark Okun has more than 30 years of hands-on retail experience training and coaching sales associates in the lighting and furniture industries.

WATCH BODY LANGUAGE

Expert salespeople study body language. This is a whole topic on which many books have been written, however, the most important areas to observe are the head (from hair to chin), arms and hands, and the torso and the legs. As a salesperson, your arms should be open with your hands in a welcoming position.

What does having “arms open” mean? Simply put, the arms are not crossed. You can use them to animate a welcoming gesture, to augment what is being said, or held wide open to welcome the customer. Hands should be relaxed or slightly animated; and, gentlemen, your hands are never in your pockets.

Your stance should be welcoming as well. Legs should be firmly planted a shoulder width apart, open and squared off to the customer. Why should you be standing still? Greeting a customer while in motion, indicates that you are in a rush. Even saying the right words won't help; the customer interprets your movement as being busy and does not wish to be rude or intrude. Above all else, salespeople need to be engaged and interested. Customers may not know the various body language clues, but they become unconsciously aware as we interact. Being more conscious of body language will give us better emotional and human interactions, which leads to better sales interactions.

EXAMPLES TO EMULATE

After smiling and making eye contact plus using correct body language, say “Hi! Thanks for coming in! Is this your first time here?”



“Greeting a customer while in motion, indicates that you are in a rush. Even saying the right words won't help.”

The customer's response will let you know if they are new or returning, but more important is your positive follow up, “GREAT! My name is Sue and I am one of the specialists here, (extend your hand) and your name is?”

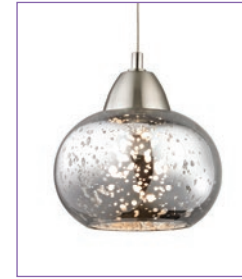
This style of approach genuinely welcomes the customer, confirms to them that you're a professional, and expresses gratitude to them for coming into the store.

Understandably, not all greetings happen as the customer walks in the door. You may meet a customer on the sales floor. In this case, adjust your greeting just a bit: “Hi! Thanks for coming in! I see you are looking around, Is this your first time here? Using the same follow up, “GREAT! My name is Sue and I am one of the specialists here, (extend your hand) and your name is?”

If you've spent time on the sales floor, you've undoubtedly come across a customer who is engaged in looking at an item. You're not sure if they like it or hate it. In this scenario, try what is called the “interruptive” greeting: “What do you think of that item? (Wait for response) “I agree, by the way. Thanks for coming in, have you been here before?” Use the follow up.

For those customers who come in regularly, recognize them as such by greeting them with all the enthusiasm of seeing an old friend: “So good to see you! Thank you for coming back in!” If you remember the customer's name, use it. If you remember the product they bought, use it in the greeting. People love to hear their name and to be recognized.

In the 21st century, the customer has many choices regarding what to buy and from whom. By establishing a greeting protocol with them, your sales team is building a human-to-human connection that becomes a more memorable experience for the customer. Now that's something they can't get from an online retailer! ❖



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