



THE ART OF SELLING REAL ESTATE

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Chapter 3

Delivering Extraordinary Service

“People don’t like to be sold to but they love to buy.”

–Cliff’s Observation

THE ART OF SELLING REAL ESTATE is convincing the buyer that it was his idea to purchase a particular property and that he will regret the lost opportunity if he doesn’t act now. Making the buyer comfortable not only with the price that he is paying, but with the “fit” of the transaction is essential.

We are all consumers of products and services. The best way to arrive at how to perfect your sales skill is to think of the many purchases that you have made in your own life. What made you want to buy, what closed the deal? Which salespeople had the technique that worked on you? This is not a foolproof analysis, but it’s a good place to start.

Both Barbara Corcoran and I have hired people to work for us from retail establishments that had nothing to do with real estate. Barbara was a great lover of fresh flowers, which she had delivered weekly to all corners of our offices. She could seldom walk past a shop that had wonderfully exotic flowers without entering and making a purchase. I can assure you that not much salesmanship was required for these transactions. One day, however, she walked into a florist shop in New York City and was so pleased with the way that the salesperson waited on her that she asked if the salesperson would like to come and work for her and sell real estate. A week later the “flower lady” had a desk at Corcoran and was

diligently learning the business.

I had a similar experience at Restoration Hardware. I went in to purchase something that wasn't readily available at their store and the salesperson, Emilie, took great pains to show me alternative solutions and convince me that what I had originally wanted might be redundant for the task at hand. At the end of approximately an hour, during which she gave me her undivided attention, Emilie had sold me numerous items, some of which I had no idea that I wanted or could use when I entered the store. This is the magic of a good salesperson: a good dose of imagination combined with mind reading and diligence.

As I was about to whip out my credit card and pay for everything, I realized that some of the items were bulky and would require my returning home with them before I could continue with my other shopping. In Manhattan, people never have the ability to simply pull up to a store, park their car and shop. Traffic and lack of parking spaces prohibit this. Moving oneself and one's goods from point A to point B is always a major logistical challenge that requires careful thought and planning. The alternative solution was to have the items delivered by the store or shipped, which would have incurred additional cost. Like all shoppers, I am impatient and hate to wait several days for purchases to be delivered. I want them now; instant satisfaction is part of the New York psyche.

My salesperson immediately picked up on this and asked me where I lived. When I told her, she said not to worry; she would drop them off herself on her way home and leave the items with my doorman. She gave me the impression that this was in no way a detour for her. When I returned home that evening I found everything nicely packed and left with my doorman with a nice hand written thank you note. I was delighted with the whole sales transaction. I called the next day to thank her, and in the course of our brief conversation asked if she lived in my neighborhood. It turned out that she lived across town and fifty blocks north of where I lived. That's when I decided that I had to hire her. She came to work for me as an agent assistant trainee because I knew that her level of service would be a wonderful match for the demands of my business. It turned out to be a great match.

The Mattress Man

One particular personal sales experience taught me a lot. We had bought a country home and purchased various antique beds, but we needed mattresses—six of them in all different sizes, some of which had to be custom made because the antique beds were not a standard size. I didn't want to go to a department store, because I wanted more personalized service and a salesperson with some knowledge of the product, not just an order taker.

This preceded the era of the Internet. I saw an ad in a weekly newspaper called *The Antique and the Arts Weekly* for a company called Bedlam Beds. They touted the fact that they were experts in the field of mattresses and could create special sizes of mattresses for unusually sized beds. The location of the store was totally inconvenient, somewhere far out in New Jersey, when we were living in New York City and the country home we were furnishing was in Westchester County. It was approximately an hour's drive to get to the store.

I called the store to determine the exact location, get driving instructions and make certain of the opening times. The first impression was a good one: a human being picked up the phone, not a voice machine. The person was very solicitous, and gave proper, easy-to-understand instructions and also answered all of my questions regarding their delivery times and the cost of home delivery. Friends of ours thought that we were crazy to travel a total of two hours to buy mattresses in another state, when we lived in the middle of New York City with plenty of opportunities to purchase this product at various discount locations within a ten-minute cab ride from our home. They were wrong.

We made the journey to New Jersey and met with the mattress salesman, who had been selling mattresses for this company for over fifteen years. He knew everything that there was to know about mattresses—even things that we didn't know were important to know. Moreover, he was willing to share all of his knowledge with us, right down to the number of knots in the springs of certain mattresses. In other words, he gave me a complete overview of the

product line and the various options that were available, as well as an education about the type of product that he was selling. He was also able to distinguish his product from that of the standardized, popular product (the 1-800 Mattress people, the Sealy people, etc.) Most importantly, he had sample mattresses that one could lie down on, to determine the level of firmness that was most comfortable.

The long and short of it was that the salesman gave the impression of being a true expert and left us feeling like educated consumers. Result: he didn't have to do much actual selling. We ordered the six mattresses from him at a price which exceeded what we would have paid in a department store or discount store AND since it was a drive to get to Bedlam Beds, which we were not anxious to repeat, we decided to replace the mattresses in our city home as well, so he got an order for ten mattresses and not six!

Placing an order, however, is only the beginning of a sale. Fulfilling that order to the satisfaction of the customer is the proof in the pudding. The mattresses that we ordered were delivered on the date agreed to and within the time frame of the day that was pre-arranged, which is nothing short of a miracle in today's retail environment. Not only were their truckers polite, they helped us unpack the mattresses and put them on the bed frames. Then, miracle of miracles, once they were certain that we were happy with the product, they carted away all of the packing material. I mean, how good can it get? Within a week, we received a personal thank you note from our salesman. Needless to say, I have sent dozens of my real estate clients to this salesperson and all of them loved the personalized service they received. They were also very happy with the product, which Bedlam Beds stood behind 100 percent.

The Nordstrom Experience

The next most memorable positive retail sales experience that I had occurred at Nordstrom's department store. Granted, personalized service is their motto and one of the principles on which their business was founded, but the actual level of personalized service offered by this establishment is truly extraordinary.

About ten years ago, I flew into Los Angeles to be a guest speaker at a black-tie dinner that was to begin at 7:30 p.m. in a prominent downtown hotel. The only problem was that when I arrived mid-afternoon, my suitcase didn't. The concierge at the Bel Air Hotel advised me "not to worry," and arranged for the hotel limo to take me downtown to Nordstrom's. Because of the late afternoon traffic, I did not arrive at the store until shortly before 6:00 p.m.; their posted closing time was 6:30 p.m. Needless to say, I was discouraged and convinced that this whole effort would be an exercise in futility.

Instead, I was greeted by a very cheery salesperson that asked if she could offer me some help. When I described my predicament, she calmly explained that there was no cause for concern, as she would stay with me until all of the items that I needed were found and purchased. I mentioned that the store would close in about 20 minutes and it would be an impossible task to accomplish in that time period. She calmed my fears by saying that there would be a register kept open for me to conclude my purchases even after the store had officially closed and, by the way, would I also need some accessories and make-up? I nodded assent and she arranged for one of the cosmeticians to stay until I had completed my purchases.

We then proceeded to the eveningwear department. She quickly found a half dozen attractive choices in my size. Once I had decided upon which one to purchase, she took me to the handbag department, the shoe department and the hosiery department where we found the items needed to complete my outfit. On the way, we passed some beautiful Indian shawls and I selected one of those as well to accent the dress.

I started to once again show signs of serious anxiety as I looked at my watch and realized that I would never be able to get back to the hotel in time to freshen up, change and return downtown for my evening event in time. The salesperson told me that I could change in one of their dressing rooms, which turned out to be a perfect solution. I had the cosmetician do my make-up, and went to the dressing room where I put on my new duds, while the salesperson took my credit card and rang up all of my purchases at the register that had been left open for me after the store had officially closed. I left the store an hour after I had arrived, which was about forty minutes after the official closing time of the store. The driver from

the hotel, who had been waiting for me, delivered me to the location of the event. I arrived on time, calm and self-confident, and the evening was a huge success—thanks to this extraordinary retail experience.

And how did I, the consumer, react to this level of customer service? I stayed a day longer than planned in Los Angeles and went back to Nordstrom's, where I spent a half day shopping with my wonderful salesperson. Not only did I spend many thousands of dollars filling in all of the holes in my wardrobe, but I also did some early Christmas shopping.

Going the Extra Mile

I have also discovered another wonderful service that Nordstrom's renders. When they don't have an item in stock in their store, they check their computers to locate which stores have that item in the desired size and color. Not so revolutionary, you say, many stores do that—but here comes the kicker. After they have located it on the computer, they actually pick up the phone right then and there and call a human being at that store and in that particular department to be certain that the item is actually there, after which the person on the other end of the phone physically goes and fetches it, puts your name on it and makes certain that it is shipped to you expeditiously. I know that this sounds simplistic, especially in the highly computerized world in which we live, but how often have you received a computer generated e-mail telling you that the item they had committed to sending you is no longer in stock or has been discontinued—after you had an order confirmation! What's worse, this news often arrives after you have had to make repeated inquiries about the whereabouts of your order. In my opinion, combining human power with computer-generated information is the perfect marriage of technology and very personalized service.

I have never been disappointed with Nordstrom's service. Whenever I'm traveling to another US city, I always ask the concierge in the hotel if there is a Nordstrom's in town. Whenever I am able to locate one of their stores in another city, I try to make a point of visiting it. Their service level is identical regardless of which store you visit.

And just when you think that they have thought of everything, you get a nice handwritten note thanking you for shopping with them. Then they go the extra mile: you will also receive a note or e-mail from the salesperson who has sold you some staples of your wardrobe, like stockings or a particular brand of make-up, advising you of a sale which is about to start and asking if you would like for them to send you the products that you had previously purchased at the reduced sale price. It is clearly their store policy to maintain the bond with all of their satisfied customers so that they can continue to render them very personalized service.

In addition to giving great service to the shopper, many Nordstrom's stores have an area with comfortable chairs for the person accompanying the shopper, to sit and listen to live piano music, while the better half is spending the money. They even offer a selection of newspapers and magazines to engage those who are seated and waiting patiently.

Since my husband and I tend to move frequently, I assumed that the Nordstrom's sales staff might lose track of me. Not so. It's store policy to make every effort to locate the customer's new address when one of their notes is returned! They are firmly committed to maintaining the relationship with their satisfied clients. I have adopted this aspect of the Nordstrom's policy: I make it a point never to lose track of my clients, even those with whom I have not actually made a sale.

The lesson to be learned is that people like great service in any market, but they especially like being super-valued customers in recessionary times. You want to make every effort to make your customers feel comfortable calling you, even though they may not be of a mindset to buy or sell at that time. This often occurs, especially since the 2008 real estate bust, when many nervous owners reached out for a bit of handholding. By being there for them in their hour of need, prepared to deliver the Nordstrom's level of service, I was able to strengthen the relationship, and in many instances generate repeat business with them or initiate new business with their friends and colleagues.

