



To Improve Retail Sales, See the Wedding Specialist

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By Dan Norman

I recently sat next to a woman at a chamber of commerce awards luncheon and exchanged business cards with her. Her card featured a caricature of her riding a fountain pen similar to a witch riding a broom.

She owned a specialty shop that carried office and stationary products, greeting cards, high-quality pens and writing supplies. In addition, she sold a number of desk items and office products that could be engraved and personalized. Located in the back corner of a retail shopping plaza, her business was struggling and in danger of closing down. She advertised in the Yellow Pages, distributed flyers to local businesses and even ran ads in the local newspapers, but she admitted to having a difficult time competing with the large office supply stores. She had all but given up hope.

I asked a few questions and suggested to her that perhaps some of the practices of successful salespeople could help her grow her business. She stood there staring at me in disgust, as if I had just blurted out something obscene to my kid after he missed a goal during his third-grade soccer match.

Finally, she broke the silence and said, "I'm already a very good salesperson and if a customer comes into my store, I'm going to sell them something every time. My problem is getting them to come into the store! I don't see how a salesperson can teach me how to get customers to come in."

I told her about a woman I knew, Michelle Martinez, who owned a flower shop in Orlando called Michelle's Flower Shop. Michelle told me that in the area of town where she was located, it seemed like a florist operated on every street corner. She always advertised in the Yellow Pages, the local newspaper and even on the radio when she could afford it. Unfortunately, her shop was losing money and she wasn't sure how much longer she could survive. She had not paid herself a salary in almost a year but still struggled to pay the rent and keep her account current with her suppliers. After more than two years in business, Michelle made the decision to close her shop.

One day at lunch, she told a friend of hers who sold real estate about her decision to close shop. Her friend gave her some profound advice. "Michelle, you're trying to compete with all the other florists in town for the same customers and in the same exact way. Before you close your business, try picking a specific group of customers as your target. Once you've done that, rebrand yourself to provide what they want and promote your business where you can find them."

Michelle thought it over and realized her friend was right. Just like her competitors, Michelle depended on the big flower days — Valentines Day, Mother's Day, Secretary's Day and Dan Norman's birthday! She advertised in exactly the same way as everyone else to draw people into the shop for anniversaries, weddings, proms, funerals, as well as on those frequent occasions when guys do wrong by their wives or girlfriends and need to make up for it.

Michelle decided to take her friends advice and focus on a specific group of potential customers, rebrand her business and go where those customers could be found. She picked her favorite type of event (weddings) for her focus and rebranded her shop as The Wedding Specialists. She changed her business cards and web site to reflect this specialty. She made a list of all the “touch points” where brides planning their weddings might go. She then focused her energy on making face-to-face sales calls to bridal shops, formalwear stores, jewelers, wedding planners, caterers, churches and event planning companies. Finally, she visited the meeting planners at hotels and restaurants that specialized in large banquets.

Michelle handed out stacks of oversized business cards at every location she visited, asking them if they could please give them to their bride-to-be customers. The front of the card read “Michelle’s Flowers — The Wedding Specialists.” It pictured a bridal bouquet, the store address with very clear directions (across from TGI Fridays) and her Web site address. Printed on the back of the card was the following message for the bride, “*When the wedding is over, give this card to your husband. He’ll get a 2 percent discount on all of the flowers he buys for you. (... until he loses the card.)*”

Michelle began to network at chamber of commerce meetings and business events and even joined a business lead exchange group. The last time we spoke, her business was doing very well and she was considering expanding.

Her success had little to do with simply persuading people to buy her products. Certainly she was making sales calls, but she wasn’t selling flowers from the back of her car or trying to convince people to come to her shop and buy flowers right away. She picked a segment of the market, branded her business for that segment, focused on where prospects could be found and took action to pull the targeted segment into her shop. Michelle’s Flowers represents a great example of putting the best practices of successful salespeople to work in a nontraditional way in order to grow a retail business.

Dan Norman is a sales performance expert, a professional speaker, a columnist and the author of Top Ten Selling – The Lumberjack Chronicles. He has hired and developed thousands of sales representatives and hundreds of sales managers. For more information visit www.toptenselling.com or call 407-566-9741.

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