

Strategies for Becoming “The Store of Choice”

By Fred Jaeckle

Everyone would like to positively differentiate their store from the competition. This is the key to increasing sales and creating a positive and memorable experience and brand. Every time you get a new customer (someone that hasn't bought at your store before) you do it at the expense of a competitor who didn't make the sale. More simply stated, when you win, someone else loses.

So the question is: How do you set yourself up to have an advantage over your competition? The simple answer is that you need to be better than your competition, and more important you need to have everyone that comes into your store recognize that you are better. This is not an easy thing to accomplish.

There are three different ways that you can differentiate your store from you competition, price, product offering, and service. We must rule out price, because if that is how we want to differentiate ourselves, we will be working against the main reason we are in business, to make a profit and provide a comfortable living for the owner and the owner's employees. If price is how you want to do it, you will be competing with Home Depot and Menards exclusively. Also, if price is the main attraction to your customers, you may be putting yourself out of business in a year or two.

Product offering can be a positive differentiator, but most of the flooring outlets already offer the full range of products available, and you can't make a living on only offering products that the competition doesn't have access to. Don't get me wrong, there is a distinct advantage to having exclusive products, but we need to offer the basic products that are available to other outlets as well.

That leaves service as the best way to differentiate your store from your competition. What are the elements of service that your store offers to your customers? The following list may be some of them:

- Well trained professional salespeople
- Estimates and measuring
- Design Services
- On staff decorating professional
- Job site inspection & evaluation
- Furniture moving
- Clean up after installation
- Haul away old flooring
- Maintenance instructions
- Customer satisfaction guarantee
- Post installation inspection

The above list is not everything you may offer but could be a start. There may be many things that you may wish to add. What is important is that I hoped you noticed that the word FREE does not appear with any of these services. Now some of these might be

free services you offer, but advertising them as free can devalue them, and also may be an invitation to unfairly take advantage of you. For example, free measuring and estimates is an invitation for them to have you measure the job, and so that they can shop Home Depot or Menards for flooring. Last time I checked, Home Depot charged for measuring and it was non-refundable unless you purchased the flooring from them.

Some of the services would obviously require them purchasing from you, but they are services that you may offer that your competitor does not. They also may be services that your customer does not recognize as important. These services need to be communicated to all customers and all prospective customers.

Some of the intangible services you might offer would be convenient store hours, a convenient location, a comfortable and inviting atmosphere in which to shop, lighting that shows the product the way it will look in their home, coffee and snacks in the store, a kids play area, and an abundance of room scenes that help the consumer to visualize the products in their home.

The services your store offers can be classified into two types. The first is reactive which involves the way you respond to client problems, concerns, and issues that may arise. The other type is proactive which can be defined as the day-to-day things that your store does to control the experiences of your customers and to make their future or the outcome of the final product predictable.

The important thing is that when you clearly articulate the specific things that you do proactively that set your store apart from the competition, you begin to identify your competition's weaknesses and areas where the competition under-serves its clientele. If you or your competitors "under-serve" your customers, you will be causing them some degree of "pain". When you can demonstrate to your customer that your service is better and different than a competitor it eases any apprehension that they may have about various "pains" and will become the winning difference in the sales process.

The nice thing is that this approach avoids speaking ill of competitors, and even avoids mentioning a competitor's name.

One of the issues that your customers may be dealing with is concern that they will be spending too much, or too little. They want to receive value regardless of what they spend. They often are afraid that they will select the wrong product, or the wrong style, or the wrong color. They worry about installation, disruption in their home during the installation, or the product looking as good in their home as it did in the picture or in the store.

One thing your salespeople can do is to assure the customer that there are no "wrong" choices per se. However, there is a right choice that's unique to the customer's specific project. It is the duty of your salespeople to find that right choice.

Once they begin to trust the salesperson they become more relaxed, and they begin to focus on style, design, color and functionality because they trust the salesperson to help them to identify products that will meet their needs and will look beautiful. Again the key is to have your salespeople ask probing questions that will end up creating a rapport with the customer.

If your salespeople can identify the leading causes of your customer's concerns, and develop the scripts and solutions to address these concerns, they are on the right track. This can be a very productive exercise for your salespeople.

The sales process in your store should end up guaranteeing that you exceed customer expectations (after you have defined them). This will give you a competitive advantage that few can match. If you serve your customers properly, you will make it difficult for your competitors to displace you as the customer's store of choice. A completely satisfied customer will also result in a great deal of referral business, and that will be a huge added bonus.

Questions, comments, and feedback are always welcome. Contact: fred.jaeckle@jaeckledistributors.com