



Setting The Stage for More Effective Sales Training **by Gerry Morris**

The CEO of one of the major bedding manufacturers recently stated that, in his opinion, the biggest challenge the industry faces is “sales training”, not competition, product development, marketing, imports, fire safety standards, but sales training.

As incredible as that may seem, consider this and you can understand why sales training is so crucial. All the efforts of manufacturers to bring a finished product to the point of sale and of retailers to bring customers through the door rests upon the shoulders of the sales associate.

A leading research firm found that consumers rate knowledgeable salespeople as the most critical element in the mattress-shopping experience. However, sales associates with inadequate knowledge increase anxiety and cause consumers to feel pressured and uncertain. (Applied Research & Consulting LLC)

It is a conversation between associate and shopper that determines if the sale is made at all, what quality of set is selected, and how satisfied the customer is with the purchase. If the sales associate is not up to the task, all the other issues are irrelevant. Most vendors and retailers understand this and have terrific ongoing mattress sales training programs.

“Setting the Stage”

This article will present ideas, concepts and principles to supplement, enhance and facilitate current training programs regardless of brand, type of mattress or type of retail store, whether it be home furnishings, sleep specialty or department. The goal is to speed up the process for the difficult learning curve that new associates go through and also to expand the skills of even the best veterans to a new level of efficacy. The higher motive is to help as many people as possible improve their quality of life by buying a high quality comfortable sleep set.

Why do these ideas work?

Much of traditional sales training is factual information that has to be memorized or learned and applied to be effective. This article should help change perspective inspire growth and creativity and broaden the context of selling mattresses because they involve the imagination. Learning then occurs on many levels. Existing skills can be transformed to become more personalized, intuitive and operative, allowing one to better relate to the individuality of customers.

Principles are a roadmap of core standards that can guide you through any situation.

Think of traditional training as being the “who, what, when and where” of selling. Now, think of these ideas, concepts and principles as being the “why and how.” They allow you to enter a more powerful and imaginative realm to negotiate in than the realm of logic and intellect. Your customers will thank you.

Traditional Sales Training

Over the years mattress sales training has largely been based on a reactive response to customers seeking value. Logic dictated that you should respond to the customers’ demands. Therefore, training dealt primarily with product knowledge, overcoming objections by demonstrating features and benefits, all blended into selling steps, such as greeting, and closing techniques. The focus was to prove value and therefore justify the customer’s reluctantly spent dollars. The hope was that if the sales associate could explain what was inside the beds, consumers would understand and make the best choice.

But, factual information such as specs and feature/ benefits make a direct appeal to ones’ intellect, and few customers can relate to the expense of such simple products as wood, steel, foam and fiber. I have heard customers say, “Well this one is more comfortable, but if a few layers of upholstery is the only difference, we’ll take that one, it’s the better value.” What a shame.

The Evolvement of Sales Training

As consumers have become smarter, better-educated shoppers, *comfort* has replaced *firmness* as the most sought after quality. The bedding industry has done a good job at switching the spotlight from specifications to comfort.

Consequently, many of today’s training programs have evolved to concentrate on “comfort selling”, a much more effective approach.

The standard selling steps are still recommended and they can be a great guideline, but with the diversity of shoppers, situations and the roulette nature of retail sales, they don’t always work. Customers don’t use corresponding “buying steps”. Some programs now attempt to identify the different types of shopper personalities and try to teach sales associates how to respond to each; a great idea.

Consider the following concepts. Hopefully they will help you enlarge your perspective and make your sales training even more effective.

ATTITUDE

There is probably no more important concept to grasp than to understand attitude, not just the customers, but yours as well (assuming that you sell mattresses. Managers take note.) As stated above, sales training has been based on a reactive response to the customers’ attitude, without fully understanding what that attitude is. Unfortunately, that attitude is in many cases, not very good, as you will see below.

These are actual quotes on websites bashing the mattress industry:

Warning: the material below may be considered somewhat disturbing.

“At its best, the retail mattress industry is set up to create consumer confusion. At its worst it uses unscrupulous salespeople and high-pressure sales techniques to make a buck.”

“Is there a more maddening industry? They confuse and flummox us with bogus science, and weigh us down with useless features. The secret to shopping is that the product is basically a commodity.”

“You head out looking for comfort, and end up totally confused. All you want to buy is a mattress.”

“There are lots of confusing terminology being tossed around...A rule of thumb is if you are shelling out more than \$1000, you’re getting ripped off.”

Dealing with customers that don’t have the “best attitude” about buying a mattress has caused many salespeople to have a less than ideal attitude about selling them. If you don’t believe this, read these actual statements that sales associates have made to me:

“I avoid the mattress department at all costs.”

“I always get nervous when someone is looking for a mattress.”

“There is just too much to learn about mattresses.”

“I never sell a mattress unless I have to.”

“I hate selling mattresses.”

I’ve noticed that you don’t seem to hear comments like that about dinettes or sofas. The difference is most customers don’t like buying mattresses. How do you feel about selling them? It is important that you honestly examine your attitude.

I have conducted training seminars all over the country and Canada and found that while there are many fine bedding salespeople, this troubling attitude is prevalent. One group of 100 or so all raised their hands when I asked how many liked to sell mattresses. I then asked the owner and managers to hide their eyes and only a small percentage kept their hands up.

Obviously, these types of comments come from associates in home furnishings stores. If you are in a sleep specialty store and feel this way, KEEP READING. Specialty shop sales people don’t tend to have as negative an attitude, because all they sell is bedding, but it is important for anyone selling mattress to understand how customer’s feel.

NEEDS / WANTS

Why would people have such a poor attitude about shopping for mattresses? Try this test and I think you will understand.

How would you feel if you had to buy a new set of tires? If you were like most people, you would be less than thrilled. You would probably rather spend those dollars on something else and the prospect of shopping, well, you would just want to get it out of the way.

This is how most people feel about mattresses. It’s just human nature. I call it the *Needs vs. Wants Paradox*. It’s the things we need and depend upon most that we least like to do and buy. Why? Because we like to do and buy the things we *want* for the emotional payoff. We buy things we need for their utilitarian value (what function they provide) and we buy and do the things we want for how they make us feel.

So knowing that, what can we do?

Let’s go back to the tire experiment. Now, how would you feel if you had to buy new tires because you just survived a blowout at 70 MPH, swerving across crowded lanes of traffic with your family or friends in the car? Suddenly you see tires in an entirely new perspective and you probably have a more positive appreciation for them.

In the same way that you changed your attitude about tires, you can help your customer change his or her attitude about buying a mattress simply by changing perspective, putting mattresses in a different context, the proper context, a worthy goal that benefits everyone.

Take a closer look at what happens with this experiment. At first, the focus was on the tires themselves. Our analytical mind tries to discern value. If we add a discussion about safety, tires take on more importance, but frankly, everyone knows tires are related to safety, (and mattresses are related to comfort). We intellectually comprehend that.

But, we are blessed with the gift of imagination, that wonderful capacity to vicariously experience scenarios in our minds. Our emotions can react as if the experiences are real. By putting ourselves into a context, we can engage our imagination and shift focus away from a broad utilitarian way to seeing ourselves actually using the product or doing tasks.

Compare the difference in the examples below. Example. One can intellectually comprehend or accept that tires are beneficial for safety and that cars are primarily for

You can intellectually comprehend ***or*** ***Vicariously experience (Imagine)***

Tires are related to safety
Cars provide transportation
Mattress are for sleeping on
Exercise increases fitness
Selling mattresses provides income

Surviving a blow out.
Cruising down the road.
Renewing yourself in REM sleep
Completing a marathon
Improving someone's life

Which evokes emotion? Well obviously, our imagination. Which is more motivating?

The wonderful aspect of selling mattresses is that by lying on them, peoples' senses are actually involved along with their imagination, similar to test driving a car. If customers fully comprehend mattresses in this manner, finding the right bed can become a mission to facilitate that imagined scenario.

So, instead of asking how does the mattress feel, and is the mattress comfortable, ask, "How do you feel on that mattress?" "How do you think you will feel when you imagine sleeping on it every night?"

"Be sure to lie in the position that you normally sleep in, and imagine it's late you're tired and you have to get up early for work. Think how you feel those few moments before you fall asleep, that is the time when you have the most awareness of your mattress, (unless you are tossing and turning all night.) Now understand that over the next 30 days you will spend ten 24-hour days lying on that mattress. In a ten-year period, you will sleep over 3 years on it."

See the difference, the focus is not on specs, not on how comfortable the bed is to the customer as much as how comfortable the customer is on the bed. Remember we buy the things we want not for what they do for us as much as how they make us feel. Use your own intuition and skills to help involve your customers' imagination and really experience being comfortable.

The real purpose of Product knowledge

It is essential that sales associates know their products. Product knowledge must be combined with selling skills. The real point of product knowledge is not to give a rote recitation of specs to shoppers, it is to give confidence and competence to "navigate the floor" and find beds that are best suited to individual customers. They don't want to know the contents as much as they want the assurance of making the right decision.

Just like getting a black belt in martial arts, the more proficient one becomes, the less one has to demonstrate that proficiency. Adversaries perceive they shouldn't challenge the karate expert. If forced to, the expert quickly and almost surgically draws from his arsenal of available "tools" to dispense of the problem.

Similarly, the expert sales associate can quickly surmise which "tool" to apply rather than display all his wares. Sometimes too much information backfires. There is the story of a little old lady that after hearing every detail of heating stove from a salesman well versed in product knowledge decides not to buy it. When asked why she responded "I just wanted to know if it would keep me warm, he was too busy talking to tell me."

Customers perceive the confidence of competent sales associates and trust them to assist finding the right model without having to tell everything about it.

Big Picture thinking and Awareness

Three men building a school and doing the same task are asked what their job is. One replied, laying bricks, the next "building a school, and finally one replied, "I'm building the future of our community." Which worker do you think was the most conscientious and took the most pride in his work. You can sell mattresses or improve quality of lives.

Think about all the people involved in support roles for you to have products to sell and for your customer to be able to purchase. You can't count them all, but they all depend upon you. Understand the importance of quality sleep for the long period of time that your customers will be sleeping on them.

You really have a responsibility to help them find a quality product that they will be happy with. My daughter after visiting family said she "couldn't wait to sleep on her own bed because her cousins' were so uncomfortable. "They don't know what they are missing." I imagine her cousins don't know what they are missing nor do many of your customers because they have never experienced real comfort and support. If you don't show them, how will they know

THE PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESS

Principles are the ethical guidelines that apply in every situation, regardless of customer, situation or any other variable. They are the transcending core values that earn respect, trust and confidence.

Genuine concern for your customers well-being means that you understand in a broader context the influential role you play in helping them find a set that can improve their quality of life and health.

The old adage, is true, "It is better to give than to receive". Putting your customers' needs and interests above your own paradoxically makes you more successful than if your goal is to be successful.

Honesty and integrity. There is no need to create false urgency or overvalue products' worth (price) or performance. Integrity means doing the right thing for the right reason

Consumers are intuitively perceptive and will more willingly buy from someone whom they trust. People see that mattresses are always on sell. Do you think they believe we're going to run out of them? I don't think so.

Objectivity and Fairness. Even with the best of intentions, salespeople can subconsciously steer shoppers toward or away from beds they personally like or dislike. Unless you are picking one out for yourself, make sure you are making the effort to find the bed that is best suited for your customer. It is not our job to impose our preferences upon others.

Developing comfort zones is another way we may be dealing unfairly with our customers. It is normal to find beds that we think are easy to sell, or ones that we have found success with. You can get really good at "pitching" certain beds. Some sales people habitually develop a list of "go to" beds. The challenge is to expand your comfort zone to include all the beds on the floor rather than make your customers step into your "*Comfort Zone*."

It is interesting how contagious beds are. When new beds come to the floor, they bring a certain level of excitement to the sales staff. Suppose an associate's newfound sense of enthusiasm influences a customer to buy a particular model. He then shares the successful experience with other associates. Guess which bed they take their customers to? Before long all associates are able say, "This is our "best selling bed", which further perpetuates its status. Customers find confidence in buying products that other people have chosen. The problem is that the bed became the best seller because of the sales staff's enthusiasm more than the customer or the bed itself. Remember every bed is new to the customer and the individuality of personal preference means that every bed on your floor may have appeal to someone.

The real task is to help your customer find that bed, not to have them jump on a fabricated bandwagon.

Broadway stars may give the same performance hundreds of times, but manage to maintain their freshness. Don't show more enthusiasm for a new bed, or for any bed over another unless it is an objective preference based on quality, support or durability.

Spiffs and contests are great, but can really be unfair to the customer. Obviously everyone selling mattresses wants to make more money. But as stated above, it's those that put the customers' best interest first that make more money in the long run than those that go after the spiffs. Also, having done the right thing pays dividends of a different sort.

Bedding is unique in nature because of the extensive training it requires for sales associates to effectively assist their customers. Taking the time to dwell upon and understand these ideas, concepts and principles can help make that training more meaningful and productive, enabling you to develop those top-notch skills that will close more sales, help select the right bed for your customers and increase their satisfaction.