

Jumping Through Hoops: Training Your Customers To Think Of You First!

By Dan Stockdale

Tigers don't jump through rings of fire in the wild, but when they're properly trained, they do so willingly, even happily. Why? Because day by day, animal trainers build a program around every behavior they want to get out of an animal. When they develop the training program, they break it into manageable pieces, each building toward a goal of creating a lasting relationship with the animal. Without this relationship, and the patient approach to each step along the way, the animal will balk and not perform, possibly even withdraw or become unhealthy.



In sales, you can train your customers by building a relationship that will ultimately yield tremendous rewards. If you *don't* train them, your customers may forget you're out there and go instead to your competition, even if they were happy with you and the service you provided. They simply won't even think of talking to you about their current needs. That's why you need to develop a level of familiarity and presence that makes you unforgettable, even indispensable.

Generate more sales by using this plan to train your customers to always think of you first.

- **Build a Relationship**

Animal trainers spend two to three hours a day building the relationship with the animal they're training. This time is essential to building trust. Trainers make contact of some sort that the animal especially loves, from playing fetch with a dog to rubbing the belly of an affection-loving monkey. They determine as the relationship grows how best to give each animal the attention he or she needs.

Though it's probably best if you don't rub your customers' bellies every day, you can rather easily make yourself a more valuable resource to all of your customers by determining what will give added value to each. Find a way to build your relationship with each of them, such as regularly passing along information via e-mail, even on a daily basis, that will benefit the customer. Relationship-building activities keep you in the forefront of customers' minds, and while these activities won't necessarily be immediately income-producing, they *will* have a positive impact down the road when the customer thinks of you and the value you added to routine service.

- **Impress with Consistency**

Animals, like children and many adults, need routine to feel secure and trusting. Trainers behave predictably so as not to frighten, confuse, or upset the animal. From a sales standpoint, you need to be consistent with your customers, so they know what to

expect from you and how much they can depend on you. For example, you should always return their calls within an hour or two of their leaving a message, not sometimes call back an hour later and sometimes call back three days later.

If you have this professional approach, and you consistently deliver what your customers want without being asked, you'll be the first one they think of because you have made yourself indispensable. In other words, they'll use you consistently if you behave consistently and consistently produce good results for them, even if they're not officially your customer.

- **Recognize and Meet Individual Needs**

Part of building a relationship with an animal involves knowing what its needs are. For example, one primate may love vegetables and despise fruit, while another won't touch his veggies but can't get enough bananas and apples. Customers also have needs, and they do business with you because you can meet, anticipate, and predictably fulfill those needs. The human equivalents of those picky primates might be those customers who insist on being able to place their orders on-line, while others want nothing to do with computers and need to be able to pick up the phone, day or night, to order what they want.

To meet your customers' needs, you must take the time to get to know each individual. Your familiarity with them will help you discern what their particular needs are, thus allowing you to better meet them.

Don't limit the lengths to which you're willing to go to accommodate your customers. If it's not illegal, immoral, or unethical, do it. If anyone in your organization complains that you're favoring a client for whom you're going a bit out of your way, explain that you're not giving preferential treatment so much as you're meeting one particular customer's different needs, and that you're committed to meeting all needs equally.

- **Learn From Your Tigers**

Tigers are solitary and territorial animals. They don't want to be around each other, so getting two to lie down side by side in a circus act, for example, can be a huge feat. Trainers have to learn which ones are more likely to remain friendly to another tiger by learning their individual preferences.

As you learn your customers' needs, learn as much as you can about the intricacies of their business, the individuals on their staff, and their roles and relationships within the organization. Especially if you're selling to different industries, be willing to go into their businesses and learn the idiosyncrasies of the industrial manufacturer, the habits of the healthcare facility, and the quirks of the cleaning supply company. Pick up every detail you possibly can that will help you build that relationship and show you how to better serve those customers. The payoff is that you begin to look like one of them, and they perceive you as being a part of their internal team, which is what you really want, as opposed to being perceived as a salesperson who just comes in to make a sale.

- **Become a Resource**

When trainers have developed a relationship with the animals they train, the animals become completely dependent on them for everything; the trainer is the animal's

sole resource for most primary and secondary needs, such as food, shelter, and even companionship.

To train your customers to think of you first, every time, you must seek to become a full-service resource, as hands-on as you can manage to be. At that point, you'll achieve the coveted top of the mind status that will bring them to you again and again. If you can demonstrate that you are able to meet all of their needs, you'll be the first person they think of when they have a new need that you can either meet or give them a referral to someone who can.

If you're in real estate sales, for example, don't limit your client contact to just selling them property. Extend yourself to meet all of their real estate needs by sending someone from your office to make a presentation to the planning commission, or to track down permits. A simple rule of thumb is to always go above and beyond what your competition is doing to provide services for the customer. Do more and you'll find you'll obtain coveted word-of-mouth advertising, the very best kind, as your happy clients send their friends and colleagues directly to you.

Build Your Menagerie With Your Competition's Clients, Too!

If you train your customers to think of you first, they won't give a thought to your competitors. Now consider how you could use this training strategy to steal business away from your competition. If the competition isn't giving this personal level of service, if they're just filling orders and aren't familiar with their customers and their needs, they are vulnerable. Use your excellent animal training skills to go in there and make the competitors' business your own. When you do, you may find yourself turning even tough old lions into happy pussycats!

About the Author: Dan Stockdale is a speaker, author, consultant, and exotic animal trainer. He is President of Adventures In Leadership, Inc., an educational firm that specializes in applying the principles of positive reinforcement to organizational issues and sales performance. His principles allow clients to achieve exceptional results while maintaining a positive, energetic environment. Dan also accepts 20-25 keynotes per year where he demonstrates his philosophy of management using live animals. You can find out more about Dan Stockdale at <http://www.AdventuresInLeadership.com> or by calling 877.3.JUNGLE.

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