

Returning the Personal Touch to Business

Dear Editor:

Your recent editorial, "Out of the Cave," which appeared in the March/April 2001 issue, was one of the most timely and meaningful messages that has appeared in a trade journal in a long time. Today, as you stated, the personal touch in business has been replaced by fax machine, e-mail, impersonal direct mail, cell phones, Internet and/or telemarketing. The face-to-face sales contact of my generation has been replaced by these so-called more efficient and less time-consuming ways of conducting business.

Salespeople today are taught that time is money, to qualify an account and to call ahead to make an appointment. It is much easier to say no to a salesperson over the phone than it is when he is in your lobby. I recall passing a small tool shop and questioning the salesman I was with why we weren't stopping to call on the shop. He said he had called them, and they were not buying any new equipment. We stopped and called on the owner and learned that they were considering expanding, as they had just received a large contract from an automotive supplier. I doubt that we would have received this information over the phone.

People still buy from people. Personal service and interacting with management, manufacturing and shop people on a face-to-face basis is still the most effective way of doing business. I wish I had every order I lost because of personal reasons...to someone who was closer to the customer than I was.

Very few salespeople today make cold calls. In my day, every salesman was required to make cold calls. There is a place for telemarketing, and it can produce results, but there is still a place today for cold calls. They can be very productive.

I also have a problem with cell phones and how they are used. I was with a salesman who called a manufacturing engineer to ask for an appointment. He

then called him to tell him we were leaving the office. He called again to tell him we were tied up in traffic, and again to tell him we were in the area. He had interrupted the manufacturing engineer four times—twice when the engineer was in the shop—and when we arrived, we received less than a warm welcome. We haven't learned how to use the toys we have in the correct manner.

Trade shows provide a neutral ground for personal interacting with potential buyers. However, unfortunately, salespeople on the floor are taught to qualify the individual. They will ask if you specify equipment, how soon you plan to purchase a piece of equipment, etc., and if the answers are not positive, you are not likely to receive much time from the salesperson. I recall receiving a large order from a manufacturing engineer. When he gave me the order, he said, "You probably don't remember me, but I was that student with whom you took time to show your machines at IMTS many years ago." He had graduated from engineering school and was now in a position to buy capital equipment.

You are so right that today we focus on projects, meetings and quotas, rather than the people who help us meet sales goals and objectives. We are driven by the bottom line, and we forget that service and personal contact are still the best and oldest methods of dealing with our customers. I had a standing rule that all proposals and quotations were to be hand delivered. This allowed us to look into the eyes of the manufacturing engineer or purchasing agent and obtain an immediate reaction to the quote. It is impossible to get any feedback from a proposal that has been mailed, faxed or e-mailed without any personal contact.

The unfortunate thing is that the cost of having a salesperson on the road continues to increase. In addition, the congested airways and highways reduce the number of calls and contacts that a salesperson can

make in a day. The salesman is taught that time is money, so he only calls on the paying customers...the 20% that account for 80% of his business. One solution taken by some machine tool companies is to set up regional technical sales and service centers. This is a way of getting their customers to come to them for service and technical help. It allows them to maintain personal relationships.

I recall telling one of my salesmen to call on a particular client every Monday morning at the same time. He objected, saying that they never bought anything from him. However, he followed my instructions. On one occasion, there was a serious problem on the factory floor the morning he made his weekly call. He was able to help them out, and in turn, they became one of his best customers. Lucky, maybe, but it was the personal calls that made the difference, not the computer, fax machine, phone calls, direct mail or telemarketing.

I am sorry for the lateness in responding to your editorial. As you have probably guessed, I am a retired machine tool person, formerly vice president of sales for Waterbury Farrel Division of Textron (Jones & Lamson turning machines, Cleveland hobbing machines, Waterbury Farrel presses, Thompson grinders, J&L metrology and J&L grinders).

Regards,
Albert B. Albrecht

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If you would like to respond to this or any other article in this edition of *Gear Technology*, please fax your response to the attention of Randy Stott, managing editor, at 847-437-6618.