

Selling With a System

by Victoria Downing



Remodelers are good at systems. Every day, they deal with estimating systems, scheduling systems, and production systems. These procedures are essential to running a business efficiently, and they help remodelers predict what will happen on the job.

Unfortunately, many remodelers resist creating a system for sales. But just as a practiced procedure helps to estimate, schedule, and produce a job properly, a selling system can help make the most of the time and effort spent trying to get the job in the first place.

What Is a Selling System?

I'm not talking about a canned pitch or a series of tricky, manipulative techniques designed to dupe the prospect. Rather, a professional selling system is a procedure that you follow from the time you receive the lead until the time the contract is signed. It sets a guideline that will help you lead your prospective customers logically through the sales process, and it can be changed and modified for individual situations.

But before you can begin to develop a personal selling system, you have to accept and even embrace the idea that you are a professional salesperson. Many remodelers resist this because they associate sales with "tin man" tactics of 15 or 20 years ago. But the slick, high-pressure selling systems that worked so well back then are inappropriate today. Consumers are more sophisticated and better educated than ever. They're tired of having to guard against being "taken." Instead, they're looking for a consultant, a remodeling expert who is willing to provide them with the information necessary to make an intelligent decision.

"We don't sell at all," a remodeler recently told me. "We show the customer our ideas and they just buy." But that's exactly the point: Showing the customer your ideas is selling. Just as you continually try to improve your craftsmanship and estimating ability, you also have to constantly improve your selling techniques. The steps in the selling

process are basically the same ones the "slick" salesperson used years ago, but the emphasis has changed. Sales people used to concentrate on selling a particular product — say, aluminum siding — and were prepared to overcome the objections that were sure to arise. Today, you need to emphasize those steps in the selling system that help to uncover the real needs of the customer.

Five Steps to Selling

Following these five steps will help lead you to the best solutions to your customer's problems.

(1) **Qualify the customer.** One of your most valuable assets is your time. Most remodelers I work with tell me that the time spent qualifying a customer is directly proportional to the cost of the job. In other words, a design/build remodeler discussing a \$100,000 addition might spend an hour in the qualifying phase while a specialty remodeler discussing a replacement window project may spend only 15 minutes.

The amount of time you spend, however, isn't as important as how you spend it. The questions you should try to have your customers answer are:

- How long have they been thinking about the project? (If they've spent a long time planning the project, they're usually serious about building it.)
- How did they hear about your company? (A personal referral from one of your previous customers tells you they've narrowed the field.)
- What's their budget? (If the amount they have in mind isn't even close, you're probably wasting your time.)
- How much research have they done? (It helps to know how much information they already have and where they got it.)

(2) **Gather information.** Encourage your customers to talk about the project by asking open-ended questions. It's important to find out if they've ever remodeled before. People who've lived through a renovation before will have a better idea of what the work will

cost, how long it will take, and how it will affect their daily routines. Getting them to talk about their previous experience also gives you some idea of their likes and dislikes. This will help you to avoid trouble spots and tailor your recommendations to their expectations.

The more they talk about why they are remodeling, the better picture you'll get of their true motivations. Many people have hidden agendas that can seriously affect your success. Suppose, for example, that your prospective customers need a second bathroom to accommodate an aging parent who will soon be coming to live with them. If you don't have this information, you could lose the job because your proposed schedule for construction doesn't satisfy what your customers perceive as an urgent need.

(3) **Present your company.** The first step in many sales systems is the presentation of your company, but I disagree with this approach. No one wants to hear everything about your company. If you present this information before discovering your customer's particular interests, you could end up boring them or, worse yet, annoying them. By waiting until after you've discussed their project, you'll have a better idea of how much information about your company they want to hear.

(4) **Offer solutions.** When you're ready to make your recommendations, try to put yourself in your customer's shoes. As you explain the features and benefits of your choices, continually ask for confirmation: "Is this what you had in mind?" or "You said that this was an important concern — here's how we handled it." By gaining agreement throughout the presentation, you'll eliminate many objections later on.

(5) **Ask for the work.** According to one study, in over 63% of the cases, remodelers make no direct request for the business. This is an amazing statistic. If you've taken the time to ask questions, listen to your prospects answers, and develop solutions that are priced fairly, you've earned the right to ask for the work. In fact, many people are just waiting for you to ask them to become your customer. Don't expect them to volunteer to sign a contract or move on to the next stage. It won't happen. ■

Victoria Downing is director of marketing for Remodeling Consulting Services in Silver Spring, Md., and the author of Selling Remodeling: Nine Steps to Sales Success.