



# Personal Selling for the Forest Products Industry

Bob Smith, Eric Hansen and David Olah\*

## PERSONAL SELLING

*Selling is the personal interaction between two or more people with the intention of exchanging something of value.*

### "The American Salesman"

## MODERN FOREST PRODUCTS SALES

The structure of forest products companies has changed dramatically in recent years. The 1990s have seen escalating importance attached to customer satisfaction, quality, market niches, value-added products, and strategic alliances.

These changes aren't characteristic of only large companies. Entrepreneurs and small companies are going through the same thing. Yet, most companies have not made the internal adjustments necessary to address and more effectively embrace these important shifts in philosophy.

Change, however, must occur for companies to be well positioned to access 21st century markets.

Companies must offer products that maximize customer value, and will have to become more sophisticated in providing that value. This demands changes in production activities, sales strategies, and the flow of information within the company and between the company and its customer and business partners.

The evolution of the sales force from order taking and price quoting to promoting mutually profitable value exchanges will continue. Regardless

of the company's size or the nature of its products, salespeople will become facilitators rather than merely product movers. Your function will be to link customers with the internal operations of your firm. This structural shift has many implications:

- Seller-buyer alliances will produce win-win situations and increase sales stability.
- Knowledge of the customer's markets, processing, purchasing behavior, and product needs will mean competitive advantage.
- You'll need to know the language, functions, limits, and capabilities of other parts of your firm.
- Customer requirements will be the driving force behind new product and process evolution.
- Value, from the customer's perspective, will be a key influence at all levels of the company, including woodlands, manufacturing, and marketing.
- For specific customers or customer groups, sustainable comparative advantage can be achieved.
- The marketing and sales force will be the link between the producer of wood products and its customers.
- The sales force's knowledge of customers will create value for customers and profit for the company.

- The sales force that emphasizes information gathering more than pushing products will be most effective.

## SALESPERSONS' RESPONSIBILITIES

To understand your role as a salesperson it is necessary to first evaluate what you were hired to do. Your primary objective is to create a satisfied customer. This may be accomplished by providing quality products, quick delivery, or responding to customer's needs faster than the competition.

However, many salespeople believe their job is to only "sell" forest products. They are evaluated only on monthly sales dollars or volume shipped. The successful salespersons of the future will create working partnerships with their customers, and sales dollars and volume shipped will represent only a part of this established relationship.

Salespeople have multiple responsibilities. Their job is not only to increase revenue, but to attract new customers, retain current customers, identify what the competition is doing, conduct market analysis, coordinate sales activities, and work with manufacturing facilities to meet customers' needs.

A look into each of these responsibilities may assist you in identifying areas in which you can improve your performance. A well-balanced portfolio of job duties will not only enhance the effectiveness of the salesperson, but increase company bottom line.

\*Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Forest Products Marketing, Virginia Tech; Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Forest Products Marketing, Oregon State University; and Graduate Research Assistant, Virginia Tech, respectively

## 1. INCREASING REVENUE

Unfortunately, most salespeople are measured on this criteria alone. Gross sales and/or gross profit are quite easy to identify. Revenue can be expanded by increasing sales volume, increasing the price of the product, reducing the cost of the product, or any combination of these.

Others, besides the salesperson, have great impact on the revenue of the company. Normally, pricing and costing decisions are not the sole responsibility of the salesperson. Yet, these decisions will have a drastic effect on sales revenue. You must understand how changes in any of these areas may affect the market. A price increase during a down market could be a major error by management and unless the salesperson states his or her opinion it could have a drastic effect on sales revenue.

## 2. DEVELOPING NEW CUSTOMER CONTACTS

It has been estimated that a business loses 20% of its customers annually. This may be a result of competitors' activities, changing material requirements, changes in purchasing policies, relocation, business failures, retirements, mergers, death or litigation. Somehow, the lost volume must be recaptured to merely stay even. There are many ways to locate new customers.

Continual change in the forest products industry forces salespeople to find new customers. As products and markets change, this may be their primary function. One systematic approach to obtain new sales leads is as follows:

- Analyze the product line or service in terms of benefits offered.
- List the kinds of businesses or individuals who would value these benefits.
- List sources of leads, such as directories, association membership lists, and mailing lists.
- From these sources, specific leads can be developed. Company names, addresses, telephone numbers, and individual buyers can be contacted.

The following are proven sources of new leads:

### Existing customers

The best qualified and most receptive prospects you will ever encounter are your own satisfied customers. Many salespeople forget that their best prospects are their existing customers. You know them and they know you. Is it possible to increase their order size or sell them a new item? They may buy one item from you and another from someplace else.

### Referrals

There may be others in your client's organization who could use your products, or they may have colleagues who would be ideal prospects. If you sell furniture to a retail store in your town, it may have outlets in other locations too.

The key to securing referred prospects is timing. Perhaps, after closing a sale you can ask about other customers. Ask for a limited number of referrals at a time. Be sure it's OK to use a referral, and always state the source of the referral.

### Old clients

All too often, once we lose a customer, we give up on them. However, their organizations also change. Go back to them in 4 to 6 months and try again. It is important to find out why they quit purchasing from you and to try to solve that problem. These customers may also be a referral source for you.

### People who have turned you down

Ask for referrals; even though they may not need your product, they may know someone who does. Also, people who turn you down today could develop into customers two or three years down the road. Maintain some contact, because decision makers and people's needs continually change.

### Spheres of influence

These are people who can influence others with a recommendation or by lending their names as referrals. Your accountant, attorney or doctor may also provide service to others in the industry. If you belong to local civic organizations, some members may know potential customers.

### Yellow pages

The yellow pages often have a business section that identifies manufacturers of furniture, pallets,

prefabricated homes, mobile homes, treating plants, wholesale distribution yards, flooring companies, home centers, and others.

### Your competition

You may not normally consider getting prospects from your competitors, but it is possible. They may not supply the same products or service you do.

### Trade associations of your customers

Often over-looked are the meetings and associations that your customers attend. Where else will you see their competitors? If you sell hardwood to a furniture manufacturer, where else do you find other furniture manufacturers than at one of their trade shows or association meetings? For example, if you're a cabinet manufacturer and sell to home centers, a great place to find other home centers is at one of their trade shows or association meetings.

### State directories

Most states have lists of primary and secondary manufacturers in the state. These can be obtained either from the state forestry office or the office of economic development. The lists contain all the manufacturers in the state by product, location, number of employees, and a contact person. Contact information for the Virginia Dept. of Forestry main office is given in the appendix.

### Industry publications

Try and establish a relationship with someone in the key trade publications in your business. These may be the same publications you advertise in. Remember, these publications typically look for news or other articles. You may be able to supply them and in turn receive free promotion. A list of some of these publications is located in the attached appendix.

### Industry directories

In the wood products industry, important directories include the Directory of the Forest Products Industries, Secondary Wood Products Manufacturer's Directory, and Random Lengths Big Book. Many salespeople find these directories indispensable. Information necessary for acquiring these directories is located in the attached appendix.

Regional and national trade associations also provide membership directories. Often these lists are available through the web on the association's home page. A list of several of these trade associations is located in the attached appendix.

### **Cold calls**

While traveling, if you see a firm that may use your product, stop and visit the receptionist and gather information. Do not make a sales call at that time, but find out what products they manufacture, who does the purchasing, obtain their phone number and set up an appointment for a later date.

### **Suppliers**

The same people who sell equipment or materials to you also supply your competitors and customers. They are a great source of information about what is happening in the market.

### **Responses to advertisements, promotions, direct mailing**

Many firms conduct promotional activities to assist your sales effort. Following up on resulting leads is very important and can be beneficial. Your advertising message should respond to the customer's question, "What's in it for me?" It should effectively communicate the qualities and benefits that the customer is seeking.

The message should reflect the total marketing program and other forms of promotion your company is conducting. Many forest products firms in the past decade have promoted quality as one of their major product benefits. This quality theme should be promoted not only in their advertising, but in their public relations campaigns, at trade shows, and by their sales force.

## **3. RETAINING CURRENT CUSTOMERS**

Most firms follow the 80 / 20 rule. Eighty percent of sales come from twenty percent of the customers. Retention of these current customers should be one of the primary objectives of the salesperson. As with all other aspects of your sales job, it's important to have a plan (customer maintenance plan) and systematically make it happen.

Two keys are treating customers right and keeping the right level of contact. Treating customers right is

made up of many things that should be instinctive to any salesperson. Being fair, paying special attention to their needs, building long-term relationships, and always doing what you say you'll do are examples. Remember who you work for . . . your customer!

The better you know your customers, the better you'll understand what level of contact they require. One customer may need to see you in person on a weekly basis, while others may prefer a telephone call once a month.

Several methods to retain existing customers include:

- *be dependable*--keep your promises .
- *be available*-- keep in contact with your customers, even between personal calls. Have your home phone number on your business card .
- *follow-up on all sales*--make sure the order arrived on time and in good condition. Make sure the product is being used for its intended use.
- *suggest solutions to customers*--look for needs and problems that can be solved with your product or service. Be a problem solver.
- *be friendly*--consider your customers as personal friends. Do favors for them, ask about their families, hobbies, and interests.
- *be the customer's champion*--take responsibility for solving problems that arise between the customer and your firm.
- *be an adviser*--offer the customer advice on using your product. Pass on ideas that other customers have found workable. Recommend other products/services if you don't provide them.

## **4. COMPETITION ANALYSIS**

No one person in the firm should be closer to the competition than the salesperson. He should relate what is happening in the market to managers on a regular basis. Are there new products or services being offered? What is happening to the price? What type of quality is the competition supplying? Why is the customer buying from them and not us? These are all questions that can be answered

by the salesperson while in contact with the customer.

Competition forces us to do our job better. For example, would the U.S. auto industry still be making large gas guzzling cars if it had not been for Japanese competition? To understand the competition, answer these questions:

- What do we offer that the competition does not?
- What do we have that the competition has, but ours is better?
- What do we have that is the same as the competitions, but is still important to the customer?
- What does the competition offer that we do not?
- What does the competition have that is better than ours?

## **5. MARKET ANALYSIS**

This is tied quite closely to understanding the customer and the competition. What forces are changing the way you do business? How will the "green" movement change the way forest products companies operate? What will international competition do to the price of softwood/hardwood lumber? What economic forces affect your markets? How will the North American Free Trade Agreement affect your sales? What will rising interest rates do to the housing repair and remodeling market? These are all factors that the salesperson may need to be aware of to better serve his customer and company.

Remember that the market environment is dynamic, not static. Data received today may be outdated tomorrow. You may need to keep abreast of all these factors to serve your customers better.

## **6. COORDINATE SALES ACTIVITIES**

You're responsible for making sure everything goes well after a sale is made. Is the paperwork correct, the price quoted properly, the delivery time listed and the type of delivery stated, are the proper products and grades listed, and are the names of contact persons on the order?

The customer sees you as the primary contact person in the company. If anything goes wrong,

you're the one expected to straighten it out. If everything is understood before the product is delivered, it saves a lot of work. If anything goes wrong, you must take responsibility and correct it as soon as possible.

## **7. WORKING WITH MANUFACTURING LOCATIONS**

Although most salespeople occasionally work with their production facilities, normally the functions are quite separate. However, you can identify new products, determine quality factors that are important to customers, and help locations to reduce excess inventory items.

A close working relationship also assists the operations personnel to understand the customer better. Marketing is no longer just selling products, but producing what the customer wants. Delivery time is no longer three weeks, but three days. The manufacturing location must be an equal player in the marketing concept of an organization. The truth of the matter is, without sales, manufacturing locations are unnecessary.

As the old saying goes:

(Production minus Sales = Scrap)

## **SUCCESSFUL SALES STRATEGIES**

Just as you would not build a house without a blueprint, or take a vacation without an itinerary, the salesperson should never make a sales call without a plan. Or, to quote a book with a similar title, "If You Don't Have a Plan, Stay in the Car."

No facet of selling has changed more in the past two decades than the necessity to be well organized. The electronic communication revolution allows customers to receive competitive information in seconds. But this revolution is not a substitute for a well-planned sales presentation. The salesperson must present information in a well organized and timely fashion. The following strategies are suggested for a successful sales presentation.

### **1. KNOW THE CUSTOMER**

What do they use your product for? How much do they use? Who does the purchasing? These are all areas that can be discovered before you

ever step into your potential customer's office. The more information you have, the less time will be spent gathering it on site, and more time will be available to spend promoting your product.

Once you have met a prospect, keep a file on them. Record important dates, what they purchase, the secretary's name, etc. This will allow you to easily carry on a conversation with them the next time.

Send cards and hand written notes thanking them for purchasing from you. Give them items with your name or company name on them so they will always have something to remind them of you. Contact the customer regularly. Phone them between visits.

### **2. SET UP AN APPOINTMENT**

The day of the "cold call" is over. The average industrial personal sales call costs over \$200. No longer can the company afford outside sales personnel prospecting for new clients. This can easily be done on the telephone by you when you are in your office, or by an inside salesperson. This does not mean that if you drive past a potential customer you can't stop and see how he might use your product. However, unannounced visits should not be used in place of scheduled appointments. Appointments demonstrate that you value the client's time and indicate respect for the individual.

### **3. USE THE TELEPHONE**

There is no greater time saver in the world than efficient use of the telephone. The telephone can keep you in contact with customers when you cannot see them in person. You can prospect for new customers. While on the road, you can reschedule appointments or squeeze in new customers. This is especially true now with the widespread use of cellular phones. The telephone helps you manage your use of time much better.

When your customer calls, make sure that your secretary or receptionist handles the call politely and courteously. The receptionist is often the first person a customer comes into contact with. Efficient and professional phone manners can make a lasting impression on a customer.

### **4. USE THE INTERNET**

The Internet is one of the newest tools available to the salesperson. The number of people and businesses using

the net has increased dramatically in the last few years. Many companies, trade associations, and industry publications related to the forest products industries have home pages where information can be accessed. Often, company sites can provide much of the background information you need to successfully approach companies about the products and services you can offer them.

This is a quick and easy source of a vast amount of information. Listed in the attached appendix are some wood products related sites that can help provide further industry information.

### **5. HAVE AN OBJECTIVE**

Why are you seeing this particular customer? Do you plan on selling him/her something today? Is it just a fact-finding trip? The salesperson should always have a reason for seeing a customer. Successful sales are 90% preparation and 10% presentation. Know what you want to accomplish before you enter the office. A planning worksheet for each customer is very helpful.

### **6. SEE THE DECISION-MAKER**

Who is going to purchase the product? Who uses it in the plant or store? Spend your time with the people who can best make the decision to use your products. There is no sense in spending a lot of time with persons who cannot make a purchase decision.

### **7. NETWORK**

Don't be overly protective of your knowledge. Use networking whenever possible and share the knowledge you have. Remember that one useful piece of information shared with 10 people could result in 10 useful pieces of information returning to you.

### **8. HAVE A SALES STRATEGY**

Create a single compelling idea that differentiates your company or products from the competition. How can you save the customer money? Does your product save the customer time? Can your product make the customer more effective in his or her work? Is your quality better? Can you meet delivery schedules better than the competition? Can your company package the product better to help the customer? Offer a solution. Have an

idea of how to assist the customer before ever seeing him. Plan your work and work your plan.

## **9. BE CONFIDENT, FRIENDLY, AND FLEXIBLE**

Know your product better than anyone else. Be able to answer any questions that may arise. Be kind and friendly to everyone you meet at the customer's office. Some salespeople always take a box of donuts to certain customers when they visit, a \$5 investment that has generated thousands of dollars in good will over the years. Get to know the secretaries and receptionists by name. Understand that customers change their minds on product needs, delivery or specifications. Be flexible enough to meet these needs.

## **10. LISTEN, LISTEN, AND LISTEN**

Remember that you are there to solve the customer's problems. Ask probing questions and see what your company and product can do for the customer. You will never write a sales order while you are talking. Listen to everything customers say about the use of your product. See what other products they are buying and from whom. Identify their needs. Studies of the very best salespeople show that it's their listening skills, not their persuasive talking skills, that distinguish them from average performers. Ineffective listening is one of the most frequent causes of misunderstandings, mistakes, jobs that need to be redone, and lost sales and customers. When you leave, write everything down. Nothing will assist a salesperson more than good clear records.

## **11. SHOW YOUR APPRECIATION**

The customer is doing you a favor by purchasing your product. The two strongest words in sales are "THANK YOU." Everyone likes to be thanked and appreciated. Never leave a customer without thanking them for their time and use of your product.

## **12. BE ENTHUSIASTIC & PERSISTENT**

*"Flaming enthusiasm, backed by horse sense and persistence, is the quality that most frequently makes for success."--Dale Carnegie*

Being enthusiastic about your job and product is one of the easiest ways to increase your chances for success. This type of attitude and mindset helps to show customers, or potential customers, that you are excited and looking forward to the opportunity of helping their business with your product.

Also, don't take rejection personally. You are selling a product. There will be many companies you call on that do not need your product. Their decision not to buy your product is not a direct reflection of you personally. Take a step back and examine what reasons the company might have had for not buying from you. Once you have done this, get right back on track and start thinking about your next sales call. The benefits of persistence should not be underestimated.

## **THE SALES PRESENTATION**

With a little patience and a lot of practice, sales presentations can become one of your most productive selling tools. Success depends on your capacity to listen, the depth of your knowledge of your company and its products, and your ability to ask the right questions.

The sales presentation is a tool that few salespeople truly master. It has a heavy component of public speaking—an activity that strikes fear in the hearts of many. Nevertheless, whether you sell kitchen cabinets or construction lumber, are presenting to an individual or a group, there are sales presentation tactics that can work for you.

There are so many sales presentation models, gimmicks, and guidelines that we can't begin to discuss them all here. What they have in common is important—each emphasizes the necessity of having a definite strategy for delivering a sales presentation.

## **BEFORE THE PRESENTATION**

*"In an emergency a plan is useless, but the planning is indispensable."—Dwight Eisenhower*

The initial steps in your sales presentation should occur well before meeting with your potential customer.

Time spent on advance preparation, including a detailed plan of action, is time well spent.

You may not (in fact, probably will not) end up following every point during the actual presentation, but the effort you put into the plan won't be wasted. The process will leave you far better prepared and enable you to respond to your potential customer more effectively.

Start by gathering as much information as is feasible about the customer. Check industry directories (such as Miller Freeman's Directory of the Forest Products Industry or Random Length's Big Book), associations, or even the local Chamber of Commerce. Your current customers may be good sources of information, and don't overlook the wealth of information that may be obtained by talking to a contact's receptionist or secretary.

From this information, you should be able to anticipate whether your contacts are likely to be interested in your product. If they don't have problems that you can solve, you should reassess the situation.

The preparation done to this point will form the basis for your presentation plan. At a minimum, your written plan should include an outline and the primary questions you intend to ask. Some important components of the presentation plan are the following:

- The objective for the appointment
- Background information on the prospect's organization
- Background information on the prospect
- The prospect's anticipated needs
- Information on the products the prospect is most likely to buy
- Specific benefits your company can provide the prospect (problems you can solve)
- Key questions to ask
- Anticipated objections and how you will respond
- Presentation materials
- A person who will serve as a reference

Too many situation questions can irritate a prospect—so answer as many of these questions as you can during the homework stage. We recommend that you also spend time anticipating how your contact may respond to your sales presentation questions and preparing to follow up.

When you are thoroughly prepared, it is time to meet the customer. First impressions are important. Make sure you are on time and look good. No matter what your approach to selling is remember these key points:

- Be a problem solver.
- Be a good listener
- Follow your plan or strategy

## FUNNEL APPROACH

One commonly used and proven technique for sales presentations is the funnel approach. Although it may not be the exact fit for your style, the overall principles are universal to sales and applicable to any sales presentation. The method can be divided into three areas: The information gathering stage; the benefits and features stage; and the closing stage. Start with a broad approach and focus on the needs of the buyer.

### A. Information gathering stage:

- Send friendly non-verbal signals: solid eye contact, a warm smile, good posture, and the way you walk all send non-verbal signals. Most important is your attitude. Be positive about yourself and your product.
- Use a verbal greeting that is sincere, warm, and natural: What you say and how you say it will help the prospect relax. Initially, a light conversation will help break the ice with the prospect. Notice the items on the walls or their desk. Do they belong to a professional organization, do they have pictures of their family, or do they play a sport?
- Demonstrate an immediate desire to help: Act more like a consultant than a salesperson. Ask questions and listen carefully to what your prospect says. Your listening skills will make you a much better salesperson than your speaking skills.
- Discover your customer's needs: The effective use of questions will allow the customer to share his problems. If you can help solve a problem, you will most likely make a sale.

- Find the customer's hot button: Why does the prospect use the product? Is it cost, performance, service, or quality? Then gear your presentation around these features.

### B. Benefits and features stage:

- Use visual aids if you have them: sales literature, free samples, customer testimonials, etc. This allows you to show, as well as tell your story.
- Ask for feedback and tell a complete story. Keep the conversation two-sided with questions from the customer as you go along. Make sure you include all your product features. Provide honest answers to their questions. Demonstrate how your product or service will improve their performance.
- Introduce the Win-Win Theory: Explain how both parties will benefit from the sales transaction. Tell them you understand that unless they are totally satisfied, there will be no further business. Be sincere.

### C. Closing the sale stage:

- Summarize the advantages of your product.
- Introduce any financial arrangements. What are your company terms, money back guarantee, delivery schedules, etc.
- Use a powerful closing statement: "It appears that you agree our product can meet the needs of your company." Ask the prospect to buy - always ask for the order.

## PRESENTING TO A GROUP

The ability to present ideas to a group is one of the most important assets you can possess. It affords greater visibility for the organization, products, and yourself. Buying decisions for major purchases are often made by a committee so an effective presentation will enhance your chances of making a sale. Anthony Salinger believes there are eleven ways to connect with your audience to be an effective presenter. With a little creativity, you can incorporate these concepts into your sales presentation technique.

1. **Let them know you are human:** Establish a bond with the audience. Mention something that you have in common with them. Let them know you are glad to be there. Be warm and sincere.
2. **Be your unique self:** There is no one else like you. Be proud and confident in how you differ from every other person. Look for and allow your
3. **Use stories and human examples:** Tell stories about yourself for examples. Twist a humorous story you have heard to include yourself as a main character.
4. **Perfect your timing:** Some of the tools for effective timing are the use of the pause, skillful story line development, and the surprise ending. Also, try not to let your presentation drag on too long. Your audience's time is very valuable. Be concise and to the point.
5. **Stay informed:** A skillful communicator cannot be too well informed. Know what current topics interest your audience and profession. Know what unifies your audience. Forest products share numerous links. For example, what happens in the medium density fiberboard and particleboard industries has significant impacts on the furniture and cabinet industries. General economic conditions have important interactions with the industry. Many forest products markets follow the trends of housing starts. You should know what is happening in all aspects of the industry that affects your customer's business. Libraries, bookstores, magazines and newspapers can all keep you abreast of what is happening in the world of sales and forest products.
6. **Let your voice make friends:** Can you smile with your voice? Have you learned to make inflection, volume, pitch, tone and intonation to make your voice sound warm and friendly?
7. **Be flexible:** Adapt - Your life is one of the richest sources of speaking material. Whatever you tell them, make it your own.

8. **Use variety:** Don't limit yourself to one subject or style. Think like a professional. Since you are gaining new information each day, share some of it with your customers. Try different introductions.

9. **Involve the audience:** Invite questions during the presentation. Give a brief quiz to see if anyone is listening, or ask for comments.

10. **Project sincerity:** Strong beliefs, enthusiasm, and energy are the qualities that cause your listeners to lean forward in anticipation of what you have to say. Don't be afraid to get excited. The audience wants to hear your feelings, values, and what you care about.

11. **Practice, Practice, and Practice:** Effective communication is a highly developed skill. Some of us spend a lifetime studying, practicing, and learning. There is no substitute for knowing your material, products, and company. You must project a confident, knowledgeable image for your customers to believe you.

## HANDLING OBJECTIONS

No matter how well you are prepared, how polished your presentation, or how wonderful your product, you are certain to encounter objections from some of your contacts. Properly handled, objections can be turned in your favor.

Your first goal should be to prevent objections. One way to do this is to avoid providing solutions too early in the presentation. If you present a solution before you have fully developed the problem and the prospect's needs, it's natural for him or her to object. It's like telling the punch line in the middle of the joke. If you do, the prospect won't get it!

If objections do come up, here are some suggestions on how to handle them. Remember, there is no such thing as a rejection. There are only objections. Find out why the prospect does not want to buy today. Start by asking the following questions, but tailor them to your specific application:

- What are your reservations?
- What would I have to change to make this offer more attractive?

Listen carefully to the answer. Good listening skills are critical at this stage of the sales presentation. Avoid

preparing your response until you have heard all of the customer's concerns.

Make short notes while the customer is talking. Get clarification or specifics on the answers. Paraphrase the customer's concerns and repeat them back to ensure you are interpreting them correctly. If the contact says your product is too expensive, find out what too expensive (\$) is. Make sure the prospect is telling you the real objection. Again, ask probing questions. "Is there anything else that concerns you?"

Always use verbal cushions: Don't counter with an objection. Show your concern, then state why they may not realize all the benefits. "I appreciate your concerns, but others have found . . ." End your response with a question. "Does that make sense? or You do want reliable service for this product, don't you?"

Always avoid arguing. Calmly restate the information in a slightly different way and make sure your voice doesn't sound defensive. Keep your answers short and to the point. Change the objections into selling points.

Unfortunately, you will not always make a sale. Don't take this personally! "No" is not a personal rejection, but a business refusal. It means that the prospect may not have enough information to buy, doesn't need the product at this time, or can't afford it. It does not mean you are not a good person.

If you have a prepared response to the following standard sales objections, you will be more likely to close the sale.

- It's too expensive.
- We like our current supplier.
- I'm not ready to buy yet.
- The last time I used your company we had problems.
- Your financial arrangements are not as good as those we currently have

Even the best salesperson cannot overcome all objections. It is important to listen carefully, probe for the underlying objections, get clarification, and verbally cushion your response.

If that fails, then leave on a positive note. Thank them for their time and ask if you could see them in the future when things may change. Then follow up with a letter discussing

your visit and any new items that you may be able to share with them.

## WHY DID I LOSE THAT SALE?

Losing a sale can be very discouraging, but it is critical to step back and evaluate what happened. Ask yourself the following questions; the answers will leave you better prepared for your next attempt.

- Was I fully prepared?
- Did I somehow offend them?
- Were they interested from the beginning?
- Did they understand the presentation?
- Did they believe me?
- Was my strategy strong?
- Was the market up/down at the time of my presentation?

No matter what your approach, a well thought out plan is critical to a successful sales presentation. Confidence in yourself and your product help, and a well thought out plan builds confidence. Knowing your audience is critically important and will allow you to steer the buyer through the closing stage and avoid unnecessary objections. If you do your homework, thoughtfully prepare, and practice your sales presentations, it will increase your success.

## SUMMARY

As we enter the 21st century the role of the salesperson has changed. Their duties no longer include simply taking orders and quoting prices. This is especially true for the forest products industry, where a "marketing" philosophy has never been dominant.

The forest products salesperson of this millennium needs to understand that they are facilitators. That is, they facilitate the mutually beneficial exchange of products or services between two parties. This exchange process is a complicated one that focuses on creating satisfied customers at a profit. In facilitating this process it is important that you understand what your responsibilities are. These include:

- Increasing revenue for the firm
- Developing new customer contacts
- Retaining current customers
- Analyzing the market and competition
- Coordinating sales activities
- Working with manufacturing locations

These tasks are most easily accomplished by: knowing your product, understanding the market environment and competition, understanding your customers, having good communication skills, and, most importantly, being a problem solver.

## Appendix

### Directories

Regional Business Directory and Industry Specific Directory(ies)  
Dun and Bradstreet Information Services  
3 Sylvan Way  
Parsippany, NJ 07054-3896  
Phone: 201 605-6700

Directories of Manufacturers (by state)  
Commerce Register, Inc.  
190 Goldwin Avenue  
Midland Park, NJ 07432  
Phone: 201 445-3000

Directory of the Forest Products Industry  
Miller-Freeman Publications  
500 Howard Street  
San Francisco, CA 94105  
Phone: 415 905-2200

Green Book—Hardwood Lumber Market Directory  
Miller Publishing Co.  
1235 Sycamore View  
P.O. Box 34908  
Memphis, TN 38184-0908

Random Lengths Big Book  
P.O. Box 867  
Eugene, OR 97440-0867  
Phone: 541 686-9925 Fax: 800 874-7979  
Web site: [www.randomlengths.com](http://www.randomlengths.com)

Virginia Wood Products State Directories  
Contact Virginia Dept. of Forestry at:  
P.O. Box 3758  
Charlottesville, VA 22903  
Phone: 804-977-6555  
Web site: [www.state.va.us](http://www.state.va.us)

### Trade Journals

Wood & Wood Products  
P.O. Box A-3844  
Chicago, IL 60690-9952  
Fax: 312 922-3165  
Web site: [www.iswonline.com](http://www.iswonline.com)

Pallet Enterprise  
Industrial Reporting, Inc.  
1893-D1 Billingsgate Circle  
Richmond, VA 23233-4239  
Phone: 804 740-1567 Fax: 804 740-2826  
Web site: [www.palletenterprise.com](http://www.palletenterprise.com)

Cabinet Maker and Furniture Design and Manufacture  
Chartwell Communications, Inc.  
380 E. Northwest Highway, Suite 300  
Des Plaines, IL 60016-2208  
Phone: 847 390-6700 Fax: 847 390-7100  
Web site: [www.cabinetmag.com](http://www.cabinetmag.com)

Southern Lumberman  
Hatton-Brown Publishers, Inc.  
225 Hanrick St.  
Montgomery, AL 36104  
Phone: 800 669-5613 Fax: 334 834-4525  
Web site: [www.southernlumberman.com](http://www.southernlumberman.com)  
e-mail: [subscribe@hattonbrown.com](mailto:subscribe@hattonbrown.com)

### Trade Associations

National Hardwood Lumber Assoc.  
P.O. Box 34518  
Memphis, TN 38184-0518  
Phone: 800 933-0318  
Web site: [www.natlhardwood.org](http://www.natlhardwood.org)  
email: [info@natlhardwood.org](mailto:info@natlhardwood.org)

Hardwood Manufacturers Assoc.  
Suite 205, Building B  
2831 Airways Boulevard  
Memphis, TN 38132  
Phone: 901 346-2222 Fax: 901 346-2233  
Web site: [www.hardwood.org](http://www.hardwood.org)

Appalachian Hardwood Manufacturers, Inc.  
P.O. Box 427  
High Point, NC 47261  
Phone: 919 885-8315 Fax: 919 886-8865  
Web site: [www.woodcom.com/woodcom/ahmi/index.html](http://www.woodcom.com/woodcom/ahmi/index.html)

Virginia Forest Products Assoc.  
P.O. Box 160  
Sandston, VA 23150-0160  
Phone: 804 737-5625 Fax: 804 737-9437  
e-mail: [vfpa@worldnet.att.net](mailto:vfpa@worldnet.att.net)

Southern Forest Products Assoc.  
P.O. Box 641700  
Kenner, LA 70064-1700  
Phone: 504 443-4464 Fax: 504 443-6612  
Web site: [www.sfpa.org](http://www.sfpa.org) also [www.southernpine.com](http://www.southernpine.com)

Southeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association  
671 Forest Parkway  
Forest Park, GA 30297  
Phone: (404) 361-1445  
Fax: (404) 361-5963  
Web site: [www.slma.org](http://www.slma.org)

### Websites

Steve Schook's Directory of Forest Products, Wood Science, and Marketing  
Web site: [www.forestdirectory.com](http://www.forestdirectory.com)

Lumber Quest  
Web site: [www.lumberquest.hollowww.com](http://www.lumberquest.hollowww.com)

Lumber Trader  
Web site: [www.Lumber-Trader.com](http://www.Lumber-Trader.com)

Center for Forest Products Marketing and Management  
Website: [www.vtwood.forprod.vt.edu/cfpmm/index.htm](http://www.vtwood.forprod.vt.edu/cfpmm/index.htm)

### Disclaimer

Commercial products are named in this publication for informational purposes only. Virginia Cooperative Extension does not endorse these products and does not intend discrimination against other products which also may be suitable.