

# Sales Techniques, Lessons from a Pet Store

by John Mehrmann

In the process of extensive study to develop Expert Sales Training Course Materials for the Institute for Advanced Leadership, I discovered that the best sales techniques relate to “Lessons from a Pet Store”. Simple and effective, these strategies are relevant regardless of the commodity or market.

**“If history repeats itself, and the unexpected always happens, how incapable must man be of learning from experience” – George Bernard Shaw**

Every market is a microcosm of the environment. As a student working part time at a Pet Store, I contemplated life’s lessons in the mall. Each store was a beehive of activity, with the associated politics, romantic drama and eager achievers that exist in every business or neighborhood. The mall was a reflection of the town, which in turn was a smaller version of the global economy. Some store personnel would boycott products from other stores or negotiate barter systems for services. Each store managed an individual profit and loss. Competing stores raged financial war with discounts and promotions, while the superpowers protected their place as anchor stores at polarized ends of the mall.

So what lessons came from a Pet Store? All of the sales associates earned minimum wage plus a commission for assisted sales. All of the associates had the same incentive, claim more customers and claim more sales. The ability to afford movie tickets, new clothes or a car payment was the result of individual sales technique.

## VOLUME SALES

The typical new Pet Store sales associate would perch at the end of the aisles and wait for a customer to linger and look at a product. The stealthy sales associate in a camouflage white smock would eagerly pounce upon unsuspecting patrons as they lingered near the dry dog food. Of course the food, chew toys and plastic Chihuahua boots had very little value and equally miniscule commission. Indeed, the amount of commission of such items would not buy a side of fries. However, the unskilled sales associates quickly learned the now familiar war cry, “Make it up in volume!”

Some of those sales associates did not learn advanced sales techniques. These unfortunate souls are still working at the local Pet Store or selling computers.

## REPEAT BUSINESS

After the initial big sale and commission for a dog or a cat, the residual repeat business was typically food, shampoo, collars or accessories. In other words, after the initial big sale, the repeat business was on items with smaller value. Sometimes there was the occasional companion pet, but this was rare. In addition, the sales associate needed to be wary of the competitive sales clerks that continually waited at the end of the aisles to pounce on and steal the loyal customer. When the customer loyalty was strong, the repeat business was a nice residual commission even though there was more competition for the smaller add-on sales.

Repeat Business also had another peculiar clientele in the Pet Store. Some individuals preferred to maintain large snakes as pets and visited the store in search of live food. Many of the sales associates would avoid these customers. Even though this assured repeat business and the commission for hamsters and gerbils was considerably higher than dry foods, some sales associates loathed the idea of earning a living by selling cute little creatures for a mid-week snack. The sales associates who aggressively retained this repeat business received financial rewards and later graduated as lawyers or accountants.

## MARKETING

How often have you walked past a Pet Store and witnessed the playful puppies or carefree kittens bounding about behind the glass? Frequently these adorable little creatures roam the store or in small rooms with open doors so the unwary passerby can pause to enjoy the affection of the furry friends. This is Marketing 101. It is your free sample, it is the impulse buy, it is the emotional bond that overwhelms all other considerations before the negotiations can begin. More powerful than discounts or coupons, emotional marketing has a tremendous success for the interested consumer.

## DIRECT SALES

Direct Sales is a special skill that only the top associates learn to wield effectively. The associates who perfected this technique earn the respect and jealousy of their peers. To be effective, these associates learn to identify the customers with the highest potential, regardless of outward appearance. While some associates would walk past a consumer dressed in paint-spattered coveralls, the associate with relationship skills would easily open a no pressure dialogue and identify opportunity. With patience and deliberation, the sales associate would create a relationship. Sometimes the relationship resulted in an immediate sale, and sometimes it would take months for the right moment. The Direct Sales Expert recognized that the customer designates the “right time to buy”, and that an established relationship eliminates competition when that time occurs.

## NICHE MARKETS

Yes my friends, even in a Pet Store there are niche markets. These are the sales associates who take the time to become specialists in a selected, often neglected, field of expertise. For example, in our little microcosm it was the aquariums. Most of the associates did not want to invest the time to learn the hundreds of variations of aquatic life, the nuances of fresh and salt-water fish, or the importance of balanced PH. Cleaning tanks and treating appropriately named diseases like “ICK” were not as glamorous as handling cute little puppies.

However, the commission for large aquariums and all of the associated peripheral accessories was significant. What aquarium would be complete without the water filters, lights, stones and bubbling Deep Sea Diver by the treasure chest? If the customer did not make the initial investment of chemicals and filters to treat the water, then it was a pretty sure bet that there would be repeat business and sales of more fish.

The Niche Market required some direct relationship sales skills and a certain level of expertise for recognition as a specialist. In this case, both the large sales and the residual repeat business were virtually uncontested. While the preparation may take a little more time to develop, the long-term rewards are worth the investment for differentiation as a specialist.

## What You Can Learn from the Pet Store

Perhaps you can also appreciate the relationship of the Lessons from the Pet Store as they pertain to other business. At the very least, perhaps you have similar lessons from other seemingly insignificant experiences to improve insight on your current situation, challenges and opportunities. Take a moment to reflect on your own previous jobs, neighborhood or family. The lessons from your personal experiences create the most powerful perspectives.

**About the Author:**

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