

The Zen Of Stan

By Stan Adler

Story 4

Fix the Customer First

Following a frustrating transaction that becomes unnecessarily complicated, our narrator better understands the most important aspect of selling.

Selling is customer service, and customer service is selling. The two actions are indistinguishable parts of a seamless process.

There are salespeople in all fields who make a distinction between the two. These salespeople tend to subscribe to the old scenario in which selling often means “get the sale and forget the customer” and customer service which often means “do as little as possible to quick-fix any problems that crop up.” They see selling as something that you do to someone and customer service as something you do for someone, albeit reluctantly.

As a real estate agent, it is your job to make your client feel better about buying, to make the buying process an intelligent and enjoyable exchange. Whether your client is buying an undeveloped lot or a 4000 square foot luxury home, your role is to answer concerns, balance priorities, work out potential problems, clarify confusion, solve unavoidable conflicts, and maintain equanimity even if the situation becomes volatile.

When servicing the client is your primary objective during and after the sale, things tend to go right. The client feels right, feels good about buying, and looks forward to doing business with you again.



Several years ago, the month of January brought record low temperatures to the fair-weather state of California. Temperatures dropped into the teens and water pipes all over town began bursting.

I was watching the local news, feeling smug and a little bit guilty that we had escaped the problem, when I heard a loud snap and the sickening sound of rushing water. An outside pipe had split open and a torrent of water was gushing onto the basement window. I yanked the bottom segment off a downspout and used it to divert the flow away from the house.

It was a temporary solution, but not a bad one, and I was feeling rather proud of myself as I started calling plumbers to arrange for a professional repair.

I soon found out I was low priority. Six different plumbers told me they had customers who had no water at all, and they didn't know when they could get to me. So then I tried calling hardware stores for advice on how to repair a copper pipe. Responses were curt. One clerk told me he had twelve people at the counter, all demanding supplies he no longer had. With each call, my questions and my temper got shorter.

The people I talked to were demonstrating a free-market truth: when demand for goods and services exceed supply, courtesy is often the first casualty. I, myself, was

demonstrating another: expect the worst, adopt a nasty attitude, and you'll get just what you expect.

An hour and many phone calls later, I finally located a hardware store in a town fifteen miles away that still had two half-inch pipe clamps. "If you can get here within the hour," the owner said, "I'll save one of them for you."

**“Fix the customer,
then fix the pipe.”
– Victor**

So I grabbed a jacket and raced out. Thirty minutes later I dashed into the store. A very young woman (a girl, really) was behind the counter. "I'm the guy who called about the clamp," I said, slightly out of breath. She frowned, looked at me with a puzzled expression, and then searched through several boxes behind the counter. Nothing.

"Let me see if I can find my dad. Maybe he'll know."

Her father, the owner, was helping two other customers in the rear of the store, but told her to look in the box under the counter.

"But I already looked there, Dad. It's not there."

"Look again! I know I put it there."

The tension was starting to get to them. Their voices got louder, and everyone in the store could hear. My own frustration was rising by the minute.

As the young woman returned to the front counter, an older woman, obviously her mother, came up from another part of the store and asked what was going on. With a pained expression on her face, she turned to me. "I'm so sorry, I sold those about five minutes ago. I didn't know he was saving them."

At that moment I lost it. "Dammit! I drove all the way over here for something you don't even have? I thought this was a hardware store!"

Now the owner joined us at the front counter. He quickly realized the situation and tried his best to apologize. "I understand how you must feel," he said softly. "I'm terribly sorry. If you have a minute, I think I can find something else that might work."

But I was having none of it. Furious, I turned and stomped out of there, slamming the door harder than I meant to. The bell on the door clattered against the glass.

**“No profit grows,
where is no pleasure ta'en.”
– Shakespeare**

A mile away, I stood shivering in an open phone booth, staring blindly at the Yellow Pages and calling myself stupid. I felt stupid for trying to find something that wasn't available, and stupid for trying to make another person feel as frustrated as I was because of an unintentional mistake. I had allowed myself to take the mistake personally, and I had managed to insult the whole family—husband, wife, and daughter.

I drove back to the store. Both women were behind the counter. I smiled sheepishly and asked if I could speak to the man.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry for acting the way I did," I said when he came up to the counter. "And I apologize to both of you for losing my temper. That was uncalled for." They both smiled, and the daughter blushed.

I'll never forget the father's response. With a kind smile, he said, "That's okay. If you can't understand your customer's frustrations, you don't deserve to be in business." We shook hands, grinning. "Now," he said, "let's see if we can get you fixed up."

The man knows his hardware. In a very short time, I left the store with a \$2.00 part, and two hours later the leak was fixed. He also knows his business—my dignity as a person and a customer had been restored, along with my disposition.

Now, whenever I need something from a hardware store, I drive fifteen miles out of my way, and do it with a smile.



Not long after this, Victor and I were strolling in the wooded area just below my house. A few minutes earlier, as we headed down toward the woods, he had spotted the bright new copper pipe and had asked about it. Now, as we walked along, I told him the story. Victor had picked up a Douglas-fir cone and was idly tossing it from one hand to the other as he listened.

Victor instantly understood why the hardware merchant's behavior had affected me so strongly. "Empathy," he said. "That's what made the difference. Your friend at the hardware store is a true seller. He instinctively knows that his job is to show understanding even when the customer doesn't deserve it. And that's the essence of service.

"The truth is, Stan," Victor continued, his voice dropping almost to a whisper as if to share a secret, "you can't remove customer service from the act of selling. It's all service. It's like this cone. If I decide to remove the scales from the cone, in short order I have no cone at all. The scales are the cone; they're inseparable."

As he talked, Victor had been pulling off the scales and bracts and dropping them on the path. "Here," he said, handing me the bare spike. "Pseudotsuga, Latin for false hemlock. We call it Douglas-fir. But botanically it's neither a hemlock nor a fir. Magnificent trees, even if we humans are confused about what to call it."