

Go Deep

The importance of customers won't change in 30 years. How you communicate with them will

When first asked to write this month's column on what I thought the sales function in building materials distribution would look like in 30 years, I was a little taken aback. How in the heck should I know? Thirty years from today, I plan to be well into retirement and enjoying a slower pace of life.

To help me get started, I began thinking about what my job in sales looked like back in 1992, and that was an interesting trip down memory lane for sure. One big difference was the tools available to communicate with customers. Very few people had a cell phone back in those days; if somebody wanted to get in touch with you, they used the newest technology available—the digital pager! You then needed a roll of quarters and a clean public phone. Those were the days of handwritten quotes, printed price books, and fax machines.

Another thing that has changed drastically in the past 30 years is the dress code for salespeople in the industry. I hear the same thing time and time again: “My customers would be uncomfortable with me if I dressed too far above them.” I say “BS” to that ... you dress that way for two reasons: You can, and you want to. Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.

But, without a doubt, the single largest change in a salesperson's life today is technology. A smartphone in your hand is like holding a small computer. You can call, text, email, schedule appointments, even FaceTime a customer. You can check out manufacturer websites for product information or specs right from your phone. Depending on your employer's technology platform, you can quote jobs, place orders, or check deliveries using the same phone.

In 30 years, I believe technology will continue to move forward and make the biggest difference in a salesperson's life from an efficiency standpoint. Bar-coding capabilities

will increase and assist companies in inventory control and efficiencies. I can see a time when salespeople making “virtual” sales calls on a tablet, or perhaps a wristwatch, will be common.

And it's hard to fathom the changes to CRM programs in 30 years. Not to worry, though; I don't believe technology advances in the future will make salespeople obsolete. The home improvement and building industries in many markets are still very fragmented today. Even with the consolidation of so many distribution companies and large builders, I believe it will still be fragmented well into the future.

There are literally hundreds and hundreds of contractors in many markets today, and that's one reason I believe the role of a salesperson in the building materials industry will still be viable. Somebody needs to be on the streets in these markets identifying and attracting contractors to their distribution center.

Another reason I think the role of the salesperson will still be around in 30 years can be summed up in one word: relationships. This is a relationship business—always has been, always will be. Contractors still want to be able to talk to somebody when they have product or application questions. Problems will still exist, and customers will still need somebody to go to bat for them when they're in need of help from a manufacturer.

The more you, your services, or products are seen as a commodity, the easier it will be for technology to replace you. The more you, your services, or products are seen as a way to enhance, grow, or help your customer's business, the less likely technology will be able to replace you.

The choice is yours—you can't control technology's place in the industry, but you *can* control how you interface with your customers. Use the tools at your disposal to communicate on a deeper level with them. Helping them grow will help you grow. **PS**



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