

Diamonds in the Rough

BY BRUCE CARTER, President North American Fire Sales

Controlled growth—how does a highly motivated, well-managed and hard working fire equipment company achieve it? Without a healthy dose of ambition and a well thought out plan, it is a safe bet that significant growth is likely to be little more than a dream.

Acquisition is a consideration. Buying up the competition has been a path to significant expansion for more than a few companies in recent years and arguably does accomplish a measure of desired growth. The addition of business via acquisition has its pitfalls however, and is clearly not a viable option for all. The subject of business growth is of interest to the majority of fire equipment distributors, but the formula for achieving it is simply not that simple.

Discounting the opportunity to purchase competitor's business, the ambitious distributor is left to consider growth by other means, such as

- Simply selling more of the current products and services to the existing customer base.
- Adding services and product lines.
- Adding accounts to the customer base by extending current geographic market boundaries.
- Growing the customer base by taking business from competitors within the existing geographic market boundaries.
- Raising prices.

Periodically raising prices is typically the self-assigned task reserved by management or ownership leaving the remaining approaches of revenue enhancement to others, but to whom? Good question.

"No, we don't ask our service technicians to do any selling at all . . . they're service people." As a fire protection

industry sales trainer for the past 15 years, this statement easily ranks at the very top of my *"The Most Disappointing Statements That I Encounter"* list. So often, fire protection organizations dilute their success and stifle their growth either with the belief that service people are incapable of selling or by simply not empowering or allowing them to do so.

Does every service technician in the fire equipment industry have the potential to become a super salesperson? Probably not. Is a team of selling service technicians likely to totally alleviate the need for designated sales representatives or a sales force? Again, not likely. Although selling service technicians may not provide the complete answer to the growth challenge, they are certainly an often-overlooked resource that can make a significant contribution.

Take service technician Tom for example. Nice guy, Tom. Tom has nearly five years experience on the service truck and knows his customers and their facilities well. He has an above average product knowledge, a good customer service head on his shoulders and a good grasp of the applicable code requirements in his locale. Tom has good people skills. His customers know him, trust him and they like him. But, even with all of these positive qualities, Tom is still "just a service technician," complete with a generous dusting of dry chemical on his work uniform and dirt under his fingernails on any given day. Even Tom would be hard pressed to title himself a salesman.

At the other end of the building we have sales rep Randy. Randy is a nice guy, too. Randy has been in the business about the same length of time as service

tech Tom. Randy, like Tom, knows well the products and the services he sells and can quote you fire codes until your eyes glaze over. Randy is honest and trustworthy and in that crisp white shirt and designer tie, a sharp dresser to boot. Most would readily consider Randy a solid sales representative.

The question is this: how is it possible – or is it possible – that service technician Tom could be as effective as sales rep Randy when it comes to getting existing and prospective customers involved with the many products and services that his company offers? When it comes to selling new fire equipment could Tom hold a candle to Randy? What about cross-selling the additional services his company offers – could Tom get it done as well as Randy? Now, what about prospecting for and landing new business? Is it a mistake to think that Tom could be nearly as successful at landing new accounts as Randy?

The answer to the question lies in part with the selling approach perspective. When Randy makes a sales presentation, his approach with the prospective buyer is as a third party service provider, meaning that he proposes to provide the prospect with terrific service through the service people at his company whose job it is to deliver it.

In his presentation, Tom also assures the prospective buyer that great service will be provided. The important difference between the two perspectives is that Tom does not need to orchestrate the delivery of superior service through others – he will simply provide it himself! It is this point of "service perspective" that provides the answer to the question of Tom's potential to sell as effectively as Randy. Be not deceived, there are count-

less buyers out there who would much rather deal with the person who provides the promised service personally than with the person who can only propose to provide stellar service through others. Certainly a well-trained salesperson can be an effective producer of sales, no question about that. But, the truth of the matter is that many buyers would rather do business with service people than with salespeople.

When considering service technicians as sellers it is important to understand that the ability to sell is not determined at birth. There are many exceptionally productive sales people who, based upon the talents and attributes that they were *not* given at birth, should never achieve success in sales, but do and in a very big way. The super sales person is no more a *born* sales person than the all-star short-stop, world famous surgeon, or wealthy financier is a born success. An exceptional amount of desire combined with commitment, discipline, hard work and

training produce success in nearly all walks of life. Selling is no exception.

In the fire protection organization, before the profitable sales dollars can be expected to roll in, a sales infrastructure needs to be put in place, which will require a modest investment by management and includes some basic components.

TRAINING "That guy is just a born salesman." Oh no, he's not! Sales people are trained, not born. And a structured program that teaches basic selling skills is a must. Extensive service experience, industry know-how and knowledge of code and product are a great foundation for success but they are no substitute for mastering specific selling skills. Without a thorough grasp of the basics, even the brightest and most enthusiastic of service technicians weary of rejection become discouraged and will give up on the new sales assignment they have been given. An investment in

sales training for technicians pays measurable dividends.

PROSPECT INFORMATION MANAGEMENT It is simple: no prospects, no sales. Much of selling is about locating, gathering and managing qualified prospects. Whether through a simple system of 3" x 5" cards organized in a file box or a more sophisticated system involving any one of today's CRM software programs, pertinent information on qualified prospects must be managed and filed for retrieval at an appropriate future date for presentation and follow-up. With a practical system for recording and retrieving information, sales and service people can maximize their selling effectiveness.

SALES SCRIPT Fire protection professionals that are serious about getting more customers involved in their superior products and services take the time to compose, memorize and internalize an effective sales script. In the buyer's mind



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an effective sales presentation is a structured and concise one that establishes clear benefits for buying. There is only one best way to say anything. Successful selling means determining the best way to say it and saying it like that!

SALES LITERATURE Conditioned since childhood, customers doubt what they hear but believe what they see. Although perhaps not an essential “must have” in the early stages of a company’s sales evolution, thoughtfully designed sales literature does provide visual credibility to the sales call. Attractive presentation folders, product brochures and descriptive flyers provide a solid ROI when placed in the hands of properly trained sales and service representatives.

COMPENSATION The ideal compensation plan is simple, easy to manage and provides meaningful incentive for the sales/service technicians working it and a reasonable return to the company sponsoring it. Time invested on the front end to carefully create a pay plan that is a winning one for all concerned is time well spent. Compensation programs in a seemingly constant and perpetual state of adjustment and fine-tuning cause frustration and de-motivate. Invest the time necessary to design a win-win compensation plan and then resist the temptation to tweak it.

No one said that growing a business, particularly a fire protection service business, is easy. Industry veterans know that solid growth comes only with intelligent planning and consistent effort. While growth is not easy, neither should it be made more difficult by failing to utilize the available resources. Solid service technicians *can* be solid sales producers.

With dry chemical on their pants and soiled hands many are simply diamonds in the rough lacking only a bit of polish and the opportunity to shine. Given the proper training and a chance, many will become valuable and sparkling contributors to the growth of the organization. Want to grow? Start polishing. ▽

Bruce Carter is a popular motivational speaker and sales trainer specializing in the fire equipment industry. As president of North American Fire Sales, Bruce travels across the U.S. and Canada teaching rock solid selling techniques with a motivating presentation style that can be described as “nothing short of contagious”. For more information on his Basic Selling Skills For The Fire Protection Professional seminar visit www.nafiresales.com or call (513) 772-3778.

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