

How to get out of a sales slump

Focus on new prospects, products and promotions to get out of a rut

BY PHIL SASSO

Q I feel like I'm in a sales rut. I've been selling tools long enough to know what I'm doing but my sales are down. I'd like the blame it on the economy. But other dealers I know are doing OK. I'd like to grab a little bigger piece of the tool and equipment pie. What can I do to promote my business more effectively and grow my sales?

A With time, anyone from a professional athlete to a professional distributor can fall into a rut. The key to continued success is not to let the rut define you. Remember, it doesn't matter if you've been a dealer for twelve months or twelve years, if you're not moving forward, you're just

treading water. And you can't tread water forever.

Here's what I suggest. Put a sticky-note on your dashboard that reads: "What's New?" To pull yourself out of a slump, you need to maintain solid basics (keep it neat, stay on schedule, tote and promote, etc.) while concentrating on three "news": new products, new prospective customers and new promotional techniques.

First things first

First let me focus on attitude. When you find yourself in a slump, it's easy to get down in the dumps. Try not to let it overwhelm you. You need to remind yourself you'll pull out of it in due time. Surround yourself with positive, encouraging people and thoughts. But you can't just sit around waiting for things to change.

In essence, if you want things to change you have to *be* the change. For instance, you need to do everything you can to keep up with the competition. In fact, don't just keep up with them. Strive to keep ahead of them. (To quote late comic Lewis Grizzard: "*If you're not the lead dog, the scenery never changes.*")

Your bread and butter
as a

dealer will always be the basic tools that all techs need. But once a tech has all the basics, the growth of your business will come from product upgrades and new products. To succeed at that you need to keep informed on what's new.

Let me give a shameless plug for our sister publication, *Professional Tool & Equipment News*. Find hundreds of the latest tools and equipment on the *PTEN* online buyer's guide, or by checking out the latest issue of *PTEN* online at www.pten.com.

Also in each issue of *Professional Distributor*, check out the Most Wanted section (Page 28) to see products techs have inquired the most about. Both will help you keep your pulse on tool trends so you'll know what your customers are going to ask for before they ask for it.

New products

"Every time you go to see a customer, you need something new to talk about," says Scott Pilkenton, Senior Vice President of Merchandising at Integrated Supply Network (ISN). "For example, ISN offers a sample program as part of ISN Select. I think that's something that sometimes gets overlooked," says Pilkenton. "Monthly, we'll send dealers no more than two items valued at no more than \$100 a piece. We're only going to send out things that are really strong and things that are hot and new to the market. We get a lot of exclusives and a lot of those exclusives are in that program."

"If it's something that moves really well, dealers can order it immediately," Pilkenton says. "But let's say it's a sample that [the dealer] says 'It didn't fit my market space. It didn't fit my market segment.

I just didn't get it.' They can send that back -- and they get up to 60 days to do that."

By focusing on "What's New," every time your customers and prospects see you, they'll think of you as the tool guy who's on the cutting edge and always has something innovative and interesting to share. They'll look forward to seeing you.

New prospects

In fact, always having a new tool in your hands makes it easier for you to approach prospective customers, too. It lets you focus on tool talk instead of small talk.

A tech won't mind giving you a few minutes if he knows he's going to learn something. And it's easier to break the ice with "Hey have you seen this new crimping tool," than "Nice weather today, eh?" To be blunt, you should focus on what's new in tools and leave the weather to Al Roker.

"Like any type of sales you need to keep finding new customers or you start getting stagnate and your sales start to drop," says Pilkenton.

So, make it a point to spend a couple minutes with guys who aren't yet customers, whether that's at an existing stop or a new one. They probably won't buy from you the first time

you introduce yourself, but it's all about timing. One day you'll be there when they need something or they'll have had a problem with their tool guy and be ready to jump ship. Be sure they have your card in their toolbox so they can call you any time they make that decision.

New promotional tools

Most dealers also use leave-behind handouts. There's nothing new about that. It's a good way to keep customers thinking about you and remind them of your special promotions. Be sure your flyer has your name and number on it so when a customer is ready to buy they can call you immediately -- before they cool off.

"We're making it very affordable for any type of dealer to have a custom flyer cover," says Pilkenton. "This will take them to a whole new reality for a very, very small fee ... It's probably going to change our industry." The new custom full-color flyer covers are expected to be unveiled at ISN's Tool Dealer Expo mid-June in Orlando.

"In today's market, with all the new technicians coming to the industry, establishing text messaging capabilities to tell them about hot new products or

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training events are a great way to self-promote," says Pilkenton. For more on how easy it is to use text messaging as a dealer see the "Sales Q&A" column in the April 2011 *Professional Distributor*.

Putting marketing technology on your truck can also help your better promote your full product offering. I'm not talking about anything very sophisticated.

I'm talking about something as simple as a DVD player and TV monitor.

"If you have DVD player or computer on your truck, you need to be showing product demos," Pilkenton says. He points out that a dealer can easily get free videos from his WD partners, tool and equipment makers, or even YouTube. "There's a lot of good stuff out there."

Slumps happen. It's how you deal with them that makes the difference. Just keep a positive attitude and focus on new products, new prospects and new promotions and you can bounce back! ■



Phil Sasso is president of Sasso Marketing Inc. (www.sassomarketing.com), a technical marketing agency specializing in tools and equipment. Subscribe to his free marketing tips at philsasso.com/blog.

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