

FIRST FIVE MINUTES

WIN THE FIRST FIVE MINUTES

I can remember hundreds of meetings with team members discussing the average amount of time we would likely spend with each of our customers looking to purchase a vehicle. Although today it is a bit less with the internet playing a larger role, certainly we have most on the team say anywhere from ninety minutes to perhaps two hours in total. After we agreed on that amount of time, I would always ask the same question. "If we are going to invest that much time and effort trying to help people, why would we blow the first five minutes and their initial powerful first impression of us?" I would then remind the team that the first few minutes are the most important part of the sale, that's when the customers decide they like us or they don't like us. This is a very significant time, and we do not get a replay.

Here are some sales tips we would discuss and frequently remind everyone of:

- Use walking meditation on the walk over to greet them. It sets up the proper attitude and mindset for us. This is a real advantage over competitors who don't give themselves an attitude bounce before meeting with customers.
- Please show customers we are actively listening to them.
- Reasonable eye contact builds trust with customers.
- Smile a bit during those first few minutes (this is underused by many of us).

If we are perceived by customers as either trustworthy or a bit suspicious within the first few minutes of meeting us, it makes perfect sense to work hard early to win their initial trust. I suspect this works just as well when meeting people doing just about anything in this world.

Our training over the years has focused our staff on how important the first five minutes are, especially the first thirty seconds. If we are looked at as trustworthy right from the start, then all the work we do over the next hour or so will likely be beneficial to both the customers and us.

Children, I know I am talking about this a fair bit, but only because it really works. Let's always try to win the first few minutes and make an excellent first impression.

I LIKE YOU

Boy, you grow up quick when your dad tells you as a seventeen-year-old kid to go on the showroom floor and try to compete with a seasoned, hyper-aggressive, money-motivated crew of approximately forty people between the ages of twenty-four and sixty. I had both the advantage and the disadvantage of being a lot boy for this nasty crew, as I had cleaned cars, changed license plates, and picked up hamburgers for them as a sixteen-year-old.

Knowing what they were like was helpful, but knowing how they behaved was also intimidating. There were many things to ponder and worry about as I left the car wash bays behind to start trying to sell cars.

One consideration that seemed crucial to me was, “How can I make some kind of connection with the customers and get them to like me a bit as we start the sales process?” Believe me, even before they arrive at the dealership, customers have already determined that you are not really there to help them. In fact, most of these customers have a “meeting” in the car on the way over with their significant other to remind each other to not believe anything we say, to not to commit to buying anything today, or to remind themselves that the last time they purchased a vehicle they felt they were taken a bit.

I woke up quickly to the fact that customers can find a way to dislike and not trust you in only a few minutes. I remember being around twenty years old during a sales meeting trying to explain to our salespeople that the customers often had a strategy driving over to the dealership. We chatted back and forth, and I said to the team, “Just like we are having a meeting about how to sell them a vehicle today, they are having a meeting about not buying one today from us.” My view was that we had a lot more practice than they had, as we did this every day. If we were positive and respectful, we should sell a lot of cars.

Back when I was a shy, eighteen-year-old kid, I really needed to find a way to make that all-important first five minutes not so uncomfortable when approaching and meeting customers. This is something that is difficult for seasoned salespeople as well, but even more so for a very young person the customer might perceive as too green and inexperienced for them. I cannot tell you how many customers questioned me when I approached them on the lot as a very young man with long hair or eighteen months later when I was introduced to them as the sales manager.

It is a hard way to start or finish the negotiations when the buyers are hesitant to deal with you in the first place. At its worst, some customers thought it was a joke that I was introduced as the manager, and a very small number of them even refused to deal with me. I was fortunate that 95 percent of them were good people and treated me well. Learning the “I Like You” way of approaching people was a lifesaver for me.

Kids, before you laugh a bit and say this sounds pretty corny, know that this was the first significant process that I ever used when selling cars. The “I Like You” process came from a rather average book I read as an eighteen-year-old, but this sales point was incredible to learn. In hindsight, the success of using this process made me start to focus on the psychological side of selling automobiles early on, and I bring it up in almost every sales training meeting I have done over these many years.

By now, most of our team knows the “I Like You” process very well, and I often ask people who are skeptical if they can think of a better way to approach someone who is very defensive coming into the store. I ask them, “What’s your plan to get through those uncomfortable first few minutes with a customer?” No one has ever come up with a better way than simply using the liking-them idea in your head.

I have also found this equally effective with any person in any situation within the sales and service business or outside of the dealership business completely. I practice it with the utmost consistency today, whether in person, on the telephone, or in a Zoom meeting. Whatever your situation, when you add up the number of interactions we have each day, taking an extra thirty seconds to use the “I Like You” process is invaluable.

Here’s how it works. When I am about to greet someone in any business situation, which could include dealership people, bankers, Toyota employees, government officials, accountants, lawyers, institutional investors, potential business owners we are trying to purchase, or anyone else, I diligently do the following:

- I try to look at them a second or so before they look at me, bow my head a little, and say to myself, “These are good people, I like them.” It is simply amazing how much this lowers the tension when we meet seconds later.
- We have to truly believe we are the best person to help them with whatever we are working toward, so I humbly say to myself, “I am the best person for you or your team to work with.” Then we put our best effort forward to complete our deal, which is beneficial for both parties.

If we really believe the two points above, our sincerity and honesty will shine through. I often tell our team members that if you can’t believe these two statements, you should not be working with them because it is likely not beneficial to either of you.

Years and years of experience tell me the only reason people won't do this consistently enough is because it does not work 100 percent of the time, because, of course, nothing does. Again, we should not be looking for perfection in anything as it usually is unattainable.

If this process improves our closing ratio by 20 percent and each situation is less stressful for both parties, this is a good practice. Let's not let a small minority of people who are impossible to deal with stop us from using our best plans that work so much of the time. Please remember, children, how effective this can be for you and how respectful it is for the person or people you are about to deal with.