

Meeting the Master

As someone with 30+ years in sales and almost 25 years in advertising, I am usually considered the old timer. I usually get to be the guy who says, “When I was starting in the business it was hard, you really had to know your stuff.” Recently, while covering a territory for my vacationing rep I got to meet a gentleman (I am using that title in the fullest sense of the word) who puts me to shame.

Mr. Joe Stevens started in advertising as a Sales Representative for a local daily in 1953. To put this in perspective, in 1953 the car in the garage cost about \$1,650, Dwight Eisenhower was in the White House and I was in diapers. After a decade at the paper where he advanced to the position of general sales manager, he went on to found a number of successful community papers. At an age when most people are retiring, Mr. Stevens started an advertising agency that now bills over five million dollars in advertising, mostly for auto dealers. He is an intelligent personable man whose life experiences give him a unique perspective on our business. Never one to miss an opportunity to learn from a true master, I asked Mr. Stevens to share his expectations of an advertising sales rep.

First and foremost, Mr. Stevens told me a sales person must respect his time. Like most successful people, Mr. Stevens has a very busy schedule. If he sets an appointment with a sales person, he expects them to be there at the appointed time. If circumstances delay the sales rep, he expects the rep to call (well before they were due to arrive) to inform him of the delay. For the same reason he expects a sales person to prepare for the call. Mr. Stevens has no time to waste with a sales rep who tries to “wing it”. He believes that proper call planning enables a rep to get quickly to the point of the call. He has no patience for reps who are disorganized and haven’t thought about what they are going to present to him.

He expects a rep to take the time to research his client’s businesses, to take the time to visit the dealerships, look at their website and study their advertising. This saves him the time necessary to bring the rep up to speed. He believes a rep who doesn’t take the time to do the research before a call is unlikely to take the time to deliver good service after the sale.

Since he handles so many accounts, Mr. Stevens deals with many reps from many different media outlets. He likes reps who prepare a written proposal detailing prices and coverage. Ideally reps should arrive with the proposal in hand. After the call, the rep should revise or prepare a new proposal based on their meeting. This helps him to make buying decisions and present his recommended programs to his clients.

Mr. Stevens likes sales people who bring him ideas. He relies on sales reps to provide him with fresh ad designs and marketing ideas for his clients. He feels that a rep who doesn’t come armed with ideas isn’t selling advertising, they are selling space. Even if he doesn’t like the ideas presented, they provide a starting point for a discussion on ad content.



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Salespeople should be focused on the needs of his clients. As a lifelong salesman, he understands that a sales person is there to make a living and capture business for their company. Mr. Stevens also understands that the best way to accomplish these goals is to tend to the needs of their clients. He expects to be informed of specials and apprised of problems. He feels that trust takes a long time to build and just a few seconds to destroy. Mr. Stevens will only do business with those he trusts.

Mr. Stevens does not expect a sales person to be a “yes man” (or “yes woman” as the case may be). If a rep disagrees with him he expects them to defend their position. Like most people that know a great deal, he readily admits he doesn’t “know it all”. If someone makes a good case for their product or their recommendation, he is willing to change. When he first met my rep, he told her that he would never purchase advertising in a Pennysaver. My rep made her case through persistence and planning, thus winning the business and the respect of Mr. Stevens.

One thing Mr. Stevens does not expect, is for a rep to always offer the lowest price. He is as cost conscious as the next guy. After 5 plus decades in the industry, he knows that “you get what you pay for”. He understands that both the rep and the publication deserve to make a fair profit. During my visit with him he told me that the local daily gave him a proposal undercutting our price. He stayed with our publication because of the level of service he received from my rep and the trust he has in her abilities. He felt that the daily paper had cut their margin so thin that they would not be able to deliver the product without cutting corners. My rep had convinced him that our publication provided the best overall value.

I once saw professional defined this way: “Professional – one who is worthy of the high standards of a profession”. This definition came back to me when I met Mr. Stevens. He is a man who is proud of his profession and of his accomplishments. He expects a sales rep to be respectful, well-prepared, creative, customer-focused and a strong advocate for their product. In short, Mr. Stevens expects his rep to be a professional. While most prospects are not as articulate as Mr. Stevens, I believe most customers also expect these things from their sales reps. This is the valuable lesson that I learned from the master.