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The customer's first impression of you is a tone setter for the entire transaction. So what warning signs are you putting up? **This month we explore four ways to put your customer at ease.**

BY RON REAHARD

**W**ith all the warnings customers get from 20/20, consumer reports and their local credit union about deceptive sales practices and "hidden profits" dealers make in the F&I department, some days it feels like there is a big yellow warning sign outside the F&I office that reads "Caution: F&I Manager Ahead!"

I travel in airplanes all the time. Occasionally, I'll get into a conversation with my seatmate. Invariably, at some point, they all ask the same question, "So, what do you do for a living?" You ought to see the look I get when I tell them I train finance managers for car dealers. You'd think I was a terrorist. Their eyes get big, they swallow hard and they start looking around for a U.S. Marshal to throw me off the plane. After a few seconds of awkward silence, they feel compelled to relate

the sordid tale of the last time they bought a car, and the horrible experience they had in the F&I office.

Many complain about having been forced to wait 20 to 60 minutes just to get into the finance office. Once they are finally allowed an audience with the F&I "god," they perceive him to be pushy, less than honest and focused on his own agenda (i.e., trying to sell them something). Often, they describe F&I managers as unprofessional and confrontational. Even worse, if the customer doesn't immediately agree to buy what he is selling, the F&I professional becomes downright rude.

Today's customers don't want to wait 30 minutes just to get into the finance office. They want the paperwork to be easy to complete and understand, and they want their questions answered. They want to deal with a knowledge-



When working with a customer, it's key to be urgent to serve — not urgent to sell. At Tuttle-Click Automotive, a Southwest automotive group, customers can take advantage of a coffee shop and other amenities before entering the F&I office.

able professional who treats them with courtesy and respect, whether they buy anything or not. Customers expect to be able to choose from a variety of financing plans and options, and they want to feel like they got a “fair deal.” They don't want to feel pressured to buy something they don't want.

The only way to change the customer's perception of the financial services process, as well as the media's perception of F&I, is by changing the way we do business. We must create a measurable difference in the mind of the customer that separates us from the competition in a positive way.

Today's financial services professional must utilize a dialogue approach to sales, as opposed to a memorized or canned product “sales pitch.” You can't just whip out a brochure and launch into a sales pitch if the customer isn't interested in the product.

A financial services professional must focus on the customer and their unique needs, not merely product benefits. We want to exceed customer expectations and delight customers by providing a more satisfying and enjoyable purchase experience, while increasing dealer profits through a customer-focused financial services process.

Every dealership, every customer, every sale is unique; and every F&I presentation

must be tailored to that customer's unique needs. To ensure every customer receives a thorough explanation of their options in the minimum amount of time, with the maximum chance of F&I product sales, there are four keys to ensuring a customer-focused financial services experience. Let's explore each one.



### GET DOWN OFF YOUR THRONE

For a customer, going back to the F&I office is like going to see the Wizard of Oz. Remember that scene, when Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Lion and the Scarecrow shook and trembled as they walked down that ominous hall to see the Wizard? We can eliminate the customer's fear of the unknown by getting down off our throne, coming out from behind the curtain and greeting them where they're relaxed and comfortable (i.e., in the salesperson's office).

Sometimes, greeting the customer is the hardest part of your entire presentation, especially if it's 9:30 at night and you were supposed to get off at six. But when you have a customer, it's “Showtime at the Apollo.” Every customer deserves a good show. The customer's first impression of you is critical because it sets the tone for your entire inter-

action with that customer. Be enthusiastic. Put on a smile and have a spring in your step. Shake everyone's hand. Get on a first name basis if at all possible. More importantly, have FUN with the customer!

Have you ever walked by a salesperson's office and heard a customer laughing and talking? You know the next place you'll see that customer is in your office to discuss how they'll finance the vehicle. It's no different in the F&I office. If you can get a customer to laugh in the first two minutes, they'll buy F&I products!



### DON'T MAKE CUSTOMERS WAIT

One of the most important things you can do to change the customer's perception of the financial services process is to stop making them wait to come into the F&I office. Unless you already have someone in your office, there is no excuse for making a customer wait. As soon as the salesperson completes the buyer's order or worksheet, go out and greet the customer in the salesperson's office.

Put the customer at ease immediately. Introduce yourself. Tell them who you are, what you're going to do, how long it's going to take, and offer them something to drink.

“Hi, I’m John Smith, the financial services manager here at ABC Motors. It’s my job to complete the paperwork for the Department of Motor Vehicles, arrange your financing, if any, and take care of all the legal documents. This should take about 30 or 40 minutes. Before we get started, what can I get you to drink: coffee, bottled water, a soft drink, maybe something with an umbrella in it?” The key here is to be urgent to serve—not urgent to sell!

Now it’s time to bring them back to your office. Remember, you’re not on some top secret assignment back there. So, let them see what you’re doing. Examine the buyer’s order and let them see you verify that all the figures and information are correct. It’s also a good idea to review the customer’s statement and credit bureau report. The key here is to understand the circumstances and details surrounding any adverse credit information disclosed by the customer or the credit bureau report. And this needs to be done prior to submitting the credit application. Why? You need to find the reasons why this customer is a good risk to help your paper-buyer justify an approval or a changing of the tier level.

Ask open-ended, needs-discovery questions as you enter customer information into the computer to understand their wants, needs and concerns. The key is to be genuinely interested in the customer. You can do this by engaging the customer in a conversation. Do this to find out why your customer needs your products.

Remember, if you expect a customer to be interested in what you have to say, you must first be interested in what they have to say!



### CHANGE THE ENVIRONMENT

Changing customer perceptions also demands a change in environment. I’ve told dealers for years to make sure there’s a distinct difference from the tiled showroom floor and the floor inside the F&I office. Often, I suggest that dealers add a one-inch pad under the carpet inside the F&I office. That way the customer knows they’ve left the sales environment once their feet touch that soft, padded carpet.

Your office must also contain a picture of your family. A customer needs to know

you’re just like him or her. He or she needs to know you also have a family, a brother, a sister, a spouse, kids, a dog and a cat. If you don’t have a family, go down to Walgreens and buy a frame. It’ll have a family in it.

Your office should also contain a conversation starter; something unique or unusual that will help you break the ice with the customer. It could be an autographed picture of someone famous, a baseball or golf club. It can even be that “computer on wheels” device that helps customers understand the need to buy a vehicle service contract.

Some things your office should NOT contain include manufacturer’s promotional materials or sales awards.

A scenic picture on the wall will help relax the customer. A live plant also helps change the environment. It tells a customer a lot about you. The great thing about having a healthy plant in your office is you have to take care of it. This makes you a caregiver. A candy dish makes a customer feel welcome. It says, “We’re glad you’re here!”

Some things your office should NOT contain include manufacturer’s promotional materials or sales awards. And there should be absolutely NO product brochures visible when they walk into your office. A brochure immediately tells a customer you’re going to try and sell them something. It’s also a ticket for the be-back bus because it communicates the fact they don’t have to buy today. What it says is they can take the brochure home and think about it.



### CHANGE THE EXPERIENCE

Selling our products isn’t something we do to someone, it’s something we do for and with them. In the F&I office, understanding a customer’s wants, needs and concerns must always precede any attempt to sell them something. Selling F&I products isn’t just about helping the dealership, it’s about helping the customer!

Selling F&I products to an informed con-

sumer depends upon your ability to find and fill his or her needs ... NOT on your ability to get people to buy something they don’t want, and don’t think they need. If you’re not genuinely trying to help the customer, then the F&I process is adding no value to his or her purchase experience. If the F&I process is not adding value to the purchase experience, then it is alienating your customers. And that hurts customer satisfaction. There are two questions you need to answer: How can you ensure you’re helping as many customers as possible, and how can you remove the pressure customers feel when going through the F&I process? Easy ... use a menu to present every product to every customer every time.

Give the customer options, not sales pitches. The use of a menu can dramatically reduce the amount of time customers spend in the F&I office. A menu allows customers to select the products they want, and ask questions or voice concerns about the ones they don’t think they need. This allows us to focus on what is important to the customer, and give him or her a chance to discuss why that product may be especially important to them. Rather than “selling,” you’re simply reviewing options, and trying to help the customer make the right decision based upon their unique situation.

Getting rid of that warning sign requires the F&I process to be an enjoyable part of the purchase experience. A financial services professional must get down off his or her throne, bring that customer back to the F&I office as quickly as possible and remember the most important part of your job is to help customers. This is achieved by changing the environment, as well as changing the experience. That means helping every customer make the best decision for him or her and his or her family. If your customer doesn’t leave your office with a smile, there’s a good chance that warning sign might just be outside your office the next time he or she is looking for a vehicle. ■

*Ron Reahard is president of Reahard & Associates Inc., an F&I training and consulting company. He conducted the workshops “Objections Are A Great Thing!” and “Using All The Tools In Your Toolbox!” at the 2006 F&I Conference and Expo in Las Vegas. You can contact Ron at 866-REAHARD, or [www.ron@go-reahard.com](mailto:www.ron@go-reahard.com).*