

Being Brilliant at the Basics

The market dynamics might be in constant flux, but the goals of an F&I manager aren't. F&I trainer reveals his secrets to becoming brilliant at the basics.

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hen Vince Lombardi took over the Green Bay Packers in 1958, one of the first questions the local press asked him was, "What are you going to change to turn this team around after a string of failures and losing seasons?" His reply provides a window into a well-developed process of how to be successful when faced with a challenging situation.

Lombardi's response was: "I am not going to change anything. We will use the same players, the same plays and the same training system. But we will concentrate on becoming brilliant at the basics." In nine seasons his Green Bay Packers won five NFL Championships and two Super Bowls.

The goal of the F&I professional is the same as it has always been. Sell products at high penetration and profit levels. The manner in which we've tried to accomplish this has varied over the years. In times past, F&I schools taught how to sell products to customers without them knowing that they bought them. Managers also learned how to overpower the customer with benefits so they felt foolish for not buying. In today's market, with a well-informed consumer and a demand for transparency in the car-buying process, such tactics need to be eliminated. Their continued use will lead to an increase in charge-backs, bad CSI scores, and worse, litigation.

We are in uncharted waters in the automotive business. Dealerships today are selling fewer vehicles at much lower profit. The need for the F&I department to produce a high level of profitability is critical to every dealer's bottom line. So, do we reinvent our process or become more evasive to our customer's demand for transparency? Or,

like Lombardi did with his team, do we become brilliant at the basics?

Putting the Customer at Ease

During challenging times, the one skill that's often skipped is developing an effective customer introduction. Remember, a customer will form an opinion about you in the first seven seconds of your meeting, and will make a decision on whether or not to buy from you in the first four minutes. People will not buy from you until they like you, trust you and are convinced that you are acting in their best interest.

Go out to the salesperson's office and greet customers where they are most comfortable and willing to share information with you. At the very least, you can get them to reveal their particular need for your products. Remember, customers expect to be sold on something when they're brought to your office. That's why we need to do what they don't expect.

In many cases, the customer introduction is the first and only opportunity for you to build the rapport and trust necessary for a customer to be in a positive buying decision. Skipping this step is equivalent to a football team running the ball without blocking. To become brilliant at putting the customer at ease demands practice, such as role playing with salespeople to develop a good way to greet a customer. Salespeople should also be told why it's important for you to meet the customer in their office rather than having him or her brought to yours.

Remember, how we start the process with a customer has a huge impact on how it finishes.

Discovering the Customer's Needs

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to assume you already know what a customer needs, wants and is willing to pay. That's why the



10 Steps to Becoming Brilliant at the Basics

Getting back to basics doesn't have to be hard. Here are 10 steps to get you on track.

- 1. Develop 30 questions you will ask every customer:** Determine the information you need to help customers see the benefit of your products. Then develop questions you will use to gather that information from a customer in a conversational manner.
- 2. Role-play your presentation with colleagues:** Most F&I managers dislike this activity, but getting outside input will help you improve your presentation.
- 3. Video or audio record your role-play:** Seeing and hearing what customers are seeing will reveal things you can improve in your presentation.
- 4. Make the invisible visible:** Develop and practice using visual aids. Involve the customer with a hand-drawn GAP, A&H, or VSC illustration. Or, show a part covered by your VSC to

the customer. Get them involved and help them "see" the product benefiting them.

- 5. List 10 reasons why a customer should buy each of your products:** If you have 10 reasons why a customer should buy each of your products, you will rarely face an objection that you cannot overcome.
- 6. Regularly collect and read repair orders:** Find out from your service manager what was the most expensive repair in the last 30 days, as well as what repairs are showing up most often. The more you can inform a customer about mechanical breakdowns and the cost for repairs, the more effective you will be in selling a VSC.
- 7. Set daily, weekly and monthly goals:** Put your goals in writing, and track your performance daily to see where you are in relation to your goals. Share your goals with upper manage-

ment and discuss them each week. The clearer the target the more likely you will hit it!

- 8. Schedule 30 minutes everyday to practice your skills:** Skipping a day without practicing your craft is inexcusable. Make training activity a daily work habit and make sure it happens.
- 9. Research your craft:** What happens when the electronic control unit (ECU) fails and how much does a replacement cost? What are the five factors that affect a person's credit score? How are alloy wheels made and why are they so susceptible to damage? Become an expert in your field and your income will show it!
- 10. Develop relationships with your lenders:** Get to know your lenders well, and build your case for approvals before you ask a buyer to buy a marginal deal. Never deceive lenders, and become their most trusted source of business.

early part of the F&I process should focus on asking open-ended, needs-discovery questions. Doing so encourages the customer to share information that will reveal if he or she needs any or all of our products. Doing so also provides you with the most effective response to overcoming any objection: "You told me earlier ..."

Develop a list of 30 effective questions that you plan to ask every customer. Then determine where in your presentation you will ask these questions. We know that 100 percent of a person's current behavior is based on 100 percent of his or her past experience, so we need to discover how he or she used his or her last vehicle. Did he or she have mechanical problems in the past? Has the customer's driving habits changed since they bought their last vehicle? Where do they park their car during the day and at night? This may uncover the need for GAP or a theft-deterrent product.

F&I managers also need to remember that questions should be presented as part of the conversation while you progress through the necessary forms. They should not be presented as part of a separate interview, as this tends to make a customer feel

as if he or she is being set up to buy something, and customers hate being "sold." However, customers do love to buy, which is why becoming brilliant at the basic skill of asking effective, needs-discovery questions leads to a more productive F&I manager.

Making the Intangible Tangible

Using the information they "told you earlier" to visually illustrate the need for F&I products is one of the keys to excelling in F&I sales. And remember this, when a customer objects to the need for a product, rarely is the first objection the real objection. The best way to bring that true objection to the surface is by using an effective visual drawing with "you told me earlier." And the chances of selling a product increases dramatically once we know what the true objection is.

And remember, word-tracks are like eight tracks ... obsolete. Verbally attempting to convince customers to buy F&I products can turn into a battle of words. That's why we must commit to providing our customers with the opportunity to "see" how our products benefit their particular needs, not just "hear" about them. The more they see, the more they will buy!

Today's Challenges Call for the Basics

Serving your dealership as an F&I manager is becoming a more difficult task everyday. The increase in compliance issues and the complexity of the credit markets demand that we stay informed and current with information concerning our responsibilities. However, nothing can take the place of the basics when it comes to selling F&I products.

Today's customers know that we are going to offer them additional products in connection with their purchase, and many have been warned not to buy them. But if they meet an F&I manager that is brilliant at the basics, they will see the need for our products and leave our offices glad that they purchased them. They'll also be glad they met a professional that made it so easy to buy. ■

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