



LISTEN, EDUCATE, PROTECT

The magazine's resident F&I pro says the way to find true success in the F&I office is to drop the sales pitch and focus on the needs of each customer. [By Ron Reahard](#)

A former business associate blessed with an abundance of ego had a favorite expression whenever he began to monopolize the conversation, which was often. He'd say, "But enough about me, let's talk about you. So tell me, what do you think about me?"

That line usually got a laugh out of me. It also served as a reminder of the dysfunctional F&I sales processes I often encounter. In far too many dealerships, the F&I process is not about the customer or what they want. It's about what the dealer wants.

See, the primary purpose of having an F&I department is not to finance more vehicles, sell more products or to make more money. The real reason an F&I department exists is to help more customers. So if you're not making enough money in F&I, you're probably not helping enough customers. It's that simple.

In the F&I office, your job is to help each customer make the right decision for them and their family with regard to the various repayment, risk management and vehicle protection options available in connection with their purchase. So how do we do that? There are three answers:

1. Do What's Right

No one has to tell you the difference between right and wrong. Whatever the situation, just do what's right for the customer. The customer may not always be right, but we can always do the right thing for them. Selling isn't something we do *to* someone, it's something we do *for* and *with* the customer.

The F&I process should be an informative, educational and consultative part of the purchase experience. If it's not, we're wasting the customer's time. And customers don't like when we do that. A true F&I professional treats every customer with

Finance & Insurance

courtesy and respect, whether or not they buy any F&I products. That means answering every customer's questions completely, directly and honestly.

It also means helping them make the right decision about the options available in connection with their purchase, whatever that decision might be. That means we don't sell them a product they and their family don't need, because it's not our job to sell products to people who don't need them. But if they do need it, we do everything within our power to help them see how that product will benefit them.

It doesn't matter how much money you make if customers aren't leaving your office with a smile on their faces. They should always feel that you helped them make the right decision for them and their family. If they don't feel that way, we did not do our job.

2. Care About the Customer

Success in the F&I office also requires that you care about the customer. You didn't have to care yesterday, and you don't have to care tomorrow, but you better genuinely care about that human being while they're sitting across the desk from you. As Zig Ziglar once said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Caring means that we seek out — with eagerness — reasons why this customer needs each and every one of our products. It requires that we listen to that customer to learn their wants, needs and concerns. Every customer is a unique individual with unique needs, and every product presentation must be tailored to those needs.

Caring also means encouraging customers to ask questions. And the discussion you have with them about the products on your menu must become a conversation about how it might help them. It should not be a preplanned, rehearsed sales pitch.

Caring also requires that you sell every product from a position of strength. And you do that by concen-



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trating on what is truly best for the customer. Caring also means that we never forget that our job in the F&I office is *not* to make money. Yes, dollars per retail unit may be how our performance is judged, but our job is to help people. And the more people we help, the more money we make.

3. Become Valuable to the Customer

The F&I process becomes valuable to a customer when an F&I professional gives value first, not when we try to add value later. We have to give customers information that they can use without any expectation of financial return. That means we make sure they know exactly what is and is not covered by the factory warranty. It also means helping them understand the manufacturer's maintenance requirements.

We also add value to the customer's F&I experience by confirming that all information on the purchase agreement is correct. We also do that by reviewing their credit application so we are able to arrange attractive financing. We add value by helping them understand the criteria a lender uses to evaluate credit. We also add value when we ensure the information in their bureau is correct and educate them as to the reason for their score — and how it affects their interest rate. If there is information in the bureau that is not correct, we add

value when we provide the customer with information on how to dispute credit reporting errors.

Finally, we add value when we educate customers on the fact that our service department no longer fixes vehicles. When it comes to repairing their vehicle, the people who do it today have evolved from grease monkeys to mechanics to technicians to today's component replacement expert. And those guys don't fix anything in today's vehicles; they just find the faulty component and replace it.

By giving value to every customer without asking or expecting them to buy anything, the customer recognizes we are trying to help them, not sell them. Customers appreciate having someone take time to review their options, answer their questions and help them make an informed decision.

Achieving spectacular results in the F&I office is possible only when an F&I professional consistently does the right thing, cares about the customer and adds real value to their purchase experience. F&I is not about you, but if your focus is on helping customers, you will become excellent at making money! ■

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