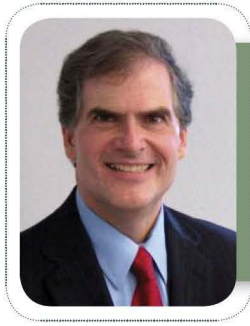


Have a Real Conversation

BY RON REAHARD



There are countless ways to sell financing and protection products, but only one way to truly connect with customers.

In every F&I class, someone always asks, “When and where should the customer interview take place?” Many dealers, trainers, and menu providers want F&I managers to conduct a scripted customer interview in the salesperson’s office, then return to the F&I office to prepare a menu with product offerings tailored to the customer’s needs.

Others ask customers to complete a thinly disguised “survey” while they’re waiting on F&I, which their software (or the F&I manager) uses to discern which products to offer and which ones the customer is most likely to buy based upon their responses. This information is then used to create a menu with the products the survey says the customer needs or some algorithm indicates they are most likely to purchase.

During this time, the salesperson is expected to have the customer watch product infomercials, review the owner’s manual or explain the various functions of the vehicle until the F&I manager is ready to pitch his products using this magic menu. None of these processes are based on what customers really want, which is to get their paperwork completed as quickly as possible.

One trainer recommends F&I managers dispense with the customer interview altogether. He believes asking needs-discovery questions immediately triggers in the customer’s mind that he or she is about to be sold. Rather than creating unnecessary sales resistance, he says, just offer four package options utilizing an assumptive approach. Customers know what you’re trying to do, so needs discovery is counterproductive.

Some dealers are also experimenting with a back-to-the-past sales and F&I process, with salespeople also responsible for presenting and selling financing and F&I products. Once the customer agrees to purchase the vehicle and whatever F&I products the customer feels he or she needs, there is no upselling during the final contracting. A clerical person then merely completes the paperwork.

If any of these methods were the ideal way for selling more F&I products, believe me, every product vendor and F&I school would be teaching it. Unfortunately, when it comes to intangible products, they don’t sell themselves, and customers don’t always pick an option package. The No. 1 customer objection to every single F&I product is the same as it’s always been: “I don’t need

it.” If we can’t help the customer see why they do, it is game over. Because it’s nearly impossible to convince customers they need a product if you don’t know anything about them.

The fact is, any attempt to get a customer to buy an F&I product that is not based on that customer’s needs is a waste of time — ours and theirs. I also agree that any hint of a “customer interview” or “sales pitch” is going to be immediately recognized by today’s consumer and met with skepticism, suspicion, and sales resistance.

An F&I professional’s conversation with the customer should begin the moment he or she meets the customer in the salesperson’s office. And it has to be a conversation, not an interview, not an interrogation, and not some self-serving, phony survey.

So stop with the fake chit-chat, surveys, and interrogations, and stop forcing customers to wait on a menu to be created. Instead, let’s treat people the way they want to be treated. Bring them into the F&I office as soon as possible and get it done. We can have a conversation with them while we’re preparing their documents.

Today’s consumer is very perceptive. They can recognize whether someone is trying to help them or sell them. They would much rather have a conversation about their options

than listen to a scripted sales pitch. Buying a vehicle is a major purchase. They really do want to know and understand the options available in connection with their purchase, and they want to make the right decision with regard to those options.

Customers ask themselves the same three questions about every F&I manager: Can I trust this person? Does she know what she’s talking about? Does she really care about me, or is she just trying to sell me something? How they answer those three questions will determine whether or not we’re able to sell them anything. As Zig Ziglar says, “Customers don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

Hey, every day really is a beautiful day to help a customer. All we need to do is have a conversation with them about their options! ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Got a question or objection for Ron? Use your mobile phone to record a brief video (shot landscape style!) of your question and upload it to go-reahard.com/ask-ron.

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