

Service First, Sales Second:

An Interview With Ryan Hall

FEATURING RYAN HALL

WITH TIM REED

Tim Reed: *Joining me from Washington, D.C. is Ryan Hall, the field operations chief at Winston's Chimney Service. Ryan, it's so awesome to be talking with you again. How are you doing?*

Ryan Hall: I'm doing great, man. Thanks for having me.

TR: *I've been wanting to have this conversation for a while, and I'll give you a little background. I came up in a part of the industry that primarily focused on selling hearth appliances—and viewed service work as a necessary*

evil. It was considered low-margin work that you'd do just to scrape by until you could get out of it. That might be overstating it a bit, but that was the basic mindset we had.

But your business—and your approach—is completely different. I'd love to start by hearing how you think about service work for your customers.

RH: Yeah, it's funny—you said that in the past tense, but I spoke at a bunch of HPBA events

last year, and a lot of folks still think that way. Most of the people I met with—from NCHPBA, NEHP-BA, and Mid-Atlantic—still treat service like it's a dirty word. They just want to sell an appliance and get out.

I came at this from a different angle. I started out with a chimney company—as a sweep assistant. We didn't touch appliances back then. In fact, when I joined Winston's in 1998, we didn't sell appliances at all. We didn't do gas. That just wasn't part of our business. So I learned how to be a chimney sweep. That's where I started.

Over time, of course, I saw the writing on the wall. Appliances were the future. They were more efficient, and that's what everyone was pushing for—the EPA, homeowners, the industry. Houses were getting tighter. People didn't want open fireplaces that needed tons of fresh air. So we had to adapt to keep our sales going.

But at its core, everything still came from a service mindset. That's the foundation. We were there to provide a service—cleaning the fireplace, giving people peace of mind, inspecting it for a home sale. That's what we did. So I think it was easier for me to transition into appliance sales because I had that foundation. It's much harder for appliance guys to transition into service—because it's a totally different mindset.

TR: *I think a lot of folks who haven't jumped head-first into service see it as low-margin work that doesn't really pay off in the long run, but that's obviously not true for you. How would you respond to that perception?*

RH: Honestly, it just blows my mind. We make more money on service, installations, masonry work, and restorations than we do selling appliances or products. The margins on labor—and on service in particular—are much higher than they are on appliances.

Now, the overall ticket price might be lower with service. It doesn't always match up in terms of total dollars. But if you look at how much you're making per dollar, it's better. A lot of service jobs have no material costs; you're just paying labor. A sweep and inspection—whether it's Level 1, 2, or 3—costs you nothing in materials. It's all time.

So your margins—your gross profit per job—are just way higher. That's how we look at it. I honestly don't know how to see it any other way. The jobs that involve more labor? We're usually making more money on those. That's just the reality.

TR: *Yeah, a hundred percent. And it seems like starting in a service role—and then moving into sales—has really shaped how you approach your customers. A lot of companies try to sell a job and then disappear when it comes to service after the sale. Why is continuing service so important for you?*

RH: For a couple of reasons. First, we're in the service industry—that's where it all starts. So if we sell someone an appliance, continuing to serve them after the sale just makes sense. That follow-up care builds trust and locks the client in the long term. They're more likely to refer other customers to us because there's a relationship there. If someone asks them, "Hey, do you know a chimney company?" They'll say, "Yeah—I've got a company that comes out every year." That kind of connection is huge.

And honestly, I don't want anyone coming behind us. It's not that we did anything wrong—I believe we've got some of the best techs in the industry—but bringing in someone else opens the door for questions. They might do things differently, and suddenly the client is second-guessing what we did, even if it was right. So we make a point to schedule that follow-up.

We'll say, "Your product warranty depends on having regular maintenance—every year or two." We bring out a warranty card, get it signed, and keep

that relationship going. It locks the customer in and shows them we're serious about doing it right.

And we keep in touch. Every spring—when things start to slow down—we email our past customers with an offer: “If you schedule in the next three months, we'll take \$100 off your service.” It fills the schedule and keeps the relationship alive. And you never know where that connection might lead. They might move. Their daughter might buy a house. Suddenly they're calling us again.

In fact, my biggest contractor right now—who sends me five jobs a week, worth over a million dollars a year—came from a random service call. I was inspecting a third-floor condo in the middle of nowhere. No upsell, no opportunity—just a sweep and a clean bill of health. But the woman I helped? Her husband had passed, and she was moving out of a \$5 million estate she couldn't maintain. The guy helping her move—who managed the estate—watched me work and said, “You're awesome. I want you to take care of all my clients.”

That one little service call turned into a massive lead source for us. So yeah—service after the sale? It matters. You never know what it'll lead to.

TR: *It's amazing how doing a great job in small situations can open the door for big things. I think that's a really important point. When folks approach service like it's not a big deal—just a small task—that mindset is totally backward.*

RH: Exactly. Service gets you in the door—and that's everything. I don't even worry too much about how much we charge for a service call. For me, it's about access. If someone wants you out

there, they're thinking about their fireplace—or whatever it is—and that means there's an opportunity. Unless they're just trying to sell the house and checking a box, they've called you because they want help. And if you're in their living room, that's a chance—whether it's for a sweep, an appliance sale, or something else entirely. Sometimes, sure, it's just a straight-up service call. You do the job, do it well, and that's it. It's not a home run—but it's a single. I'm always totally fine with that—because I got on base. And more often than not, those singles turn into something bigger when you approach them in the right way.

TR: *That's so good. How do you approach servicing appliances that you didn't sell? Let's say someone calls with a fireplace that's 15 or 20 years old, and something isn't working, but it's not a brand you carry. What do you do in that situation?*

RH: I'm a big believer in reading the manufacturer's installation instructions—always have been. And anyone who's been to one of my classes knows I have a thing about getting low and dropping my level. I'm famous for walking into a room, seeing a unit—maybe it's a Lopi, or whatever it is—and asking, “Do you have the manual?” If they don't, I pull it up on my phone. Then I sit right down on the hearth, cross-legged. Picture a 300-pound guy sitting on the hearth, reading the manual—but that's what I do. It's important to make sure it was installed right and figure out how to service it properly.

Most of those manuals have a section on service, and if they don't, I'll find a video online. I use that a lot—especially for wood and pellet stoves—because those units can have a ton of moving parts. You have to take the baffle out the right way or you'll break it. Some of them have catalytic con-

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AND THAT'S EVERYTHING.”**

verters, and you might need to remove the top. There's just a lot going on.

So even if I think I'm familiar with the unit, I still sit down and read the manual. And sometimes that leads to a conversation—maybe I notice that the unit doesn't meet current standards. It might've had a direct-connect pipe to the first flue liner when it was installed, but that's not how it's done anymore. So I'll show the customer the manufacturer's instructions—maybe even a newer version—and explain the differences. It helps them understand what's changed and why it matters.

I don't mind servicing appliances we didn't install. I just slow down, read the instructions, and do the job right. And honestly, I don't mind doing that in front of the customer. I'll tell them straight up: "Hey, there are so many models out there—I've got to look this one up." Most people appreciate that level of care.

TR: *I think when I was in retail, it was really easy to say, "Well, we don't service that brand because we can't get parts," or, "We only service what we sell." And I know a lot of companies still do that—they won't even service a brand they carry if they didn't make the original sale. Your approach seems so much better—just going out and doing what you can to help the customer. So how do you prepare for a job to make sure it doesn't turn into a bunch of return trips?*

RH: Yeah, so the first thing is—we're always honest. I know that might sound cliché, but it's the truth. Especially with smoke and draft issues, there are just so many variables. We'll tell the customer: "We can make it compliant. We can get it going. It might work—but it also might not. You could have negative pressure in the house. Not enough fresh air. Too much exhaust. You just don't know until you test it." So we try to have those conversations up front to preempt callbacks—like someone saying, "Hey, you serviced my unit and now it smokes every time I use it."

Second, we don't leave meat on the bone. We do a thorough inspection every time—get eyes on everything we can. That leads to detailed proposals when there's work to be done or a full evaluation when everything looks good. Either

way, it's complete. We aim for Level 2 inspections whenever possible, with video scans and full documentation. That helps eliminate a lot of follow-up issues because we're not doing a halfway job. And we also coach clients on things like priming the flue or warming it up so they know how to use the system right.

Third, we make sure our trucks are stocked. You want to have the right parts on hand—maybe a cap, a damper, some sand, lava rocks, embers, thermocouples. Just basic stuff to get the job done in one trip. That way you're not coming back for something simple you could've handled right then and there. Now, at Winston's, we operate a little differently. I personally handle inspections and service, and then our work crews handle the installs and major jobs. But when it comes to the small stuff, I try to knock it out myself. If I pass it off, we're just losing money. So yeah, I keep my truck fully stocked—tools, parts, whatever I might need.

That's how we try to cut down on return trips: be honest, be thorough, and be prepared.

TR: *Yeah, that makes sense. Sales and service are so interconnected. I want to ask this question in two different ways, but let me start here: Why is it so important for salespeople to realize that they're actually in service?*

RH: Salespeople definitely need to understand they're in the service business. The ones who succeed the most are the ones who don't come across like they're trying to sell something—they're just there to help.

When customers feel like they're being taken care of, they relax. That's what I want as a customer too. If I'm getting my car fixed, I want someone to say, "Hey, I got you. We're taking care of this." That gives me confidence. It's the same in our world. You're in someone's home to provide a service, not to push a product. Being humble and genuinely trying to help people—that's what builds trust. That's how I've always approached it, and that's what's worked for me.

In fact, I actually close more jobs from inspections and sweeps than I do from free estimates.

Those are service calls. Sometimes the customer's never met me before, but they called us out for a service. And when I focus on taking care of them—not selling to them—that's where I see the best results.

TR: Yeah. Okay, I want to ask this the opposite way. Why is it so important for service people to realize that they're actually in sales?

RH: Because every detail of how you perform a service tells the customer something about you. The way you lay out your tarps, how clean you are, whether you ask to move furniture or to park in their driveway—it all matters. Every little thing communicates something.

And how customers experience your service is going to make or break the sale. If you come in, throw a bunched-up tarp on the ground, track dirt through the house, don't ask questions, and then hand them a sloppy report that doesn't tell the full story—there's no way they're going to trust you to do more work. You've already lost them. But if you're detailed, respectful, and thorough, you're showing them who you are. You're selling yourself through your service. That's why it's so important to understand that service is sales. How you carry yourself, how you speak, how well you do your job—it all sets the stage for whether or not the customer wants to move forward with anything else.

TR: Yeah, a hundred percent. You know, Ryan, I really mean this—you're one of the most (if not

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the most) successful salespeople in the industry. Especially when it comes to someone working out of a vehicle and meeting with customers in their homes. I don't know anybody doing more volume than you. And yet, you've told me that you're not a hard closer. I'd love to hear more about that.

RH: It's kind of my secret—I just don't try to be a hard closer. There are a lot of ways to sell. You can assume the sale, ask for it directly, do a hard close, try to make a deal on the spot—there are all kinds of approaches. And I work with guys who are great at that.

One of them, Brennan, is a machine when it comes to closing on the spot. He's super comfortable saying, "Alright, break out your checkbook, let's do this." He's got customers chasing him around the house with credit cards. And I admire that—but I'm just not built that way. I'm not comfortable with it.

I do better when I'm relaxed. When I don't feel pushy. When I feel like I'm just helping someone, not selling them. That's when I'm at my best. So for me, sales—and even service—is all about being comfortable and confident in the process. I hand them the inspection, walk them through the details, show example photos, explain what we recommend, and then I say, "You've got my cell number. Call me if you want to move forward." And then I leave. I'm not hovering. I've done my job, and I trust that.

Now, I've been told I probably leave some sales on the table. And maybe I do. But I've still been successful with this approach. And I keep challenging myself to grow. I go to trainings, ride along with guys like Alan Rush, and learn from guys like Chuck Hall and Mark Stoner. I'm always trying to get better. Actually, after riding with Alan not too long ago, I tried asking for the sale more directly. On my very next job, I said, "So, would

you like to go ahead and proceed with this?" And she booked it right there! So I know it works. I still lean toward being a soft closer, but I'm always learning. This is just what works for me. I don't necessarily recommend it to everyone—not even to the guys who work for me. I think you have to find the approach that fits you best and commit to being excellent at it.

TR: *Yeah, what's amazing is that you've clearly found what works for you. You have this level of self-awareness—you know where you're comfortable, and you know how to come across as genuine to customers. And it obviously resonates, because they keep buying from you.*

RH: Yeah, man—25 years of walking in and out of strangers' living rooms, four, five, sometimes eight times a day, five or six days a week. If you don't have some self-awareness after all that, then you're just treading water. And I refuse to do that. I'm always challenging myself. I'm not above learning or trying new things. But yeah, I'm a soft closer. It drives people crazy. I know it goes against the grain and against what most people say works best—but it's what I've done, and it's worked for me. I'm happy to share it, but I don't teach it to my team. Our company process is to ask for the sale on the spot because that works best for most people. It's a solid approach. I just happen to do it differently—and I've had success doing it my way.

TR: *You know, it's like with great musicians: When someone is as studied, practiced, and experienced as, say, Eddie Van Halen, then that person knows when and how to break the rules. But you can't break the rules unless you know them.*

RH: Exactly. And I think the most experienced people eventually learn what works for them. That's always been my advice when it comes

"I'M NOT ABOVE LEARNING OR TRYING NEW THINGS."

to sales: Do what you're comfortable with. Find your rhythm, and lean into that. You don't have to conform to a cookie-cutter approach. You can still follow the same sales process as the rest of your team, but how you deliver it and how you connect with the customer—that can be your own. Whether you're a soft closer or more of a "let's make a deal" kind of person, the key is being genuine. People respond to that.

And the biggest thing I've learned over the years? Honesty. I'm just brutally honest with clients. To the point where sometimes it might even feel like I'm talking them out of the sale. If the brick's not going to match, I tell them. I say something like, "I could use the same manufacturer, same color brick, same mortar mix ratio, even the same time of year—but I can't duplicate 30 years of that wall sitting in the sun. It's just never going to match perfectly." I make sure customers know that upfront.

In a similar way, I tell customers if an appliance is going to reduce their viewing area. I'll hold up a tape measure and say, "Here's exactly what you'll see." I actually learned that the hard way. Early

on, I had a couple of jobs where we finished the installs, and the customers looked at it and said, "It looks like a microwave in my fireplace." They were upset because the viewing area was smaller than they expected—and that stuck with me. So now, I make sure to warn people ahead of time. I show them exactly what the opening will be. That way, there are no surprises.

That kind of transparency builds trust. It shows them I care about getting it right—not just making the sale.

TR: *You're so right—that's what builds trust.*

RH: It really does. And when people trust you, they'll work with you again—and they'll refer you to everyone they know.

TR: *Ryan, this has been so good. Thanks so much for sharing all of this.*

RH: Thanks for having me, man. Call me anytime—and for anyone out there reading, if you need anything, feel free to reach out. I'm always happy to help.



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