

CLIMBING THE CURVE TOGETHER:

3 Tips to Transform Industry Rookies Into Hearth Pros



By Dax Johnston

Introduction: From Highways to Trails

I came to the hearth industry from a big box hardware store background where every object had its place, every product had training materials, and every protocol was clearly defined. The transition to our industry—where formal training is rare and most learning happens through “sit next to me and do what I do”—felt like stepping from a well-lit highway onto an unmarked trail.

So when Tim Reed reached out about writing this article, my first thought was that I might be too new to offer valuable insights. But then I realized something: My fresh perspective might be exactly what’s needed. After all, there are hundreds of us navigating this same transition, and the lessons I’ve learned about moving from industry rookie to valued contributor could help newcomers find their way *and* help veterans develop their teams.

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Whether you’re establishing yourself in this industry or guiding someone who is, here are three tips I’ve discovered that can accelerate the journey from uncertainty to confidence: First, transform inexperience into an asset by approaching every interaction with humility and curiosity. Second, create a systematic framework that turns customer conversations into predictable successes. And third, build an environment where rookies don’t just survive—they thrive.

Tip 1: Transform Questions Into Trust

Whether you're the rookie or the person coaching one, this first tip will reshape how you think about inexperience: You can turn your learning curve into a competitive advantage.

In sales, I learned quickly that customers respond better to honest humility than false confidence. When you're new, you have permission to ask questions that veterans might feel embarrassed to ask. You can dig deeper into customer needs because you're genuinely trying to understand, not just waiting for your turn to pitch.

This approach requires a mindset shift. Instead of seeing customer interactions as interruptions to your day, recognize them as invitations. Remember that these people are literally inviting you to solve their problems. They've chosen to call your store or walk through your doors because they believe you can help.

Here's what this looks like in practice: When you don't know something, you just say so—then you become relentless about finding the answer. You tap into every available resource: fellow employees, distributor reps, factory reps, even the manufacturers themselves. And when you follow up with that customer later with the complete answer, something powerful happens. They realize you'll move heaven and earth to help them, and that builds more trust than having all the answers memorized ever could.

For veterans training rookies, this means reframing what success looks like. Your newest team member's questions aren't signs of weakness—they're opportunities to demonstrate your company's commitment to getting things right. When customers see your entire team working together to serve them, they're witnessing something increasingly rare in retail: genuine care.

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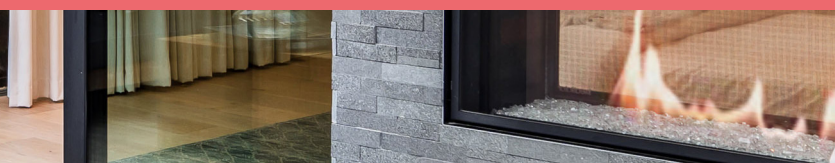
Tip 2: Build a Success Roadmap

Do you have a clear process for customer interactions? This question matters whether you've been selling for 20 minutes or 20 years, since having a structured approach transforms random encounters into predictable successes.

In my previous roles, I always had a defined process that showed me what success looked like. Now, as a factory rep, I never walk into a showroom without a game plan. To be clear, my agenda isn't just about pitching products—it's about discovering needs and understanding how I can add value. The same principle applies to every customer interaction in our industry.

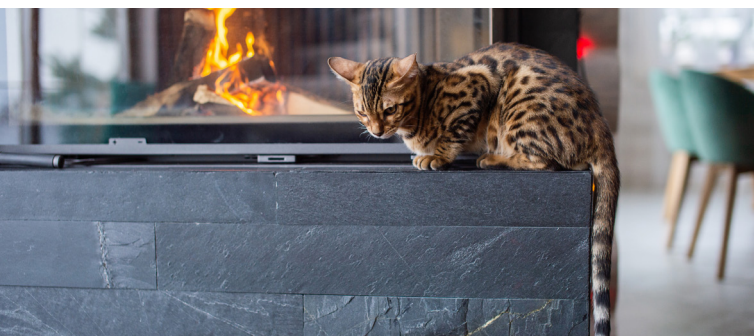
If you don't have a roadmap for your sales conversations, let me share a framework that's simple enough for rookies to master and effective enough for veterans to appreciate. It's called SMART:

- **Seek Out Customers:** This starts before anyone walks through your door. It's your online presence, your showroom atmosphere, and your greeting process. But in the hearth industry specifically, it means understanding that customers have often already started their journey online. Your job is to seamlessly continue that experience.
- **Meet Their Needs:** This is where you become the expert translator, converting what customers think they want into solutions that will actually work for them. For hearth products, this means understanding not just the technical specifications, but how a family will actually use that fireplace, where the stove will fit in their daily routine, or why one insert makes more sense than another for their specific situation.



- **Add Related Services and Value:** Here's where rookies and veterans alike often stop. Don't just sell the product—walk customers through the entire experience of working with your company. In our industry, this means discussing installation timelines, permit requirements, maintenance needs, and even how to properly season firewood. These “extras” aren't extras at all—they're what separate professional hearth retailers from big-box stores.
- **Review the Solutions:** Confirm that your solution matches their vision. In the hearth industry, this might mean reviewing how the chosen fireplace will look in their space, confirming the heat output meets their needs, or ensuring they understand the different advantages of gas and wood. If something doesn't align, that's not a failure—it's an opportunity to understand their needs better.
- **Thank the Customer:** Whether they buy today or not, express genuine gratitude. They chose to spend their time with you, and in an industry built on relationships and referrals, today's “browser” often becomes next month's buyer—and next year's advocate.

This framework works because it's flexible enough to adapt to any situation while structured enough to keep you on track. For rookies, it's a safety net. For veterans, it's a consistency tool. For everyone, it's a path to better results.



Tip 3: Create the Conditions for Success

If you're a business owner or manager, this section is especially for you—though rookies should pay attention too, as these are the signs of a company that will help you grow. The question here is simple: What are you doing to ensure your rookies eventually become resources?

In my travels across the Western U.S. as a sales rep, I've noticed that the most successful dealers share some common traits. They don't just hire rookies and hope for the best—they actively invest in their success.

This investment shows up in unexpected ways. Yes, it includes training programs and clear advancement paths, but it goes beyond that. I've seen dealers who provide bagged lunches for installers, ensuring their team stays energized and on-site. Others maintain consistent schedules so employees can plan ahead. One retailer in North Idaho even provides hot showers and laundry facilities for their installation crew. The result? They don't just train great employees—they keep them.

Your showroom setup also plays a crucial role in rookie success. Studies by HPBA confirm what we all know: Customers research online before they visit. The successful retailers embrace this reality instead of avoiding it. They use QR codes linking to product information, ensuring that when customers pull out their phones, they're still engaging with your content. They organize their showrooms to mirror the clean, logical flow of online shopping, making the transition from digital research to in-person purchase feel natural.

Consider the online shopping experience—it's organized, searchable, and intuitive. If your showroom feels like a chaotic warehouse in comparison, you're creating unnecessary friction. But when your physical space extends the online experience with consistent organization and clear pathways through the buying journey, rookies and veterans alike can guide customers confidently.

So ask yourself: Does your store have a physical flow that reinforces your sales process? Can your newest employee understand the logic of your layout? Are your systems clear enough that rookies can execute them while they're still learning the nuances? These aren't just training questions—they're competitive advantages waiting to be claimed.

Conclusion: From Rookie to Resource

The hearth industry may lack the formal training programs of big-box chains, but it offers something more valuable: a community of professionals who remember being rookies themselves and are willing to share their knowledge with those eager to learn.

For my fellow rookies, your fresh perspective is an asset, not a liability. Your questions help everyone see familiar problems in new ways, your enthusiasm reminds veterans why they got into this industry in the first place, and your determination to serve customers well raises the bar for everyone. For the veterans and owners, remember that today's rookie is tomorrow's resource—but only if you create the conditions for that transformation. Every investment in training, every system you clarify, every bit of patience you show pays dividends in employee retention, customer satisfaction, and business growth.

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We're all climbing the learning curve together, just at different points on the trail. When we combine the rookies' energy with the veterans' wisdom—when we truly support each other's growth—that's when this industry shines. The question isn't whether someone is new or experienced; it's whether we're all still learning, growing, and committed to serving our customers better than we did yesterday. That's how rookies become resources, good companies become great ones, and an industry built on warmth continues to thrive—one transformed rookie at a time.



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