3 Behaviors to Win More Sales in Less Time This Season

BY TIM REED

Introduction: SLOW-IS-FAST

One of the hardest things for salespeople in our industry to do is manage the influx of business that comes every fall as the season starts to turn. As more and more customers come through the door, as online inquiries flood in, and as the phone rings off the hook, salespeople face the constant temptation of rushing through the customers in front of them to get to what's next.

And while it may seem to alleviate pressure in the moment, it's actually feeding a chaos cycle that chews salespeople up and mercilessly spits them out.

That chaos cycle looks something like this:

- Cold weather leads to more and more customers coming into the business.
- Harried salespeople rush through customer interactions in order to get to their next task.
- Rushed interactions create more follow-up work for salespeople to do later.
- Follow-up work drags because other urgent priorities come up as soon as the customer leaves.
- Aggravated customers hound the salespeople about belated follow-up work.
- Important work falls through the cracks as salespeople flail from one customer emergency to the next.

And this thing starts to spin.

I know because I've lived it.

Every rotation through this cycle grinds you down a bit further until eventually there's nothing left but despair—or even worse, apathy.

But if you're a salesperson, the chaos cycle is a self-inflicted wound that can be avoided by slowing down with each customer in front of you—and thoroughly helping that person solve the problem at hand—before moving on to the next one.

On the surface, this seems counterintuitive. After all, how can you save time by taking longer with each customer interaction? The answer is that every time you push something down the road, you create more work for yourself after the customer leaves. And the problem with doing work after the customer leaves—whether it's providing a quote, checking a specification in the installation manu-

al, or calling for availability on a certain product—is that it doesn't have the same level of urgency as when the customer was in front of you.

In the language of Stephen Covey, that work is still *important*, but after the customer leaves, it's no longer *urgent*.

And by slowing down with each customer—even in the heart of the season—you'll find that while that particular interaction may take longer, it saves an incredible amount of time later on.

Tim Rethlake says that we have the choice of SLOW-IS-FAST—where we diligently take our time on the front-end to save time on the back-end—or FAST-IS-SLOW—where we rush through things at the beginning (often in the name of efficiency) only to spend inordinate amounts of time on the back-end cleaning up our mistakes.

If we want to make more sales in less time this season—and avoid being sucked into the chaos cycle—here are three SLOW-IS-FAST behaviors to adopt right away:

1. **Sit down with every customer—physically.**
2. **Sell the series—not the size.**
3. **Write estimates for all customers—before they leave.**

Let's take a deep dive into each of these behaviors now.

Behavior 1: Sit Down With Every Customer—Physically

One of the biggest mistakes I see salespeople make in the showroom is standing face-to-face with customers—or even worse, calling back to them over their shoulder—as they try to determine what people need for their projects.

In each of these postures, efficiency is prioritized over connection, and the customer is the one who suffers.

Instead, salespeople who physically sit down with customers to ask thoughtful questions about their situations gain an immediate advantage that saves time and reduces work later on.

Here's why:

1. Sitting down focuses both the salesperson and the customer. It's much harder to be distracted when a salesperson says, *"You know, we have all kinds of fireplaces on display, and not all of them are safe for every particular home. So, would it be ok if we sat down for a couple of minutes so I can learn a little bit more about your project? After that, I'd love to show you some options that would be a great fit for your home."*

   This shows purpose, care, and focus. It's a true statement that every given fireplace will not be safe in every given home, so the natural answer to that problem is to sit down and learn a little bit more about the project.

   It's amazing how even the busiest customers have time to sit down and answer questions about their project when you use this language. And while it does take five to ten minutes longer than rushing willy-nilly to the first product you see, these focused minutes provide a foundation that will pay off handsomely later.

2. Sitting down with your customers provides you the opportunity to go through a Customer Understanding Form to understand their problems. It might sound crazy, but having a pre-made form full of questions that you walk through with each customer is a super-power that most salespeople miss.

   Customers simply assume you're a professional when, as you sit down, you say, *"Do you mind if I take some notes so I can make sure that I'm on the same page about your project and don't miss anything?"*—and immediately pull out a clipboard that walks through a series of thoughtful questions. As a side note, you can do the same thing with a laptop or tablet, just make sure the customer can see the screen at all times.

   By taking the time to walk through a series of these questions, you'll gain a deep understanding of your customers' problems. More than simply knowing their square footage and if they have a masonry fireplace, you'll understand the specific struggles and pain points they've been

dealing with—both physically and emotionally. This immediately shrinks the list of products that you need to show them and saves all kinds of time later on.

3. Sitting down with your customers in this way ensures that you understand their problems thoroughly *before* showing them solutions. I routinely see salespeople rush to a product without a complete understanding of the customer's problem, only to have to un-sell that very product when more information is revealed later on. This creates customer confusion and distrust that the salesperson actually knows how to help.

   The way to confirm that you understand your customer's problem is to read it back to the customer from your notes—and ask if you have an accurate understanding. You'll be amazed how customers respond when you say something like, *"So, Mrs. Smith, if I'm understanding you correctly, you said that your home was built in the 1940's and is about 1,800 square feet. It sounds like there's a fireplace in the main living area where your kitchen and great room is, and the chimney outside is made of brick all the way up to the top. Now, you mentioned that you have gas to the house but not to the fireplace and were hoping to get a gas fireplace that you can turn on with a remote control. Also, it sounds like it's really important that the logs are as realistic as possible and that the fireplace doesn't make noise—since your last home had a fireplace with a noisy fan. Is that an accurate understanding of your situation?"*

   You'll be amazed at how customers respond to this. In addition, if you missed anything, they'll let you know so you can adjust your calibration before showing them a product. What's more, customers can't help but make a connection to a salesperson who makes such a genuine effort to understand them. Remember, customers don't want to be interrogated, interviewed, or discovered by a salesperson—they want to be understood.

By taking more time on the front end to understand the customer's problem, you'll find that there are fewer solutions that need to be offered and fewer options that need to be quoted. And, it could be just me, but I've found that it takes less time to show customers a specific solution that perfectly addresses their problem than to show them everything on display because you aren't actually sure what would work best for them. This avoids the chaos cycle and keeps the momentum of the sales process building towards the close.

Behavior 2: Sell the Series—Not the Size

Another FAST-IS-SLOW mistake to avoid is jumping to a specific model of fireplace right away rather than talking about a series of fireplaces that could solve their problem.

Here's why: When the customer is in the showroom for the first time, you're showing them products without complete knowledge of their situation—and that knowledge isn't confirmed until an installer has performed an in-home site inspection.

This means you need to play the odds and set proper expectations.

I have an unwritten rule when I'm on the sales floor: Never show the customer a product that doesn't come in a series with a variety of sizes.

It goes without saying, but if I don't have full confidence in the size of the customer's fireplace, why would I show them a specific 35" model and tell them about how incredible it is just because it's the one we have on display? Don't put yourself in that box!

Some salespeople avoid this entirely by sending their customers out of the showroom with "homework" the second they find out that they don't have measurements, but this article doesn't have adequate space to address the foolishness of that ac-

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tion.

Instead, focus on selling a series of fireplaces rather than a specific model.

Here's the way I think about it: If you have a series of fireplace inserts that can fit an opening width of 28" and 45" and a height of 19" to 30", I know that a model from this series will work in nine out of 10 fireplaces. John Henry said, *"Give me liberty, or give me death."* I say, "*Give me a series, not a unicorn.*" If a given series will work in 90% of customer situations, we should take those odds every day of the week and set proper expectations for the remaining 10%.

In addition, by selling a series, you can build the value of the in-home site inspection by saying that an installer will come out to confirm which size in the series will be best.

Time and time again, I've seen the mistake of a salesperson selling a customer on a massive fireplace insert (because showrooms have the biggest models with the largest viewing areas on display) only to have to backtrack after an installer goes to the home and apologize that the model they looked at together on the showroom floor won't work after all. At this point, the salesperson has to try and sell a smaller size (after already talking about how amazing the large size was with the huge flames and massive viewing area), which takes more time and effort. Plus, customers face the disappointment of not being able to get what they wanted, and things quickly sour.

All of this can be avoided by selling a series of fireplaces to the customer and setting proper expectations. Here's an example of how simple the conversation can be using the faux brand name of "Easy Warmth" and the series name of "Champion": *"Thanks for taking the time to answer all those questions about your home, Mr. Jones. I think I have a really good understanding of your situation, and a few fireplaces come to mind that could be a really good fit for your home! Now, I'd like to show you our Champion series of gas fireplaces made by Easy Warmth. These are incredible fireplaces that do a really nice job of warming up the objects in your room—just like a wood stove—so sitting down on your couch is like being wrapped up in a warm blanket. Now, these models come in three different sizes, but don't worry, we'll make sure to get you the right size for your home after we've come out for an in-home inspection."*

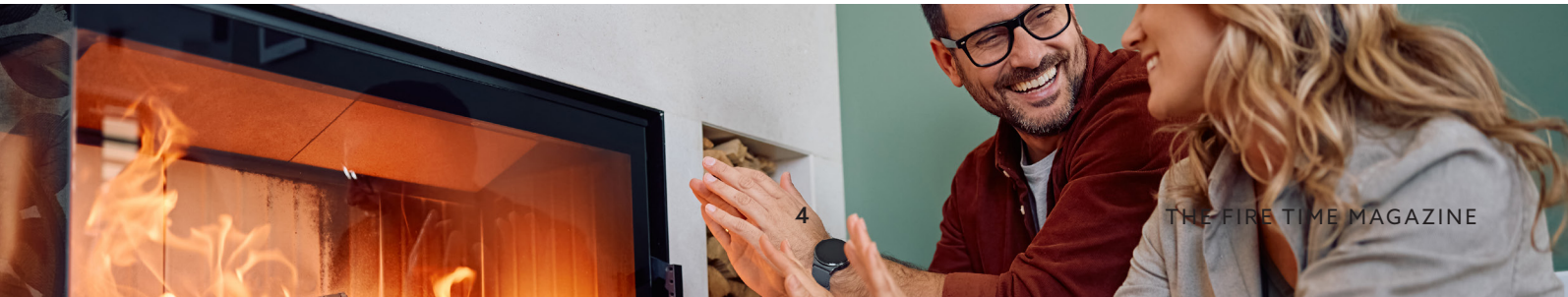
When you frame things this way, you're letting customers know upfront that there's a right size for their home that isn't known yet, but there's no need to worry, because your professional installers who come out to the home for the site inspection will find the size that fits perfectly.

And customers are truly okay with this.

The beauty of this is that if customers end up needing the smallest size of fireplace in the series, it's their situation that's the bad guy—not you. Because you set the expectation that these fireplaces come in multiple sizes and your team would confirm the model that will work best when they get to the home, you buy yourself grace when customers can't get the biggest size.

This may mean that you have to say no to certain products that don't offer multiple sizes—or that you need to get creative as a salesperson and create a series of your own—but wisdom says to offer the customer a solution with the best chance of success. And that means selling the series, not the model.

Adopting this behavior saves time un-selling the specific model you first sold the customer on in the showroom, helps you to sidestep the hangup of not being sure how to proceed when a customer doesn't have measurements, and builds momentum towards the close. Plus, it minimizes the customer disappointment and follow-up work that fuels the chaos cycle in season.



Behavior 3: Write Estimates for All Customers—Before They Leave

I believe that one of the single biggest problems in our industry—and one that fuels the heart of the chaos cycle—is salespeople promising their customers to follow up later with an estimate.

Oftentimes, it's framed as a courtesy, like you're really looking out for the customer's best interest and don't want to waste their time: "Would you like me to write up an estimate for you now? It can take 20-30 minutes."

But here's the problem: It's simply not true.

As Jill realizes in *The Last Battle*, by mixing a little truth, the lie becomes far stronger. Yes, an estimate does take time to produce (but often it's 5-10 minutes at most—not 20-30), but we have to remember that customers have *already* set aside 30-60 minutes in the showroom (often more) to try and get their problem solved. They can afford a few more minutes if they believe it's part of the process.

In addition, every time we promise to follow up with an estimate in a few days, we add a time-bound task to our ever-growing list of everything we've already promised—and push the chaos cycle just a little bit faster.

And if that wasn't enough, when customers finally get their estimates, momentum has stalled, and they have no obligation to call and tell you if they don't understand it or if they decide to go in a different direction.

Most salespeople would be amazed at how many of their customers would take action in the showroom if they were given the ability to do so—and that can't happen without writing an estimate.

Rather than *asking* customers if they would like an estimate, *assume* that they do. After all, if you were interested in a product, drove to a high-end showroom to find out how much it costs, and spent 60 minutes talking with a salesperson, wouldn't you want to receive a price for the very thing that brought you to the showroom in the first place to see how much it was? I think that logic holds up.

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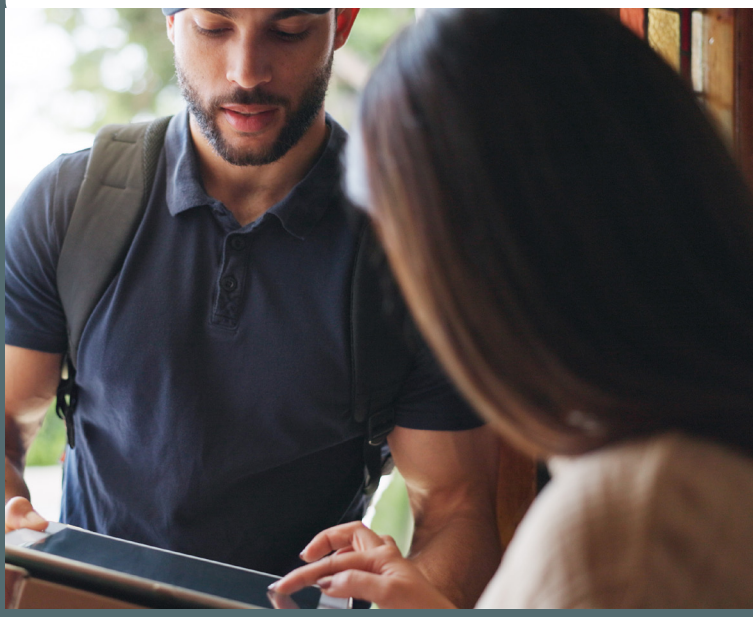

With that in mind, here's some language that I've found helpful to ease into this step of the process that's transparent and non-threatening: *"Well, Mrs. Smith, it looks like this fireplace series is going to be a great fit for your home for all the reasons that we talked about. So, if it's okay, I'd love to explain the way that all of our jobs work here at Tim's Fireplace Shop—because people don't buy fireplaces very often. Step one, before you leave today, I'll write you an estimate for this project so you have a good idea of what the project will cost. Step two, if those numbers look good, we can schedule a time for our certified technicians to come to your home and perform a safety double-check. They'll make sure that we didn't miss anything in our conversation today, confirm the specific model within the series we discussed, and provide a final price before they leave. And step three, if you feel comfortable moving ahead, we can get this project scheduled so you can start enjoying your fireplace again. So, if it's okay, I'll work up that estimate for you—it'll just take a few minutes."*

This process can also easily be adapted for taking an up front deposit or making a will-call sale for customers who are installing units on their own. The point is that if you tell customers that writing an estimate is part of the process, they'll believe you. And writing the estimate every time sets them up to take the next step right there—and voice any concerns or objections while you're in a position to address them, rather than after they've left the showroom.

Adopting this behavior eliminates another quote from the growing pile and puts customers in a position to make a decision in the moment (which is actually what they want). Even though it takes more time with each customer, you'll find it leads to a quicker sales cycle and keeps you off the chaos cycle in the heart of the season.

Conclusion: The Hurrier You Go, the Behinder You Get

I know how it feels to be stuck in the chaos cycle. Day after day, you show up to work, get ground up by your customers, get ground up by your installers, and get ground up by your boss—just to wake up and do it all again the next day.

It's terrible.

Nearly 20 years ago, I was on a job installing a fireplace with my father-in-law, and, like normal, I made a mistake because I was rushing through something. He looked at me and said, "The hurrier you go, the behinder you get."

A few years later, I had a boss tell me that "thoroughness is next to godliness."

And it's simply the truth.

These are words that I needed to hear early in my career, and they've helped me tremendously in the years that have followed.

There's no silver bullet to solve every difficulty that comes up in the heart of the season, but adopting these behaviors will address many of them. If you can sit down with customers to understand their problems, sell a series rather than boxing yourself into a corner with specific models, and write estimates for all customers before they leave, you can win more sales in less time—and stay out of the chaos cycle this season.

New stove s[16]V

The s16-V, a wood stove like no other. Conceived for design lovers and warmth seekers, it blends the charm of mid-century style with performance built for today.

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