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The Most Expensive Fireplace Is the One You Have to Sell Twice

By Gideon Honeycutt

I've been in the hearth industry since I was 16. As a sales rep, I hear dozens of anecdotes a year from dealers about why they lose sales. Price. Lead time. Brand recognition. A competitor throwing in free installation. The customer's brother-in-law knowing a guy. We spend a lot of time worrying about those lost sales. Lately, though, I've been thinking about something that can be a whole lot more expensive: selling the wrong fireplace.

Right now, I am helping two different dealers who are selling fireplaces to customers they already sold fireplaces to last year. Unfortunately, these aren't customers who loved their fireplace so much they

decided to put another one in the basement. They are replacing the first ones. And while the circumstances are completely different, both situations have reminded me of something that's easy to forget when we're trying to get a customer across the finish line: The most expensive fireplace you'll ever sell might be the one you have to sell twice.

When the Product Is Wrong

The first situation is probably familiar to anyone who has been in this business long enough. A dealer sold a brand he wasn't particularly accustomed to. It wasn't the type of product he normally sold, and,

arguably, it wasn't at the same quality level as the products he was accustomed to representing.

There's nothing inherently wrong with trying a different product. Every brand in every showroom was new to that dealer at some point. But this one didn't work out. The job was a frustration from the start. The fireplace developed significant problems. The customer became frustrated. The dealer spent time troubleshooting it. More time was spent communicating with the customer and trying to find solutions. Eventually, everybody reached the point where the best solution was essentially to start over.

Now the dealer is selling the customer another fireplace. Except, of course, he isn't really selling another fireplace. He's fixing the first sale, and those are two very different things.

When the Fireplace Isn't the Problem

The second situation is even more interesting. The dealer sold a vent-free fireplace going into a new home. He mostly worked with the contractor, but the customer did come into the showroom once to select logs. As it turns out, the customer actually has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). The customer experiences respiratory issues when the fireplace is on and believes a vent-free appliance should never have been sold to her. While the contractor is the one who recommended the vent-free appliance (likely due to not wanting to build a

chase), the dealer is the one covering the costs to remove and install the new vented fireplace (due to a combination of not wanting to lose his biggest contractor, and also feeling like his sales team did not properly vet the customer before selling her the box and logs).

So now the vent-free fireplace is coming out, and another fireplace is going in, and the dealer is going to lose a significant amount of money making the situation right. That brings up an important distinction: A perfectly good fireplace can still be the wrong fireplace.

We tend to think about product selection in terms of dimensions and specifications. Will it fit? Does it have enough BTUs? Can we vent it? Does it meet the budget? What front does the customer like? To be clear, those questions matter. But they are not the entire job. We also have to understand the people who are going to live with the thing.

How are they planning to use it? Is supplemental heat important? Is this going into a bedroom, basement, or huge open living space? Is the customer particularly sensitive to heat? Are there concerns or circumstances that should affect which type of appliance we're recommending? Sometimes the most important question in the sale isn't on the spec sheet. And sometimes the right answer might cost you the sale.

That's okay.

"The most expensive fireplace you'll ever sell might be the one you have to sell twice."

Losing a Sale Can Be Cheap

That's a strange sentence for a manufacturer's rep to write. My livelihood depends, at least in part, on dealers selling fireplaces. I would very much like you to sell one at every opportunity. But I've also been around this business long enough to know that

sometimes a sale will cost you more than it makes you.

Suppose a customer wants the cheapest fireplace in the showroom. Maybe you know it's probably not going to give him what he's expecting. Maybe he's trying to heat a space the appliance isn't suited for.

Maybe he wants a product installed in an application that makes you uncomfortable. Maybe he's demanding something that technically can be done but experience tells you is going to become a headache. There's tremendous pressure to say "yes." Because if you don't, the dealer down the street probably will. And watching that customer walk out the door with a quote in his hand feels like losing money. But sometimes letting him walk costs you nothing. Winning him can cost you thousands.

I also feel this pressure as a rep. I'm constantly resisting the urge to say "yes" to every possible sales opportunity. But here's the hard truth: Not every opportunity is the right opportunity.

The Second Fireplace Costs More Than the Fireplace

When a sale goes badly, we usually calculate the obvious expenses.

A replacement fireplace costs X.

Labor costs Y.

Parts cost Z.

Add those numbers together, and that's what the problem cost us.

I don't think that's even close to the real number. What did the 12 service trips cost? What did the 15 phone calls cost? What did the Saturday morning visit to an angry homeowner cost? What did the time your best installer spent diagnosing a problem instead of completing another installation cost? And what did it cost when that homeowner told his neighbor, builder, designer, or Facebook group that the fireplace he bought from you was a nightmare? That is where the math gets ugly. There's an opportunity cost to every problem we bring into our businesses.

Sell What You Know—and Know Your Customer

I think there are two lessons in these situations.

The first is about the product. Know what you're putting your name behind. That doesn't mean the most expensive fireplace is automatically the best fireplace. It doesn't mean you should never bring in a new manufacturer or experiment with a different product category. It means price shouldn't be the only number in your calculation. Reliability has value. Manufacturer support has value. Parts availability has value. A rep answering his phone when something goes wrong has value. Your installers knowing how to work on the product has value. Your salespeople understanding what it can and can't do has value. None of those things appear on the customer's invoice, but all of them become very expensive when they're missing.

The second lesson is about the customer. Ask more questions. Not because we need to turn every fireplace sale into a 45-minute interrogation, but because sometimes five minutes of conversation can save five months of headaches.

What are you trying to accomplish?

How do you plan to use the fireplace?

What's most important to you?

What don't you like about the fireplace you have now?

Are there any concerns we haven't talked about?

Then, actually listen to the answers. Our job isn't simply to sell the fireplace customers walk in asking for. Sometimes, our job is to tell them they shouldn't buy it.

Make the First Sale the Last Sale

Both of the dealers I'm working with are doing what good dealers tend to do when something goes wrong. They are trying to make it right. That matters. Customers don't expect every product to be perfect forever. Problems happen. Components fail. People make mistakes. What happens afterward says a lot about the company that made the sale. But making things right isn't free. And the best warranty claim,

service call, or replacement installation is still the one you never needed.

So yes: Fight for the sale.

But don't become so afraid of losing a customer that you become willing to win a bad sale.

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