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3 Assumptions That Cost More Sales Than Any Competitor

By Dave Anderson

Chances are, the last sale you lost had very little to do with price. You may have lost it to an assumption. As salespeople, we love to blame the competition when a deal falls through. We say things like, “They were cheaper,” “They had a better promotion,” or “The customer was only shopping price.”

Sound familiar?

Sometimes those excuses are legitimate. There’s always going to be someone willing to sell something cheaper, and there will always be customers who make their purchasing decisions based on price alone. But after more than two decades in this industry, I’ve come to believe that some of the most expensive sales we lose have absolutely nothing to do with our competition. In fact, we lose some of them before we ever write a quote—sometimes before we even show the customer a product.

We lose them because *we assume*.

We assume we know what customers want. We assume we know what they can afford. We assume we know what’s best for them before we’ve taken the time to understand what they’re trying to accomplish. And here’s the problem: Those assumptions

usually come from our own experiences, preferences, and wallets rather than our customers'.

I've been guilty of these mistakes myself, and if you've been in sales long enough, the odds are good that you have too. There are three assumptions in particular that I believe cost our industry more sales than most of us realize: selling what we like, selling out of our own wallets, and judging customers by their covers. So let's take a closer look at each one, and then explore what's really possible when we *stop assuming* and *start listening*.

Assumption 1: Don't Always Sell What You Like

Walk through enough showrooms, and you'll hear some version of these statements:

- "This is the fireplace I have at my house."
- "This is my favorite grill."
- "If I were buying one, this is what I'd get."

There's absolutely nothing wrong with sharing personal experience. In fact, first-hand product knowledge can be one of the most valuable tools we have. But there's a big difference between sharing your experience to help someone make a decision and using your personal preferences to make that decision for the customer.

Let's use outdoor cooking as an example. Maybe you're a die-hard charcoal guy: You love cooking over lump charcoal, enjoy managing the fire, and believe nothing can compare to the flavor. I'm a charcoal guy myself, so I totally get it. But what happens when customers walk into your showroom looking for a pellet grill? Do you take the time to understand why they want one, or do you spend the next 20 minutes trying to convince them why charcoal is better?

I've watched salespeople do exactly that, and I can tell you what happens next: Those customers walk out the door, drive down the street, and buy the pellet grill they wanted in the first place. In those situations, you didn't lose that sale because the competition had a better product. You lost it because you weren't listening.

The same thing happens with fireplaces. Early in my career, I was guilty of trying to convince customers who came in looking for an electric fireplace that they really needed gas. In my mind, gas was the better option. It provided real heat and a real flame, and I felt it was a better overall product.

But that wasn't what those customers came in looking for. Maybe they didn't want to run a gas line. Maybe installation costs were a concern. Or maybe it was a young couple who had just purchased their first home, and they didn't have $10,000 to spend on a fireplace, but they still wanted to enjoy having one in their home. Of course, there's absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Think about the opportunity standing in front of you. You take the time to listen to that couple, understand their situation, and help them find an electric fireplace that fits their home and their budget. Maybe it's not the biggest sale you'll make that week, but you treated them with respect, took their needs seriously, and helped them get exactly what they were looking for.

So what happens next? They tell their friends and family about the experience they had at your showroom. They remember the salesperson who took the time to help them rather than trying to sell them something they didn't want or couldn't afford. Word of mouth can be your best friend or your worst enemy, and how you treat people has a lot to do with which one it becomes.

Now, let's fast-forward five or 10 years and imagine that same couple building their dream home. This time, they're looking at a $10,000 to $20,000 fireplace, and maybe they're planning a complete outdoor kitchen. Guess where they're going first? They're coming back to the person who helped them when they bought their first home—the person who listened, treated them with respect, and made them feel like their business mattered—all because you

took the time to help someone buy an electric fireplace years earlier.

Sometimes the smallest sale you make today can turn into the biggest customer you have tomorrow.

Think about the different people walking into our showrooms. A retired couple building their forever home might want a beautiful fireplace that provides ambiance without overwhelming their living space. A young family might want dependable supplemental heat during a winter power outage. A homeowner building an outdoor kitchen might entertain 20 people every weekend, while another couple simply wants to cook a couple of steaks on Friday night. Those customers aren't shopping for the same experience, so why would we assume they need the same product?

Simply put, customers aren't buying your lifestyle—they're buying *theirs*. Our job isn't to convince everyone to like what we like. It's to understand what matters to our customers and help them find the right solution. At the end of the day, your favorite product might not be the best product for the person standing in front of you, and that's perfectly fine.

Assumption 2: Don't Sell Out of Your Own Wallet

Of the three assumptions, this one might be the most expensive. A customer walks into your showroom and starts looking at a premium fireplace, a high-end grill, or an outdoor kitchen. Before you've even had a meaningful conversation, you're already doing the math in your head. *That's a lot of money*, you think. *I wouldn't spend that much. Maybe I should start with something more affordable.*

Stop right there.

That's selling out of your own wallet, and it's one of the worst habits that salespeople can develop.

Here's something I've learned over the years: People will spend money on what they value. Some people won't blink an eye at spending $90,000 on a new pickup. Others wouldn't dream of spending that kind of money on a vehicle but will gladly invest $50,000 in an outdoor living space. Why? Because that's what matters to them. Maybe they love entertaining friends and family. Maybe they've worked their entire lives saving for that backyard entertaining area they've always dreamed of building. Who are we to decide what that experience is worth?

I've worked with customers building beautiful custom homes who had absolutely no interest in compromising on the fireplace that would become the centerpiece of their great room. I've also worked with customers who had a strict budget and wanted the best possible value for their money. Neither customer is wrong, and neither decision is ours to make.

One of the biggest mistakes we make is eliminating premium options before customers even know those options exist. We think we're helping them by saving them money. But are we really? What if those customers would have gladly spent another $3,000 to get the fireplace they truly wanted?

Here's another example I see in our industry: You're selling a beautiful outdoor heating system with Infratech heaters, and you've already helped the customer design a space to enjoy throughout the year. But when it comes time to discuss the controls, you decide the upgraded control system is too expensive, so you quote the heaters with basic duplex stack switches instead. Why? Because you wouldn't spend another $2,900 on upgraded controls?

What if the homeowner would have gladly spent that additional money to have greater control and convenience over that outdoor heating system? What if those were the exact features that would have made the experience even better for that homeowner? The problem isn't that you offered a less expensive option; the problem is that you never gave the customer the opportunity to choose. You may have just cost yourself a larger sale and, more importantly, you may have cost the customer the opportunity to enjoy a feature that would have been appreciated for years to come.

Now, I'm not suggesting we push every customer toward the most expensive product on the showroom floor. That's not professional selling either. Instead, I'm suggesting we give customers the opportunity to understand what's available. Show them the differences, explain the features, help them understand what they're getting for their money, and then let them decide what fits their needs and budget.

There's nothing wrong with asking customers what they're comfortable spending, but don't confuse their budget with yours. Never let your own wallet determine what someone else can afford.

"Sometimes the smallest sale you make today can turn into the biggest customer you have tomorrow."

Assumption 3: Don't Judge the Cover

We've all heard the saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover," and nowhere is it more true than in sales. Over the years, I've worked with customers who looked like they had just climbed off a tractor and could have purchased just about anything in the showroom. I've also worked with customers who pulled up in expensive vehicles and dressed like they were headed into a corporate board meeting but watched every dollar they spent.

You simply never know.

But this assumption goes beyond what someone can afford. It's about how we treat people based on what we think they're worth. People walk into your showroom wearing muddy boots, worn-out jeans, and old sweatshirts. Do they get the same greeting as the people who walk in wearing designer clothes? Do you spend the same amount of time with them? Do you show them the same quality products? Or have you already made up your mind about who's more likely to buy? That's where we get ourselves into trouble.

We all make snap judgments; it's just human nature. But those judgments have no business determining how we treat a customer. The guy in muddy boots might be a rancher who's getting ready to build a million-dollar home. The young couple asking basic questions might be planning a project that's still a year away. And the person who says, "I'm just looking," might be trying to decide which dealer to trust with a major investment.

Here's something else to consider: That customer who isn't ready to buy today might be your best customer a few years from now, with friends, family, and neighbors who are ready to buy right now. You have absolutely no idea what opportunities are standing in front of you until you take the time to have a conversation.

I've always believed that how you treat people when there's nothing immediately in it for you says a lot about who you are. That applies to life, and it certainly applies to sales. All customers deserve the same opportunity to be heard, educated, and treated with respect—regardless of what they're driving, what they're wearing, or what you think they can afford.

So don't judge the cover. Find out what's inside.

Curiosity Will Make You a Better Salesperson

If there's one thing I've noticed about some of the best salespeople in our industry, it's that they're genuinely curious. They want to understand the person standing in front of them. They don't immediately

start rattling off BTUs, efficiencies, burner configurations, or every other feature printed on the spec sheet. They ask questions:

- "What brought you into the showroom today?"
- "Tell me a little about the project you're working on."
- "How do you envision using this space?"
- "What do you like about what you currently have?"
- "If you could change one thing, what would it be?"

Pretty simple questions, right? But you'd be amazed at what you can learn when you actually listen to the answers. Customers asking about an inexpensive gas insert may be looking for a dependable way to heat their homes during winter power outages. Someone shopping for a basic grill might be in the early stages of planning an entire outdoor kitchen and have no idea what options are available. Those conversations can lead to opportunities that neither you nor the customer originally considered, but you'll never discover them if you're too busy telling people what they need.

Sometimes the most valuable thing you can do in a sales conversation is shut up and listen. I know that can be difficult for those of us who enjoy talking about the products we sell. But customers don't walk through your door to hear a speech. They walk through your door because they have a want, a need, or a problem they're trying to solve.

Your job is to figure out which one it is.

Our Real Value Isn't on the Spec Sheet

Think about how much the buying process has changed. Today's customers can research products, compare pricing, read reviews, and watch installation videos without ever leaving their couch. They can find out how many BTUs a fireplace produces or how many square inches of cooking space a grill offers in about 30 seconds. So if all we're doing is repeating information they can find online, what value are we really providing?

Our value comes from experience. It's knowing how products perform in real-world applications. It's understanding installation challenges, asking the right questions, and helping customers avoid mistakes they might not even know they're making. A website can tell people how many BTUs a fireplace produces, but it can't stand in their living room, understand how they use that space, and help determine which product makes the most sense for their home.

That's where we come in.

It's also one of the biggest advantages independent specialty retailers have over big-box stores and online sellers. We have the opportunity to provide something those businesses often struggle to deliver: knowledge, experience, and a relationship built on trust. But none of those things matter if we don't take the time to understand the customer.

The Sale You Never Made

Here's what I want you to think about: not the last sale you lost to a competitor, and not the customer who came back with a cheaper quote, but the customers who walked into your showroom, spent 20 minutes talking with you, and walked out without buying anything. Did you really understand what they wanted? Did you show them the options that made sense for their projects? Did you allow your own financial priorities to influence what you presented? Did you make a judgment about them before they ever had a chance to tell you their story? Or did you simply assume?

We're never going to close every sale. That's not realistic, and anyone who tells you otherwise probably hasn't spent enough time selling. But we can stop losing opportunities because we made decisions for customers who never asked us to make them.

So the next time someone walks through your showroom door, just remember three things:

1. Don’t always sell what you like.
2. Don’t sell out of your own wallet.
3. Don’t judge the cover.

Instead, get curious. Ask more questions, listen a little longer, and give the person standing in front of you the opportunity to decide what matters most.

Because the biggest threat to your next sale might not be the competitor down the street; it might be the assumption you made before the customer ever had a chance to tell you the whole story.

The sale you never made might be the one you never gave yourself a chance to earn.

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