

SELLING LARGE FARMERS: IT'S DARNED HARD WORK

by Dr. W. David Downey

There is little question that large farmers are different. Different from what they used to be. Different from other market segments. And different from each other. A national study of more than 2,500 large commercial producers just released by the Center for Food and Agricultural Business at Purdue University certainly underscores that. Every farm supplier knows large farmers are not only economically important, but they are also sophisticated, complex, more business oriented and demanding.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

The traditional sales approach is based heavily on social relationships, taking orders and providing follow-up service or just beating a competitor's price. That doesn't work well with these accounts. Purdue research strongly suggests large farmers place a much higher priority on a wide variety of business and technical factors that blend together to create unique value for them individually. Follow-up service, relevant information, innovative ideas and access to resources all score especially high with large farmers. They are far less influenced by the salesperson who "is my friend" and "calls on me frequently." Large farmers prefer salespeople who are "technically competent," "understand my operation"

and "represent my interests." Interestingly, "honesty" continues to rank as the highest single attributes of the most desirable salesperson.

If you listen in on the sales calls of most agri-salespeople, you will hear a little chit chat followed by a list of reasons why the farmer should buy their product. They often don't ask nearly enough of the right questions or listen very well. If the farmer is patient, or kind enough to wade through the salesperson's litany of product features, any success the salesperson has is more likely in spite of his efforts than because of them. No wonder large farmers have little patience for ill-prepared salespeople who assume they know what farmers need and waste their time with useless information that they are not sure they trust anyway.

DISCOVER NEEDS

Developing deep relationships with important accounts is tricky business that takes time and lots of effort — getting to know them, understanding their business and building trust. It is not enough to find out what a customer needs. You must also find out why they need it. That is the only way salespeople are going to create a selling strategy that truly appeals to business-oriented producers.

Purdue research consistently reinforces the importance of investing time discovering relevant information about the account's values, goals and needs before creating a value proposition that uniquely fits the customer. If salespeople don't really understand the customer, it is very difficult to create unique solutions. They end up just trying to "sell stuff." How amateurish is that?

DELIVER VALUE

Real professionals understand that they need to deliver value — often ideas and information — on each and every call because the cus-

tomers, especially the large farmer's, time is very valuable. These agri-salespeople understand that this process will likely take numerous calls over a long period before they generate sufficient interest to earn business. It is through this process that they build trust and demonstrate honesty and integrity. Gradually, they create a value-based relationship that puts them in line to have a shot at the business.

GET ON THE SHORT LIST

Most farmers perceive themselves as loyal. Purdue's research also shows that they don't like to make changes in their primary suppliers often because of the "switching cost" involved. Most large farmers prefer a stable business relationship with a trustworthy supplier who knows their business well. They are most vulnerable to a switch when something goes wrong in their relationship with their current supplier. Real professional agri-salespeople work long and hard to get onto a preferred customer's short list. They have an established relationship that they can jump into the instant their target shows any sign of discontent with their current supplier. That is when they hit pay dirt.

Yes, capturing new large account business takes a lot of hard work and patience, but it is worth the effort. Any customer that is easy to get, is also easy to lose. **AM**

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