

THE APPROACH

The approach, also known as the *sales opening*, is the first face-to-face contact with the customer. Salespeople can make or break a sale during their first few minutes with a customer. They must learn how to properly approach a customer to open a sale. The approach sets the mood for the other steps of the sale. Its purpose is to establish **rapport** (a positive relationship) with the customer whether for organizational or retail selling.

In order to achieve an effective sales opening, salespeople must remember to do the following:

- ▶ Treat customers as individuals. Never stereotype a person because of age, sex, race, religion, appearance, or any other characteristic.
- ▶ Be aware of the customer's personality and buying style. Some customers like to do business quickly. Others prefer a methodical pace.
- ▶ Show interest in the customer by maintaining good eye contact and showing friendliness.
- ▶ Learn and use the customer's name to personalize the sale when possible.
- ▶ Grab the customer's attention. Incorporate a theme in the approach that is related to the presentation and the customer's buying motives.
- ▶ Recognize that sales approaches differ in organization selling and retail selling situations.

As You Read

Predict How does the approach differ depending on the sales situation?

ORGANIZATIONAL SELLING

In organizational selling, salespeople usually make an appointment prior to making a sales call. This ensures that their customers have time to meet with them. Some may not call in advance.

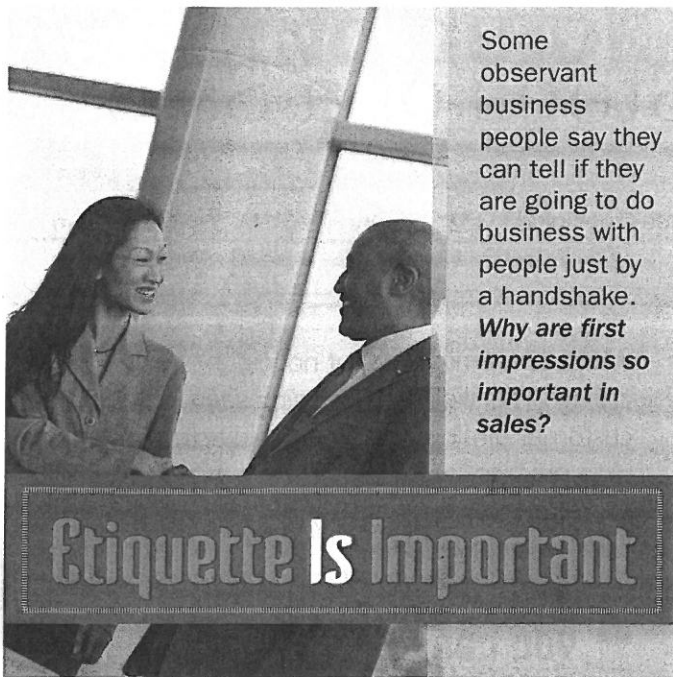
When they arrive without notice, they are "cold calling." The likelihood of being seen by the customer diminishes. When cold calling, it is a wise practice to ask customers if it is a good time to see them. This courtesy is appreciated by busy businesspeople.

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“ You can make or break a sale during the approach. ”

ARRIVE EARLY

Field sales representatives should always arrive early for a sales call. This allows the salesperson to gather his or her thoughts. It also shows professionalism and courtesy because it ensures the salesperson will not be late for the sales call. In some cases, it allows the salesperson to observe the customer's place of business. Here are a few examples of how to make use of observations.

- ▶ If your customer is a retail store buyer, you can spend time walking through the store to see which competing brands are carried. You can also observe customers in the store to see if they appear to be part of your product's target market.
- ▶ If you sit in the waiting room for a purchasing agent in a manufacturing facility, you can read all the plaques on the walls and any industry or company literature on display. These items may be helpful in your approach as well as other steps of the sale.
- ▶ In the customer's office, you may observe something that will help you establish rapport. It might be a college plaque, a sports trophy, a painting, or something else that uncovers your customer's interests. For example, if the customer keeps golf clubs in his or her office, making small talk about this interest during the initial approach can help the salesperson to establish rapport with the customer.



Some observant business people say they can tell if they are going to do business with people just by a handshake. **Why are first impressions so important in sales?**

GREET AND ENGAGE CUSTOMER

The first step in the initial approach involves proper business etiquette. The salesperson greets the customer by name and introduces him- or herself and the company with a firm handshake and a smile. After the proper greeting and introductions, the next statement or question should engage the customer.

Engaging a Current Customer

When meeting with customers you visit frequently, you can be more personal. Comments on recent events in the customer's industry or personal recollections about the customer's family, interests, or hobbies can create a smooth meeting. This technique puts the customer at ease and helps open lines of communication.

Learning what is appropriate to say regarding personal matters is critical. When personal conversation is not appropriate, you can still engage in small talk to establish a relationship with the customer.

Engaging a New Customer

As noted, any common interest shared between the salesperson and the customer may also be used to engage the customer. That common interest might range from a personal connection (e.g. graduated from the same college) to sports-related passions (e.g. participant or fan).

You can also use information gathered during prospecting to create an opening statement. It is best to pick a theme that is related to the presentation and the customer's buying motives. For example, "When I spoke with you last week, you indicated an interest in looking at new golf accessories to enhance your current assortment." You can also use current topics in the industry with a new customer. For example, "According to *Supermarket News*, food stores that are going green are attracting new customers. My company has the products that will help you take advantage of that growing trend." Topics that are always of interest to organizational customers include reducing costs, increasing productivity, improving profits, and generating more business.

RETAIL SELLING

In most retail selling situations, the salespeople do not know customers prior to meeting them. The exception occurs when retail salespeople have steady customers whom they know well. In both cases, timing and type of approach are important.

TIMING THE RETAIL APPROACH

Timing the approach depends on the types of customers and on the products being sold. When customers are in an obvious hurry, you should approach them quickly. When customers seem undecided, it is best to let them look around before making the approach. Many customers prefer to shop around before buying. They appreciate salespeople who show interest while allowing them to make their own decisions. These casual lookers will seek help when they need it.

RETAIL APPROACH METHODS

There are three methods to use for the initial retail approach: greeting, service, and merchandise or theme. You must evaluate the selling situation and the type of customer to determine which method is best. In some cases, you may use one, two, or all three approaches as part of your sales opening.

Greeting Approach

With the **greeting approach**, the salesperson welcomes the customer to the store. This lets the customer know that the salesperson is available for questions or assistance. This can be simple.

For example, simply greet a customer with "Good morning." If a frequent customer arrives, using the customer's name in the approach makes the customer feel important.

When you greet the customer, it is important to use a rising tone in your voice. Regardless of whether the customer responds in a friendly manner, it is extremely important for the salesperson to smile and continue to be friendly.

After greeting the customer, pause for a few seconds. Out of courtesy, most customers will respond. If they need help, they will tell you how you can assist them. If they are just looking, they will let you know. The greeting approach establishes a positive atmosphere and opens the lines of communication. It can also be incorporated easily into the other two retail approach methods.

Service Approach

With the **service approach**, salespeople ask customers if they need assistance. One way to use this method is to ask, "How may I help you?" An open-ended question such as this one offers the customer a greater opportunity to respond with more than "yes" or "no." The wrong way to use the service approach is to ask, "May I help you?" This question is ineffective because customers will often say, "No, thank you, I am just looking." That customer response ends communication between the customer and salesperson.

Merchandise or Theme Approach

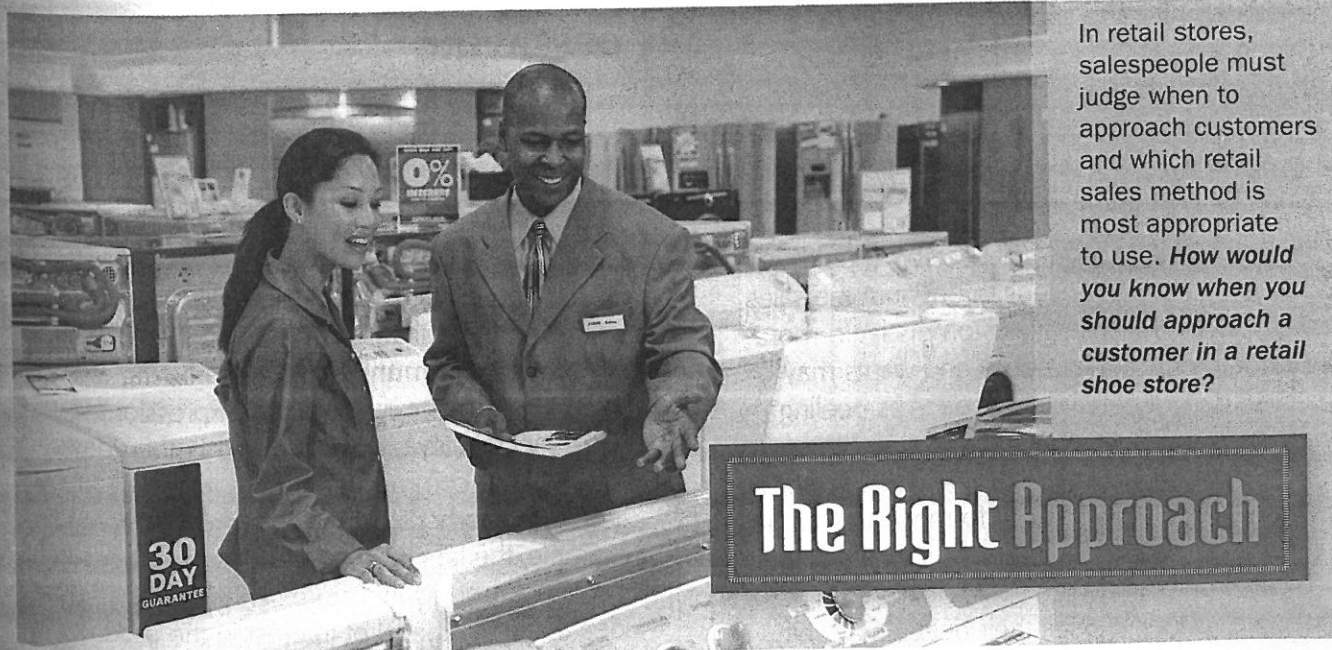
With the **merchandise approach**, or theme approach, the salesperson makes a comment or asks questions about a product in which the customer shows an interest. You may say something about the product's features and benefits or typical customer buying motives. It should give the customer some information that is not immediately apparent to the eye.

Focus the conversation on the customer's interest. With a jacket, you might say, "That children's jacket comes in several other colors." If you have no indication of the exact interest, you can talk about the item's popularity, its unusual features, or its special values. You can also ask a question, such as "Is that the size you need?" or "Were you looking for a comfortable children's jacket?" This themed approach is effective in retail sales because it focuses attention on the product and the sales presentation. It increases customer interest and could encourage a purchase. In addition, customers may not see the desired style, size, or color on the selling floor. The merchandise approach lets the customer know what is available.



Reading Check

Recall What are three methods of retail approaches?



In retail stores, salespeople must judge when to approach customers and which retail sales method is most appropriate to use. *How would you know when you should approach a customer in a retail shoe store?*

The Right Approach