



# Sales Lessons from SEMA

## Tradeshaw Tips to Better Your Business

Since I began my column with TIRE REVIEW back in 2010, I've been fortunate enough to attend a lot of automotive industry events. I've been present at and, more often than not, also a presenter at everything from tire and automotive state associations to the large tire manufacturer annual conferences..

Of all those events, the Specialty Equipment Manufacturers Association (SEMA) Show in Las Vegas is right at the top for me. For any true auto enthusiast like yours truly, the SEMA Show is a true kid-in-a-candy-store affair. I just can't get enough of all the cool custom cars and trucks and all the specialty equipment that the aftermarket offers to support and/or enhance anything with wheels and a motor.

Although SEMA is not open to the public, every year it attracts an absolutely huge crowd of automotive industry insiders. While at the show this November, I did something I had not done in the past. I sat down (rare at the show) and thought about what was really going on there, behind and between all the drama and commotion, as it relates to your business sales, customer service, and success in general.

While my findings apply to the typical trade show you're likely to attend, they were certainly magnified at SEMA.

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### My Top 4 Sales Lessons from the 2016 SEMA Show

#### 1. Always Be Learning

There's no sense attending any trade show if you're not interested in learning something new and, in fact, many tire business owners I spoke with at SEMA attended for the primary purpose of finding equipment, technology and/or knowledge to make their business more successful.

The reality is you can't learn anything if you already know everything. Know-it-all types aren't particularly interested in moving forward and growing, contending that if they don't know it by now then they never will. Obviously this is not the most favorable attitude when attending any trade show or when it comes to learning anything. High-achievers maintain an open mind and

proactively seek out new learning opportunities and ideas that can help them further their skill set and performance.

Since your business is only as strong as the people that support it, there's a direct correlation between the success of the business and whether or not your employees are striving to learn and grow. While conceptually that makes sense to most business owners, the sad reality is most tire businesses are so busy managing daily activity they simply do not devote the required time to learn anything more than what is absolutely necessary to maintain operations. This results in employees who learn just enough to meet their job descriptions and, ultimately, fall short of achieving excellence. An "Always

Be Learning" culture provides a competitive advantage and is a main driver that elevates truly great businesses above and beyond all those average organizations that settle for the status-quo. As the leader of your organization, it is your job to create and cultivate this.

#### 2. Prepare In Advance

It's safe to say that every exhibitor's primary objective while attending SEMA is to sell more products. It's also safe to say that selling more of your products and services is a primary objective of your tire business.

Walking the 22 or so miles around the Las Vegas Convention Center during my three days at SEMA, I met two types of attendees: those who had properly prepared, and those who did not prepare much at all.

Those who properly prepared had made appointments with potential customers to meet with them in advance. They were proactive and productive. Those who did not prepare typically hung out at their booth hoping potential customers would visit them. They were reactive and relatively unproductive with their time.

It can be similar to your tire business. You meet a lot of strangers. I agree with Will Rogers who said, "A stranger is just a friend I haven't met yet." To be successful, you must turn these strangers into friends. In business terms, that means connecting with potential customers and turning these prospects into business.

As businesses typically pay many

thousands of dollars to exhibit at SEMA, they risk a lot if they are not successful accomplishing this. Observing many exhibitors staffs, it was clear that either that message was not communicated effectively, committed to properly, or both. People were not properly prepared to manage the interaction and, ultimately, secure a relationship when the opportunity presented itself.

In my training and consulting work with dozens of multi-location tire businesses, I can confirm that this same situation exists in the vast majority of cases. The business spends a substantial sum on advertising and marketing to get the phone to ring and increase store visits, but doesn't

have a real sales process in place, consequently squandering those opportunities as they occur.

Just like a professional sports team, the time to practice and prepare for the game is not at the game. Is your team proactively preparing to win before potential customers phone or visit the store? Or, are they reactive and "winging it" with those precious sales opportunities?

### 3. Stand Out From The Crowd

One of the biggest challenges for businesses participating in trade shows is standing out from the crowd and differentiating their business from the other exhibitors. With so many local competitors, this is also one of

the biggest challenges tire dealers and automotive service providers face.

At the SEMA Show, it seemed like every exhibitor has an exotic vehicle and/or models to make their booth stand out and to attract visitors. But in contrast, most tire/auto service businesses don't do very well standing out in their local markets.

As I wrote about in my September 2016 article "How To Fail," being unremarkable is hurting your business. When your business blends in, it creates indifference with the consumer and engagement with your brand declines dramatically. Conversely, just like at trade shows, when your business stands out in a positive manner, customer engagement with



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your brand improves considerably.

Of course, this doesn't mean you should park a Lamborghini out front or hire showgirls to parade around your shop. Just know that customers make value judgments of your business based on their senses – so everything they can see, feel and hear will positively or negatively impact their engagement with your brand.

Just like a high quality trade show experience, you not only want to make a great first impression that engages your audience, but also a lasting impression that customers remember once the interaction is complete.

#### 4. None of It Matters Without Customers

The amount of displays and products at the SEMA Show is truly mind-boggling. It's quite the sight to behold, but none of it matters without

customers. The same is true of your tire business. You can have the best facility, equipment and products but none of it matters without people to serve.

Taking that a step further, your business' success actually depends on two types of customers: internal and external. Your internal customers are your team members. As I wrote in my April 2016 article "Winning Customer Service," world-class service organizations require world-class employees – so to best position your business to succeed at the highest level, you must first hire people that fit your "world-class" model.

Your external customers are the people that call on and visit your business for their tire and vehicle service needs. Similar to the situation with "Always Be Learning," most tire business employees are so busy trying to manage daily activity they lose sight

of where all that business comes from – customers. When that customer focus is lacking or poor, customers end up feeling like just another transaction, a number. While you may still get the customer's business today (usually based on price), there is no emotional engagement that creates a lasting relationship and loyalty to your brand.

Be it on the show floor or in your shop's showroom, remember that everything begins and ends with your internal and external customers. **TR**

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