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## 7 Tips for Selling the Invisible

WANDA KENTON SMITH · JUN 24, 2021

Chris-Craft vice president of sales Gavan Hunt was emphatic.

“You’ve got to write about the invisible sale,” he told me. “Dealers don’t have inventory, and they’re all struggling to figure out how to sell what they don’t have.”

With inventory plummeting following a year of plentiful customer demand, dealers are scrambling for ways to generate revenue during the next 120 days or longer. As we all wait out supply-chain and manufacturer-production resets, here are seven marketing and sales tips to survive this season of drought.

## Embrace the paradigm shift

Outside the large-cruiser and yacht category, most purchases are prompted by available inventory. A paradigm shift in how the industry sells and in how customers buy is required to sell the invisible. If we want customers to buy what they can’t see, then it’s up to us to deliver a compelling story with tangible advantages and benefits.

There’s no better time than now to present this strategy to your sales team, as many team members are anxious about limited income-generating opportunities. If the salespeople don’t believe they can sell the invisible, they won’t. Anyone willing to shift gears has a real opportunity.

## Create a dream center

When you visit a home builder’s sales center, you’re usually awed by enticing floorplans, the ability to touch and feel fabrics, the choices of colors, and options for flooring, appliances, cabinets and more. The viewership experience is the gateway to the dream, even if there are no actual homes for the customer to inspect. This is a preselling experience.

“You’re not getting the boat unless it’s presold, so invest in preselling,” said Hunt, who suggests that retailers convert a chunk of empty showroom space into a design center. The conversion doesn’t need to be costly. Space only needs to be well organized and properly staged with attractive visual displays, comfortable seating and a welcoming environment.

“The space should be strategically designed to take orders,” he suggests. “Be sure to have your order forms, pricing, all the options displayed including pictures, canvas and anything that needs to be explained.”

# Create community

Author and speaker Christopher P. Ramey, president of The Home Trust International and of Affluent Insights, says the real mission is building community.

“You see your facility as a place for inventory, but consumers see it as a magical place where the shelves are full of objects and fantasies,” he says. “The objects may be gone, but the fantasies remain. Whatever space you have, rethink why it exists. Reimagine it as a venue for other purposes that serve the same clientele, so you can build a relationship. Anything that you’re not using because you haven’t got inventory is a wasted asset until you find a creative use for it.”

Ramey points to Starbucks, which sells coffee in a space that allows guests to congregate, unwind and work on their laptops. Total Wine has dedicated rooms for wine tastings and group events. Barnes & Noble offers chairs so guests can choose a book and stay all day. Yacht builder Ferretti Group opens its doors to select groups like Ramey’s for a mix of business meetings and entertainment.

“For those with offices on docks, you should be having events several nights a week,” he says. “There are many industries and dozens of companies to collaborate with like wine, liquor, cigars, aviation, restaurants, watches, cars, etc. Keeping prospects interested and engaged, and becoming part of your community, is key for success. The more comfortable they are with you today, the easier it is to transact with them when your inventory returns, which is particularly true if you want to presell custom boats.”

# Create a price advantage

Why should customers order boats versus purchasing inventory?

Hunt says there should be a specific discount extended for ordered boats versus stock inventory. Customers must clearly recognize this discount and advantage.

In addition, Hunt says, the customer must grasp that he’s only paying for what he truly wants, not for extras that may be tacked onto stock models.

Cultivate language to remind customers that this is “their” boat, built and designed to their exacting specifications, featuring their color choice, their equipment package and their power options, even if the wait for the boat will be longer.

# Overcome delivery objections

Customers are ready to buy now and go boating tomorrow. However, buyers today understand the current supply-demand scenario. If they’re still in the wings, there’s no time like now to engage in conversation regarding the benefits of preordering.

“Excuse the timeline and remind them they will have this boat for many years to come, that the best things come to those who wait,” Hunt says. “Why compromise your purchase when it’s actually only a few months in the big picture?”

He suggests displaying a large calendar in the design center that shows the boats on order with production slots. Such a display creates a sense of urgency.

Another idea to soften production delays? Offer a short-term boat club membership and rental vouchers. If the dealership doesn't feature these lines of business, then consider forging a partnership with club or rental providers in your area.

"Although it may be unusual for boat retailers, the affluent are — regardless of category — used to waiting on product," Hunt says. "Extended time and scarcity build consumer desire, and luxury brands focus on building desire for their brand.

"Your customers may be dismayed, but they won't be surprised," he adds. "Don't say things like, 'You should have...' Your goal is to make a friend with whom you're sharing an unfortunate experience. Fortunately, every consumer has learned with other product categories how to pivot when what they want isn't available. So first, learn to express empathy — that we're in this together."

## Work those leads

Because of inventory shortages, most dealers have chopped their marketing budgets or shifted funds to customer-retention activities. If you choose to sell the invisible, however, you must invest in targeted outreach. Success won't happen if your leads are unaware of new buying programs.

Consider every lead a lucrative opportunity to presell, and respond immediately to every inquiry. Don't slack and assume there's no urgency because inventory may be depleted. This is a prime time to present your presold sales message.

Also, gather qualified leads you've banked, and follow up to stimulate new dialog about the advantageous preordering options.

If you already have customers who purchased presold, then solicit and promote their testimonials. Their satisfaction with the process and outcome, coupled with savings realized, is highly credible. Produce videos and written testimonials, signage and collateral. Deploy with gusto.

Other cost-effective marketing tactics include custom e-blasts; direct mail and/or downloadable flyers; e-newsletter feature stories; a series of social media posts and/or digital ads with landing pages.

## Refresh your website

Customers review your website long before they engage, and then most show up in person to check inventory. Will they simply discover a dearth of inventory and then disappear?

To sell the invisible, your website home page must be transformed. Position your dream center up-front. Boldly promote your custom-ordering program, with key buyer benefits. Create exciting graphics. Share customer testimonials. Invite conversation.

In addition, Hunt recommends that the website have clear navigation paths to showcase great walk-around videos of the products you sell, along with images and enticing content to keep the dream alive.

Overall, dealers can either suffer, starve and risk losing sales professionals, or they can create smart new solutions such as selling the invisible and building community. "The worst thing you can do is nothing," Ramey says. "New eras demand a new way of seeing the world. This is the time to serve clients in new ways and far beyond the competition."

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