



The Raphael Report

**Observations on marketing,
advertising, sales and
promotions
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My Five Lessons In Humility

Feargal Quinn is the CEO of Superquinn supermarkets in Ireland. His innovative, creative and original concepts in advertising, marketing and promotion attract retailers around the world. They visit his stores to discover what he's doing that's new, different and . . . successful.

When asked how he was able to come up with so many ideas he said, "I learned very early in my business career that in order to be successful, I must practice five lessons in humility."

Here they are with our thoughts and comments on how these lessons work for your business.

1. "My customers know more than I do."

Airlines call them "passengers." Consultants call them "clients." Disney calls them "guests." Doctors call them "patients" (which is also a description of how long they have to wait when they arrive).

Another description could be "advisors." Remember the basic rule of selling is very simple - only one sentence. Here it is: "Find out what the customer wants and give it to him."

You can't do that unless you first "listen" to the customer. You can "listen" to them when they are in your store. You can "listen" to them with surveys or questionnaires. You can "listen" to them by tracking your inventory and seeing what sells and what doesn't.

I like this comment from a Canadian retailing executive who was asked, "What will your stores look like tomorrow?" His answer "Whatever our customers want them to be."

At a recent seminar I asked the audience of several hundred retailers how many had "focus groups" with their customers. This would be a cross section of about a dozen of their customers (age, sex, ethnicity). You set aside an hour a month to talk with them about what they would like your business offer them.

Number of retailers who raised their hands "yes," saying they did this: five. Out of several hundred.

To which we asked, "How do you know what your customers want unless you ask them?"

Listen to this phrase from the Old Testament: "In the multitude of counsellors there is safety."
– Proverbs 11:14

Because: Your customers know more than you do.

2. "My employees know more than I do."

You must not only educate but also empower your staff.

How many times have you visited a store with a complaint, exchange, or question only to be told, "I'll have to check with the manager on that."

Why?

What is more frustrating to a customer than having someone NOT answer her problem. And at once. Few retailers "empower" their staff to make decisions for the customer. I remember visiting a retailer who had this sign in his window: "No exchanges. No credit cards. No personal checks. No refunds." I wondered why he didn't add "No customers" to the list.

Remember the few who raised their hands a few paragraphs back that had customer focus groups. They were among the tiny minority who also answered "yes" when asked how many had weekly meetings with their staff.

Here's what you do: Talk about upcoming promotions. Show proofs of an upcoming direct mail offer before it is sent to the printer or newspaper.

I remember doing this exercise with our staff and hearing these actual questions:

"How come you left off the name of the store?"

"You didn't say what day the sale starts."

"I've counted ten misspelled words . . . so far."

How could that be? Didn't I review everything ahead of time?

Because: Your employees know more than you do.

3. "Neither my employees nor I can be creative all the time."

A marketing professor begins his course asking his students, "What does the word 'management' mean in five words or less?"

Here's the correct answer: "Getting results through other people."

This not only means your customers and your staff but almost everyone you meet, read or hear about doing something different and exciting.

What are other retailers doing successfully? You hear about them at seminars. You read about them in your trade magazines. How can you take these ideas and adopt and adapt them as your own?

Stew Leonard, owner of one of America's leading supermarkets has hundreds of annual requests to tour his store. He agrees - with one caveat: "You must bring me one idea I can use for myself." He knows "neither my employees nor I can be creative all the time."

4. What I knew yesterday is not enough for today.

People are naturally scared of change. It means disrupting your traditional ways of marketing, advertising and promotion. But the customer expects change. They are impressed when you capture their e-mail address and send them new information about their favorite brands. That which worked yesterday should be remembered and often used for future sales. But your customers are changing. They are using new methods of communication and knowledge-seeking. They like shopping with a business that has not only "been there, done that" in the past but one that also seeks out the new, the different, the cutting-edge.

Because . . . what you knew yesterday is not enough for today.

5. I'm not responding fast enough for my customer.

L. L. Bean delivers their orders by Federal Express.

The prevailing demand of today's customer is Quick. Fast. Hurry.

Practice these five lessons in humility. It will make you a better retailer and a better person. In the words of the 19th century writer and critic John Ruskin: "The first test of a truly great man is his humility."