

Farmers and Mechanics

What do farmers and mechanics have in common? The reason I'm asking is that I drove past the Farmers and Mechanics Bank last week. It struck me as a strange combination, but then I started thinking about the way the term "farmer" is used to describe salespeople. In that context, the sales universe is made up of hunters and farmers, but now I'm thinking there's a role for mechanics as well.

What Farmers Do

I've always had a problem with the farmer analogy. It's usually applied to a salesperson who services an established book of business, and the classic sales "farmer" is more about service than selling.

Compare that to what farmers-who-operate-farms do every day. The analogy breaks down pretty quickly. Real farming is about preparing the ground, planting the seeds, cultivating the plants and then harvesting them. Real farming is a highly proactive process. A classic farmer-type salesperson probably wouldn't be very successful on a farm. Of course, in my experience, most farmer-type salespeople aren't making their employers very happy either.

Why? Because businesses need new business. And while it's true a farmer can service a growing account, experience has shown that to be an undependable model. Just as frequently, it seems, farmers manage shrinking accounts. We might even say, broken accounts.

What Mechanics Do

That takes us to mechanics, who fix broken things. But that's not all. Mechanics also do a lot of "preventative" maintenance. Yes, you take your car to a mechanic when it's broken, but you probably do that less frequently – and end up spending less overall – if you follow the recommended service schedule. Change your oil before it stops lubricating. Rotate your tires before they break down from uneven wear. Get regular inspections to identify and resolve problems before they leave you sitting at the side of the road.

OK, then, what's the service schedule for your typical customer? Let's start here: *Never let 12 months go by without expressing your appreciation for that customer's business.* And please note, that applies to a "typical" customer. Anyone who is atypical – due to sales volume or any other factor – may require a shorter interval.

Here's something else I'd like you to consider. I've written in the past that too many companies abdicate "ownership" of their customers to their salespeople. The risk, of course, is that a salesperson could leave and take customers along. I believe in "defensive" sales management, one element of which is that owners develop and maintain relationships with their companies' most important customers. Can you think of a better way to anchor something like that than with an annual "Thank You" call or visit?

Now back to the salesperson's responsibilities. In addition to expressing appreciation, I think it's important that you establish an inspection schedule. That might be a self-evaluation. *Do we have any problems with Customer A? Have we met or exceeded their expectations since the last inspection? Is there anything I need to address in order to ensure our continued relationship?*

There is one problem with self-evaluation, though. You will be dealing not with facts, but with your own opinion. I've seen far too many situations where a salesperson thought everything was just fine, while the customer didn't.

Don't assume! If you're not 100% sure a relationship is strong, ask the only person who really can be — your customer!

If you do have damaged relationships, that's when a mechanic's skill becomes paramount. *What exactly is the problem? How did it happen? What will it take to fix it?* Mechanics are problem-solvers, and I'm sure you'll agree, a damaged relationship is a problem that needs to be solved.

A passive farmer might not do that, which leads to my final thoughts for today. Hunter or a farmer, you need to have a mechanic's mindset as well. And you're not a true farmer if you're simply servicing your accounts. Only if you're growing your customers!