

(A reprint of Judy Hoff's article published in the *American Bookseller Magazine*, December 1994.)

## 21 Tips From a Bookseller Who has Hand-sold for over 10 years

1. *Nothing endears your store to a customer more than if she thinks you're saving her money by giving her special attention.*  
Point out the bargains; mention that a book she's considering also comes in a cheaper edition; show her the sales table. Often she'll feel justified in buying something else — and more with the money she's saved.

2. *If your customers aren't in a hurry, introduce them to each other, especially if they have something in common.*  
Meeting a fellow teacher of the same grade from another district or someone who also likes to collect World War II books will provide a customer with an added reason to shop in your store.

3. *Chat with a friend after he's finished buying, not before.*  
Otherwise, he might suddenly glance at his watch and realize there's no time left to buy anything today.

4. *Sell books that are on your shelves.*  
Glance to check that a book is in stock before you begin raving about it to your customers. (This might seem obvious, but it's my biggest sales flaw.)

5. *Know when to shut up.*  
No matter how much you love the book, a rave from another customer will have much creditability than your review. Limit yourself to saying simply to the reviewer, "You have excellent taste." Or, you could offer her a job.

6. *Ask people to be sure to let you know how they like the book they're buying.*  
They'll be flattered, and even if they come back to tell you they hated it, they might spot something else they like better on the return visit.

7. *If a customer complains about the high cost of a book, agree with him, but then broaden the complaint to include the high cost of living in general.*  
For example: When someone complains about paying \$24.95 for "such a little book," sigh and start commiserating: "Isn't it incredible?" Then begin ranting about paying almost \$4 for a half-empty box of cereal that used to be under a dollar "just yesterday," buying a car "for what a house used to cost" and paying "29 cents for a three-cent stamp." You've agreed with the customer while demonstrating that books are no more inflationary than other items, and often a good deal less. [Ah, to think we thought those 1990's prices were high.]

8. *If an older person who obviously hasn't been around children's books for a number of years is suddenly faced with buying a child's present, steer him first to the books, he'll remember, such as Seuss, Scarry, C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, etc.*  
He won't feel he's in such alien territory.

9. *Also, for the same older person who hasn't been around children's books for years, be sure to quote prices as you go along to save him the embarrassment of sticker shock at the register.*  
This way you can greatly steer him toward paperbacks, if necessary.

10. *If you want to show a customer books that she hasn't requested, give her an easy out so she recognizes you don't expect her to buy them that day.*

For example, say, “Here’s a beautiful book on the same topic, which I just have to share with you. You might want to remember it for a future present.” You’ve lifted the pressure from her so that if she’s at all interested, she can concentrate fully on the book without worrying you’ll expect her to buy it if she so much as glances at it.

11. *When people demand, “Tell me a good book to read,” ask what books they’ve enjoyed reading lately.*

People’s notions of good books range from books by Nobel Prize winners to the latest serial killer (fiction or non-fiction).

12. *Don’t waste too much time standing on your head trying to please negative or abrupt people.*

Selling is a two-way street. The customer has to be half-way receptive as well.

If he wants to stalk out of your store, don’t be upset if you know you’ve done your best to treat him politely. Remember that your other customers don’t like to be surrounded by grouchy people either.

13. *Recognize, however, if you do connect with a rude or negative person, you’ve probably made a lifelong customer, since he will probably find your friendliness unique.*

14. *Be specific.*

If you don’t have a book in stock, don’t just ask, “Would you like me to order it?” That conjures up visions of a three-month wait. Inquire instead, “Would you like me to order it to come in by this Friday?”

15. *If a customer is buying a gift for someone and claims she has no idea what that person would like, try to determine what kind of person she is buying for.*

Old? Young? A finicky person? Someone young at heart? Republican? Democrat? Lover? Friend? Business acquaintance? Ex-husband’s first wife? Is he or she someone your customer would really like to impress, where money is no object if it’s the right gift, or someone she’s just obligated to go through the motions for and wants to waste as little time and money as possible?

Naturally, you can’t ask most of these questions directly, but you can begin to build a picture of the person in your mind as you listen carefully to the customer’s responses when you ask such mild questions as “Would this be for an older person?” or “Do you think she would enjoy a humor books such as the latest Erma Bombeck?”

16. *If she still seems confused, suggest a gift certificate.*

Stress how much your book-loving customers have said longingly that they wish someone would give them a gift certificate.

17. *If you haven’t read a book, admit it.*

Don’t fake it. You can say, of course — if it’s true — that “several customers have told me they loved it.” Or “I read a great review about this.”

18. *Also, be honest about your dislike of a book.*

If you’re the owner, people will trust you for future recommendations. However, if you’re an employee, try to tone down your violent dislikes a bit, otherwise you may sound disloyal, which customers, if they like the store, will resent.

19. *By accepting graciously that “no” means no, you can help customers feel comfortable shopping in your store.*

They will want to come back and next time might find something.

20. *On the other hand, recognize when a customer is dying to be talked into a purchase.*

If she says, “No, I shouldn’t” and *makes no move to leave*, she obviously craves the book and is hoping you’ll come up with a halfway legitimate reason to justify her spending the money on it.

21. *Oblige her*