

“Watch Your Tone, Scotty!”

It's Not What You Say; It's How You Say It

By Scott O'Neill



When I was a kid, my aunt used to bark at me, “Watch your tone, Scotty!” I didn’t like the nagging, but my aunt taught me an important lesson.

The tone we deliver when talking with our clients and colleagues can often determine the direction of that discussion. A harsh tone can quickly lose a customer, but a tone of kindness invites further discussion.

Take the case of Peter K., who needed a garage door. His wife, Gretchen, wanted the door “yesterday” because she had recently had a baby. I’m not sure how the baby affected their urgent need of a garage door, but, hey, you don’t argue with them at this point.

Avoiding the Quick and Dirty

As is often the case, the garage door was an important visual factor on the house, and that merited some discussion and ideas. I know that *some* salespeople use the quick-and-dirty approach of just selling customers “whatever you think you want.” But we all know that’s shorting both the client and your own company.

Peter and Gretchen had been a victim of the quick-and-dirty approach before. About five years earlier, a decking guy had burned

the couple. They had wanted the job done swiftly because the deck was going to be off the bedroom where their firstborn, Meagan, would sleep.

So they hired an unlicensed contractor who could put together

the deck cheaply and quickly. The term “put together” is accurate because the deck was poorly engineered. It soon failed and rotted the house siding. Peter and Gretchen had to completely replace the deck and spent twice the original amount to hire the right contractor.

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Fool Me Twice, Shame on Me

But on the garage door job, Gretchen wanted action, so I tried to deliver. I asked her to send me photos of the front of the garage and house. I then took her through our website to go over ideas and concepts. But I was stunned when she abruptly said, “Can we hurry this up?”

I had listened, addressed her ideas, and was swift to adapt. Yet she *still* bluntly and rudely interrupted me and told me to get a move on.

In that moment, I could hear my aunt: “*Watch your tone, Scotty.*”

Turned by a Tone

I replied to Gretchen, “Absolutely. Would you prefer we continue this later when you have more time?” I was careful to use a totally casual, non-offended *tone*.

Gretchen paused for a second and then said, “You know, that was rude of me. I’m sorry; I’m just stressed and have tons of stuff to do.”

I didn’t challenge her or respond abruptly like she had. That makes a big difference, and I’ve seen it work many times. I admit that I learned that lesson the hard way early on in my career when I was just a novice. But, as my aunt could have predicted, my tone of kindness worked. The result: I sold them a beautiful door that was perfect for their house.

Meanwhile, Back at the Office

Just the other day, my associate was working with a client on the phone, and I detected a bit of a sharp tone. She said to the client, “I’m sorry, but I didn’t know that expletives were necessary to explain your garage door issue.”

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There was a long pause. And then I heard her respond back to the client, “No problem, I understand your frustration. We all have those types of days.”

It turns out that the client had just lost a loved one in a tragic accident and was transferring anger and sadness to my associate. Later, they called back to thank her for having patience with their attitude. It was her *tone* that had calmed the discussion and helped to keep a customer.

We can learn some powerful lessons in this business. Even though we’re “just” selling garage doors, the process can make us better salespeople and better people, too. ■

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