

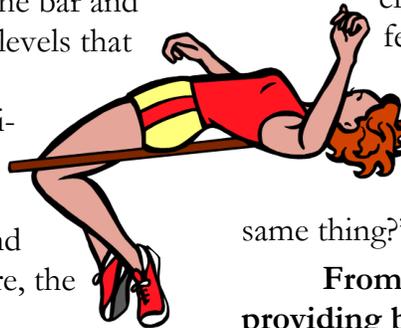
The Bar Keeps Rising for Salespeople



Professional Selling

The bar keeps rising for agri-sellers

Every time the Olympics come around, viewers are amazed how the athletes keep raising the bar and achieve performance levels that a few years ago were thought to be impossible. When it comes to selling in an increasingly complex and competitive agriculture, the bar is also rising.



According to Gary Heckman, VP of Sales and Marketing, Mechanicsburg, PA., “One of the things that is driving the bar upward is the fact everyday that goes by, there are fewer farms out there. The rate of reduction of competition is nowhere near at the same level. We can no longer just be out there just selling our products and services. We have to be consultants and business partners.”

In their article on Strategic Selling in the February 2000 issue of *Agri-Marketing Magazine*, authors David Downey, Mike Jackson and Marilyn Holschuh comment, “Yes, competition is also raising the bar. Every time a company introduces a new idea, a more efficient method, or a more aggressive program, everyone else scurries to adopt a similar strategy or face the prospect of falling behind.

“Moreover, business experiences

outside agriculture can increase customers’ expectations. As farm buyers experience highly effective programs and services outside agriculture, they naturally ask themselves, ‘Why can’t my supplier do the same thing?’ ”

From ‘selling stuff’ to providing business solutions.

Downey, Jackson and Holschuh continue, “The introduction of new technologies and business systems is increasing the complexity of agriculture. It’s clear the role of the agricultural salesperson is changing.

“Historically, the salesperson’s role has been to ‘sell stuff.’ But, this role is rapidly shifting to one of bringing total business solutions to the customer. Today, value goes much farther than the value provided by the product itself.”

Don Bennink of North Florida Holsteins, Bell, Fla., tells us how his expectations of agri-salespeople have changed. “We want to deal with those folks who come in and ask, ‘What can I do to help this fellow make his operation more profitable and more stable? What are the things that will make this farm a better business?’”

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Bennink continues, “The salesperson’s primary focus needs to be on helping the farm’s bottom line. Profit for the farm has to be the key thought of the salesperson when they come in.”

Pete Gelber, Alliance Dairy, also of Bell, Fla., adds, “Salespeople who are more economically astute will do bet-



ter here. We are very economically minded on this farm. We don’t want any frills. We just want the bottom line.”

Bennink concludes, “Don’t worry about what you are going to sell to the farm. The dollars will come later. Focusing on what ‘you’ want is very short-sighted and does not make for long-term relationships.”

What’s driving the rise in expectations?

It’s clear customer expectations are rising. Let’s hear from a few producers as they comment on the forces driving agriculture.

Larger farms with a focus on efficiency and profit.

Hank Wagner, Oconto Falls, Wisc., comments on the pressures for farms to become larger and more efficient. “We love farming. We love agriculture. We love living in a rural com-



munity. However, we don’t love it enough so we’re willing to work for nothing or do it seven days a week. We need to have time off and we need to have profit.”

Tom Thompson, Stotz Dairy, Buckeye, Ariz., agrees.

He says, “In order to make a farm work today, we need to have more income producing assets to support our family and our employees’ families in the lifestyle they would like to have.”

For those who serve producers and growers in this economic climate, it’s easy to see why larger farms are demanding more from the salespeople who serve them. Larger farms will continually ‘raise the bar’ and push Field Marketers to become highly-trained and skilled professionals who can serve their more diverse needs.

Increased complexity brought on by new technologies. George Allen, Dairy Producer from Schaghticoke, N.Y. says, “If you look on a real dollar basis, the cost price squeeze is tighter today than it was thirty years ago.

“Fortunately, we’ve had some technological improvements that have been able to mitigate that squeeze somewhat. Most of those technologies, however, are expensive.

For this reason, we have to put them across enough cows to make it cost effective. Thus, use of new technologies and larger farms go hand in hand.”

Because of the economic pressures driving farm owners to implement these technologies, it’s understandable they will expect salespeople to be able to answer questions and work with them through full implementation.

Buyers see technically competent salespeople as key to helping them realize the full economic value of their investment in the technology.

Competition is fierce! Earlier, we mentioned the impact of fewer farms and increased competition. These factors are causing buyer expectations to rise. Ed Silba, Asheville, N.C., tells us, “We can no longer just go onto a farm talking about the product we have to sell. We need to bring ideas that will solve problems and help buyers improve their bottom line.”