

MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL...

Are you who you think you are? What does the customer *really* see, hear and even smell when they come into your place of business? Don't overlook the details. They can make or break the sale and the long term relationship you want to build with your customers.

by Eric Bodley

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Image is everything. Or so the saying goes. And your customers' opinion of your company image can be one of the most powerful assets or greatest liabilities that you can have. My consulting business takes me into literally dozens of consumer electronics stores and custom installation companies each year and it amazes me even though most companies want to project a professional image, they overlook some of the most fundamental and essential details in creating a great corporate image.

Big screen televisions, camcorders, high-end audio systems, multi-room audio & video, and the automated home are only a few of the high ticket items that a consumer can spend money on today. Your customers have a choice. Will they buy that new home theater, or take a family vacation? Will they install a whole house music system, or opt for the upgraded kitchen and pool? Image can be everything (or nothing) when it comes to swaying the customer to spend money on the products and services you sell.

What I've put together here is an A to Z (or rather a front to back) checklist for you and your people to review to work toward projecting the most professional image in your marketplace.

Your Storefront

Many owners, managers and their employees park in the rear or off to the side of the building to allow customers to park in front. But this also means that they may go into a side or rear entrance and never see what the customers see as they approach the building.

Come to work early, park your car away from the building, go out to the driveway and look at your place of business. What is it telling you? Is it clean, friendly and inviting? Does it need painting? Does it look like you would want to spend \$10,000 of your hard earned money inside?

Walk to the front door. Look at everything. (Your customers do.) Are there little piles of papers and cigarette butts along the curb? Do you sweep your parking lot carefully and daily if need be? (A note: if you are nearby a fast food restaurant and their wrappers, debris, etc. blows into your lot, approach the manager. Most national chains have a mandate to not be the litter-bug, and they will patrol your parking lot on a regular basis to pick up their stuff.)

Look at the windows. Are they clean? Are you still sporting window promotions from a month ago?

Let's Go Inside

Walk in and stop right at the door. Look around. Is it easy to see

"into" your store? Remember that first timer's in your store don't know where to go first. Does your store layout "invite" them to walk in, or intimidate them?

Bring a camera with you and take pictures of your store displays. It's amazing what our eyes will glance over that can't hide from the camera. Wires showing. Confusing, unrelated or just plain too much point-of-purchase stuff. Crooked pictures. Holes where demo products have been sold or moved. (Some customers may think they missed out on a good deal.)

If you offer custom installation and you have in-wall speakers, volume controls and keypads mounted in-wall, make sure they're not smudged or crooked, that the wallplate colors match, and that they don't have missing grilles or knobs. I think you're better off NOT displaying these items if they don't look perfect in the wall. Why? As you're presenting these items as your recommendation, the customer might be thinking "Is that's the way they'll look after they install them in my home?" Get the point?

Your showroom has to be clean, comfortable, and functional. If your sales associates have trouble making it work, the customer might think they will never get it to work in their home.

Drive by at night too. Make sure your signs are fully lighted and that you reset the timers for daylight savings time.

Last, but not least, visit the restroom. Make sure they look (and smell) good. If you can, have a separate bathroom for employees and customers, and keep the customers bathroom spotless. One dealer I saw recently had wallpapered and appointed their customer bathroom as nicely as most home bathrooms, complete with cloth towels!

Your Staff

From the first impression your sales associates make, to the last impression your installers make, you never get a second chance to make a good impression. Look at your staff. Do you have guidelines for how they dress? If you have a retail showroom, can you tell the sales associates from the customers? Do you look like a team? Do your installers carry an extra shirt for the later part of the day when they've been in an attic or two?

For those who don't wear a shirt and tie or dress, have them wear shirts and blouses with your company logo on them. If you get polo type shirts from a manufacturer, embroider your company name on the sleeve. It's actually not that expensive and it helps to create a consistent corporate identity.

Listen to your staff as they work with your customers. Have either you or one of your managers don an installer's shirt and pants and accompany your sales associates on one of their sales calls. Have them introduce you as an installer that they brought along for technical support. Sit quietly, don't interrupt, and listen intently

to the discussion. After the sales associate gets on a roll, you'll be amazed at what you can observe to help them in future calls. What you don't know here can hurt you.

Do you offer a formal sales training course for all of your sales associates? Very few companies can afford to have a full time sales trainer and unfortunately, resort to the oldest form of training: apprenticeship. Make sure you inspect what you expect. Training your people formally is the best investment you can make in presenting a consistently professional image to your customers.

Your Vehicles

More people will see your delivery and installation vehicles than will ever walk into your place of business. What do they look like? Do they get washed and polished regularly? Is your signage crisp and clean? Is your phone number easy to read at 55 mph? Make sure to fix any dents and scratches as soon as you can. The impression you want to give is that you mean business.

Your Proposal

Look at the proposals your people give to your customers. Are they truly a document worth reading, or are they a dressed up price list? Many of the best sales presentations have the customer leaving excited and inspired to "think it over," only to have them return in a foul mood with a preoccupation of price negotiation. It shouldn't come as a surprise if your proposal is just a dressed up list of model numbers and prices. Let's face it, the customer might just think that it's a homework assignment - is the message "Go out and check these prices and get back with me," or is

it "Read this and you'll get just as excited about owning this as you were when I was with you!"

Your proposals should include a description of what the system will do in each room and area of their home. Make sure you clearly mention where you'll be incorporating any equipment that they already own into the system. Remember, even though their old \$1,000 two-channel receiver isn't worth five-bucks today, it's still "on the books" mentally to them for \$1,000. You'll be a hero to some customers if you can find a way to use it without compromising your design.

With today's color printers so affordable, are you missing a chance to really stand out from the crowd? Use a binding machine that allows the proposal to lie flat on the table and not close up. Make your proposal an extension of your professional image.

Follow Up, Follow Up, Follow-Up

Here's some news. I was in the dentist's chair the other day and read this on the wall: "You don't have to floss all your teeth. Just the ones you want to keep." Clever. How about this twist: "You don't have to follow-up with all your customers, just the ones you want to keep." There just isn't a better way to break the mirror and eventually lose a customer to a competitor, than to put a ton of effort into the initial sale, only to let the customer drift away with your lack of attention to their future needs.

Look at it this way: "Don't close a sale - Open a relationship!" And go beyond the follow-up card. I met a sales associate recently who was mailing DVD literature to his customers with a hand written

post-it note attached saying "Thought you might find this interesting. Stop by the store when you're in the area. We'll take it for a test drive." He signed only his first name. The literature was stamped with the store name on the back. He called this technique "keeping the pot simmering." Even if they didn't come in, he got them to think about him again as their "friend in the business."

Your Corporate Culture

If you and your people start looking in the mirror and acting upon what you see, you will not only find your company a better place to work, your customers will find it a better place to buy. A successful corporate culture is not

some sort of black magic. It's all of the above and then some. Anyone can sell boxes. Your company should be selling itself first, and the products second. It sends a cultural message to your team-- "This is what we value above all, this is what makes us different."

Confronted by today's unprecedented customer expectations of perfect quality, errorless service, and tailored-to-their-needs relationships, every person on your team is making key judgment calls--whether when installing a product in the wall or handling a customer's complaint.

Whole companies are only as strong as their weakest links. Employees on the floor, in the

field and in the office must make good choices on the fly, without being told how. They need help, and it can't come from supervisors. They need a set of overarching beliefs that serve as powerful guides for everyday action. They need a culture. What better way to start than to pay attention to minute particulars that make the customer come back for more because you set the example by paying attention to the details.

Eric Bodley has more than twenty-five years experience in the consumer electronics industry. His firm Bodley & Associates has consulted with dozens of retail and custom installation companies on sales, management, and operational issues. In addition, Bodley is President and Founder of Home Entertainment Design, a residential custom electronics design and installation company located in Bonita Springs, Florida. A CEDIA Past President, Bodley is a guest speaker and course lecturer at many industry events for the Consumer Electronics Manufacturers Association (CEMA), the Professional Audio/Video Retailers Association (PARA), American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) and CEDIA.

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