

Approaching the customer

Acknowledging the customer
Initial contact



Inside retail

. . . This workbook will help build your confidence when approaching customers and will give you ideas on how to start the conversation.

Communicating effectively with your customers is the key to getting the information you need to make that sale and achieve your sales target...

Introduction

Making initial contact with customers is one of the most important parts of your job – but it can also be one of the hardest parts.

Starting a conversation with a complete stranger can be nerve-racking and unpredictable. Quite often, during the early part of your training, you are being watched by your manager or colleagues too, to make sure that you are doing it right, and this can be quite embarrassing.

This workbook will help build your confidence when approaching customers and will give you ideas on how to start the conversation.

Communicating effectively with your customers is the key to getting the information you need to make that sale and achieve your sales target.

Acknowledging the customer

When a customer first walks through the door of your store, they want to feel comfortable and relaxed. All too often, though, customers feel under pressure to buy or are totally ignored.

The pressurised customer

How do you feel when you walk into a store and the sales assistant ‘pounces’ on you with:

‘Do you need any help?’

The chances are you simply use the classic reply:

‘No thanks, I’m just looking.’

You will probably say this even if you want to know how much the jumper in the window costs or whether they have it in your size.

We all react this way when we feel pressurised into buying.

Jumping at the customer as soon as they come into your store with a boring standard question will not get you anywhere in your attempt to find out what they really want.

The ignored customer

How do you feel when you enter a store and nobody even notices that you are there? You have a question to ask, but the sales person is busy talking to another customer or even their colleague!

We all lead busy lives and don’t want to waste time waiting to be served. If nobody seems interested in us, we simply walk away.

Overcoming these problems and talking – or communicating – with your customers is the first step to a sale.



Initial contact

When customers walk in to your store, they may have seen something in the window they want to look at or they may just want to browse.

They are usually looking at the goods with their backs towards you.

How to start the conversation

Don't

- Call across from behind the sales counter: 'Do you need any help?'
- Ignore the customer until they turn to face you.
- Continue your conversation with a colleague.

Do

- Approach the customer and ask if you can assist them.
- Approach the customer – sideways on. (Don't creep up behind or you'll frighten the life out of them!)
- Pick up on some clues to help you decide on a question to ask.

Top tip

... You may like to take an item with you to make it look as if you are going to restock the shelves. While you are tidying the display, you can easily start a conversation. This may help you by giving you a 'prop' to hold on to and will make the initial approach less awkward...



Think of the clues you can get by just observing different types of customers and the products they are looking at. For example:

- 🔍 Are they a couple looking at furniture? Perhaps they are equipping a new home?
- 🔍 Is the person a parent with a child or children looking at bikes – possibly buying a birthday present?
- 🔍 Are they looking at a particular type of oven? Is cost important or do they want a specific model?
- 🔍 Are they senior citizens – looking for information and advice on new technology?
- 🔍 Are they a group of young people looking at clothes – perhaps looking for the latest fashions?

Write down two or three more examples of visual clues your customers can give you that might help you start a conversation with them when you approach them.



The visual clues are just the start. As you approach the customers, you may hear them say something that will give you a clue about what they are looking for. **For example, you overhear them say:**

'The make isn't important, but I am not spending more than £300.'

You approach the customer and say:

'Hello, we have some special deals on washing machines today. What spin speed do you want?'





Write down some of the things you overhear customers saying to each other when browsing in the store. Then think of the type of question you could use to make initial contact.

Tip: Try to ask **open questions** (questions that cannot be answered with a simple 'Yes' or 'No').

What customers say	Questions I could ask



Top tip

... It doesn't matter if the customers are not looking for the product you thought they would be interested in – what matters is that you listen to their reply to your initial question...

Never assume!

Picking up on the clues, both visual and verbal, takes a bit of practice and sometimes the clues can be misleading.

Never assume that just because someone is looking at the cheapest TV they want that one. They may want to understand what features the TVs have before buying an expensive model.

Never assume that a woman surrounded by children and bags of shopping is looking for a family item. She may be looking for an expensive treat for herself.

The key is to use the clues carefully.

It doesn't matter if the customers are not looking for the product you thought they would be interested in – what matters is that you listen to their reply to your initial question.

For example: You see a customer looking at a bottle of perfume. You approach her and ask:

'Are you looking for a fragrance for yourself or as a gift?'

She replies:

'No, actually I was interested in an aftershave for my husband, but I saw this on offer and wanted to test it.'

And you have made contact!

You can then let that customer test the sample and perhaps buy it, and go on to help her choose an aftershave for her husband.

Talking to people is not difficult if:

- you **look** for clues
- you **listen** for clues
- you ask an **opening question** that you think 'suits' that customer
- you **listen** to their reply, and **keep listening**.



Think of six things you could say to open a conversation.

Write them down and discuss them with your colleagues. Ask your colleagues what works well for them and if they have any tips on talking to different types of customers.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6



Try out your opening lines using the visual and verbal clues, and then make some notes to answer these questions.

- What happened?
- What opening questions did you use and why?
- What was the customer's response?
- Would you do it differently next time? If so, how?
- Do you need to practise it again?

Links to qualifications

This workbook will help with the following parts of your qualifications:

NVQ units in Retail Operations

C.3 Help customers to choose products

C.4 Maximise product sales

C.5 Provide information and advice to customers

C.6 Demonstrate products to customers

Key skills

Communication: C2.1a

Skills for Life

Adult literacy level 2:

- Speaking and listening

