

## Keep Customers Concentrat

Keeping Customers From Concentrating on Cost

Build value to diminish the importance of price.

By Denise Keller

You have carefully crafted the perfect price for each gown on your sales floor. Presumably, these prices are based on very fair and reasonable factors, such as how much you paid for the dress at market, its designer and the quality of fabrics and materials used.

Unfortunately, those factors aren't always immediately obvious to a bride who walks into your store. If she were to shop based on price alone without understanding the value she is receiving, she may feel confused, chafed or even cheated.

Professional speaker, best-selling author and business coach Tim Connor, who is based in Charlotte, N.C., says a price will always seem too high to consumers if the product isn't something they really want. This makes it absolutely critical to keep your customer's focus off price until she has amassed enough reasons to deeply desire a gown.

To get you started, VOWS: offers the following list of eight strategies designed to help you build value and keep your customers' eyes from zeroing in on the price tag.

### Strategy 1:

#### Take Your Mind Off It

Oftentimes, salespeople are more concerned about price than their customers because they mistakenly believe price is the biggest influence in a customer's decision to buy. But what consumers really want is value, according to Tom Richard, a sales trainer and syndicated sales columnist in Waterville, Ohio.

Richard says that when you stop focusing on price, your customers will be able to follow suit. To reach this point, you and your consultants need to honestly believe that your product is worth the asking price. Understanding the factors used to determine a gown's price can help your staff see the fairness of your store's pricing structure. And once price is no longer pressing on their minds, your consultants can instead concentrate on building the gown's value and helping the bride understand how it will meet her needs.

### Strategy 2:

#### Guide Her with Your Greeting

The manner in which you greet your customers may actually affect at what point in the sales process they vocalize their price concerns. Steer clear of asking, "May I help you?"

When approached with this question, many customers don't know how to respond and end up asking about price. Instead, simply say, "Welcome," a phrase Richard says is the most underappreciated one in retail. In bridal, you can follow that up with something like, "You have a special day coming up?" This will prompt a bride to begin talking about and focusing on her wedding rather than the price of a gown.

You may also consider having a consultant sit down with each bride-to-be and engage her in conversation. The time spent together can be brief but valuable. If necessary, ask questions such as, "What's the look you're going for on your special day?" But, most importantly, listen.

"Your potential customer will tell you what you need to tell her to sell her," Connor says.

### Strategy 3:

#### Engage Her Emotions

It's no secret that most brides have been dreaming about their weddings since they were little girls. So the mere thought of walking down the aisle stirs up emotions in almost every bride-to-be. When gown shopping then, she is looking for more than material and stitches. She is about to make the most emotional purchase of her life. Richard says the more emotional a purchase is, the less relevant price should be.

Use that to your advantage by focusing on the emotional aspect of gown shopping. Some consultants remind customers of the importance of their wedding with phrases such as, "You only

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get married once" or "Pictures are forever."

Mandi Crosslin, a bridal consultant at Kimberly's Prom and Bridal in Tahlequah, Okla., assures brides, "Your wedding day is the one day it is okay to go overboard."

So keep in mind all purchases are made with emotions and justified with logic. When a bride falls in love with a gown, she has determined she wants the dress. But, Richard says, your customer may look to you to help her justify what she wants. By all means, help her!

### Strategy 4:

#### Put Budget on the Back Burner

While it may seem important to ask a bride about her gown budget during your initial interaction, the sooner price comes up, the more of a focal point it becomes.

"We never ask the budget," says Lori Allen, President of Bridals by Lori in Atlanta. "We have had many brides say they don't want to spend over a certain dollar amount and spend double or triple that. When they find the gown and are educated on the designer, price becomes less of an issue."

Of course, the more your consultants know about the samples in your shop, the better they can provide that education to their customers.

"A consultant who is knowledgeable gains respect from the customer," Allen says. "Our consultants know fabrics, designer backgrounds, styling, etcetera before we ever allow them to wait on one of our valuable customers."

Allen believes you can create value through knowledge.

"Price tags become a less important feature after thoroughly explaining everything to the customer," she says.

### Strategy 5:

#### Sell Benefits, Not Features

While selling benefits rather than features is far from a groundbreaking sales strategy, it is not something all of you do.

In fact, Connor says, "I think the biggest mistake people make when selling is to spend too much time talking about the product instead of about what the product will do for the customer."

But remember that rattling off a gown's features such as the fabric, embellishments and train length does little to entice a bride to buy. She is more interested in learning how those features will help her achieve her dream wedding. For example, telling a bride that a gown is made of silk would merely provide her with information. On the other hand, describing to her how much cooler she will feel during her outdoor August ceremony wearing a gown made of a lightweight, natural fiber like silk will help her to see the gown's value.

"Everybody should spend more on a wedding dress than they planned to spend," Connor says. Furthermore, if your customers are not spending more than they planned, your consultants are only selling dresses while overlooking opportunities to convert the dresses' mundane features into meaningful benefits.

To determine if your staff has room for improvement in this area, think about the types of statements you or your consultants make about the gowns in your store. If a bride can respond with "So what?" you are pointing out the gown's features. Instead, focus on illustrating the potential benefit for the bride, which is, ultimately, her dream wedding.

### Strategy 6:

#### Be a Storyteller

Your past customers often provide you with one of the most effective ways to build a gown's value with new customers. Former brides provide you with stories that Richard says enable you to effectively communicate with your customer without directly lecturing her or telling her she is wrong.

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For example, let's say your customer is debating between two dresses. She prefers the look and feel of gown A, but is also drawn to the slightly lower price of gown B. If you were to tell her to bend her budget and buy gown A, she may be led to believe that you are just trying to make the bigger sale.

As an alternative, share a story about how glad a recent customer was that she chose the gown she really wanted and how she loved hearing the compliments from wedding guests about how happy and beautiful she looked on her special day. This technique can help your current customer visualize her own wedding day and see the value of the gowns rather than their price tags.

### Strategy 7:

#### Set Yourself Apart

Most of you feel that the wedding gown is only part of what a bride is purchasing.

"We believe the value of what brides will get here will go beyond the price of the dress," says Kohleen Liddell, manager of The Hope Chest Bridal & Tux Shoppe in Ham Lake, Minn.

This full-service bridal store provides customers with individualized appointments and an extensive purchase rewards program, which includes perks ranging from savings on accessories to a free vacation.

Whether you offer a generous guarantee, superior service or affordable alterations, a bride receives certain value-added extras from your store that may not be available from other retailers. You don't want to badmouth the competition, but you do want your customer to know what she is getting for her money. If she fully understands the value of doing business at your store, she will see the gowns' prices as bargains.

### Strategy 8:

#### Part Ways with Price Tags

Some shops have found that one of the best ways to take the focus off a gown's price is to eliminate tags altogether. Of course, before deciding to go this route, make sure you check with the designer and review any potentially applicable state laws to avoid legal trouble.

If you're in the clear, opting to not attach a price tag to your store's samples can allow consultants more time to build value before addressing price and give shoppers a chance to find the dress of their dreams without worrying about what it will cost them.

Saundra Toor, owner of Tour of Elegance Bridal & Formal Wear in San Diego, began using this approach when she opened her store five years ago.

"From the beginning, I felt that it was important to help the bride get the gown she wanted without price being an issue," Toor says.

Like most retailers that do not price gowns, Toor does ask brides for a budget with which to work. She then pulls gowns that fit into that price range.

"I think this way of doing business allows a girl to look at more gowns because of what she loves, not because of what the price tag says."

Keep in mind that omitting price tags will have different effects on different customers. While some shoppers will allow themselves to fall in love with a dress price unseen, others may assume that if you don't want them to see the price of a gown, it must be ridiculously expensive. This latter category of customers may be so annoyed or intimidated by you withholding this information from them that they won't buy anything from your store.

So when a bride-to-be does ask the price of a gown, it is generally best to answer in a straightforward manner. After all, she may just be asking an innocent question. Furthermore, rambling on in an attempt to defend the price may give her the impression that the gown is overpriced.

However, quickly quoting a price on request is key to building a customer's trust and confidence in you. So if you choose not to use tags, Connor says it's crucial to memorize prices. To get started and help newer consultants get up to speed, keep most of your gowns at common

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prices, organize your samples by price range, or use a system of color-coded tags or hangers.

Keep in mind that what works for one shop may not work for another. These suggestions are meant to serve as food for thought, so you must decide what is best for your business, your consultants and your customers.

As a service-oriented bridal business, you have a distinct advantage when it comes to building value and diminishing the importance of price. Not only can you help a bride find what she's looking for, but you can do it in a way that lets her know she's important to you as a customer and as a person. On that, your customers can put no price.

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