




WHAT CUSTOMERS WANT IN A SALESPERSON

By Richard Ries

 Ryan Woodard's story shows that strength of character is what customers want in their salesperson, whether they're customers for washing machines or wheel loaders.

You're chatting with some folks at your equipment dealer. It's a big company. Seventeen locations in seven states. One of them says to you, "We're looking for a new sales rep. As a customer, what do you think is important in an equipment salesperson? What would you say are the three most important attributes of the person who's going to be calling on you?"

What would be on your list? A degree in economics? A background in retail sales of consumer electronics, appliances and furniture? Zero experience in any aspect of construction? None seems likely to make the list, yet all apply to Ryan Woodard, territory sales manager with RECO Equipment in Indianapolis. But that can't be why his customers invite him to golf outings and company picnics.

Maybe that list of qualifications needs to be adjusted.

Transition

Armed with a bachelor of science from the University of Kansas, his home state, Ryan Woodard spent five years working his way through the ranks of electronics and appliance retailer H.H. Gregg in Indiana. He spent time as a regional trainer, going store-to-store to teach employees how to operate the company's computerized sales register. He ascended to general manager of the store in Kokomo, Indiana. There were signs the company was faltering, but Ryan was doing okay. "I was young, getting nice bonuses, making good money. I was a good soldier, stayed in my lane and kept making money. But eventually the writing was on the wall. I could see there wasn't any upward

mobility for me and that someday there might not be a job for me to go to anywhere inside H.H. Gregg, so I started looking for different employment."

His schedule at H.H. Gregg had him working weekends, but that gave him two days off during the week. He made sure he had at least one interview each day he was off. "Sometimes it didn't feel like I had a day off because from 8 in the morning to 3 in the afternoon I was doing two or three job interviews a day."

Ryan was disappointed with many of those interviews. "It felt like they were trying to sell me on coming to work for them more than me selling them on why I was the right fit for the job." It was different when he interviewed with Chad Gilman, director of sales at RECO. "We hit it off great, ended up talking for about three hours. It was a lot longer interview than I think either of us expected."

The next week Ryan got a call asking him to come to RECO's offices in Cranberry Township, Penns., north of Pittsburgh, for a second interview. "I thought man, that's a long drive with no guarantee of a job. What the heck. Let's just do it." The interview went well. Ryan was driving home to Indiana, still in the middle of Ohio, when he got the call offering him the position.

Ryan left H.H. Gregg March 1, 2016. The company ceased operations on May 25, 2017. The brand has new owners that promise a re-launch of some type at some point. They'll have to make their way without Ryan Woodard. He's happy at RECO. "Best career move I ever made in my life," he says.

Same skills benefiting new customers

The same skills that boosted Ryan up the ladder at H.H. Gregg serve him well at RECO. Among those essential skills are patience and persistence, which came to the forefront when Beaver Gravel Company was thinking of buying a second 9527 loader. "In working with them I heard, 'Not ready, not ready' quite a bit. But I wanted them to take all the time they needed to make a sound purchase decision. I wanted them to feel at ease. It was important they have a positive experience with positive outcomes and feel confident that we were taking good care of them."

In sales, there are order takers, the type of salespeople who check in occasionally, come by infrequently, and if you tell them you need something, they'll get it for you. A really good salesperson does much more. A really good salesperson is warm and open, taking a genuine interest in and playing an active role in customers' success stories.

Chris Beaver, co-owner, president and CEO of Beaver Gravel, says Ryan went beyond what was required to service the account and cultivated a personal relationship with everyone at Beaver Gravel. "It was fun. We got to hear about his father, his dog, his girlfriend. We heard about his childhood and his schooling. But it wasn't so personal that you felt bad if you put off making a decision. He made us feel comfortable." Chris says while Ryan shared his thoughts, he was also a good listener. "He listened to what we needed, what we wanted, who we are, what we stand for."

Relationship building is a two-way street and Beaver Gravel did its part in building that personal relationship with Ryan. "They were real inviting to their company, to their industry," says Ryan. "We all had fun together in Las Vegas during the ConEXPO trade show. I've met their friends, done a golf outing with them, attended an employee recognition picnic. They never made me feel obligated to participate in anything, but I always felt like they really wanted me there."

Another skill that translated well for Ryan was the ability to learn and to teach. Ryan remembers traveling to Purdy Materials in Lafayette, Indiana as part of a team doing an equipment demo. Beaver Gravel of Indianapolis wanted to spend time with a 95Z7 that Purdy had. Hank Ottman from KCM joined Ryan and personnel from Beaver. Hank explained that the operator could be getting better performance from the loader. He adjusted the presets to automate the load-and-carry sequence and give the operator a return-to-dig mode. He also set the work mode on the machine to provide the operator with more power when charging the pile. Even to Ryan's untrained eye, "The difference in production was night-and-day." Hank's tutelage of Ryan continued until he retired at which time Andrew ("Andy") Waszil, the current factory territory rep for KCM-Hitachi, took over.

Andy had a lot of contact with Ryan through frequent phone calls and drives to see customers. Andy also participated in RECO's official training programs. "We have a training school at RECO. I was very involved in that. RECO's very good at training salesmen and keeping them up to speed on new features on the machines so that they can explain those features to customers."

Ryan also learned all he could about Beaver Gravel. Service technicians and operators all shared their knowledge, but operations manager Adam Knapp spent the most time with Ryan. "I've worked for Chris for about 15 years," says Adam. "I've run a lot of equipment." He says while Chris and others did the number-crunching, he was focused on the operation of the loader. "I can be involved in the financials conversations, but most of my discussions are with the guys in production. So my role during the acquisition of this second 95Z7 was assessing its functionality, ease of getting in and out of the machine, its level of comfort, how well it fit our needs."

Since delivery of the machine, Adam has worked with Ryan "on any issues that arose, the few little warranty items we've had come up. He puts in his work. He does a good job. We've formed a pretty good friendship over these matters."

Equipment accolades

Successful selling requires the right relationship, but it also requires the right machine, and Beaver Gravel knows the 95Z7 is the right machine. Beaver Gravel has fifth-generation family members in the business. "These family-owned gravel pits are a tough situation," says Chris. "You need to get every advantage you can get."

He quickly runs through a list of the 95Z7's attributes. "It's extraordinarily well-balanced, both left-to-right and forward-to-back. It's very comfortable. We felt our operators could sit in it all day, for a 10- or 12-hour shift, and remain fresh. We know accidents can be caused by people being tired, no longer able to keep up with the demands of the loader, so comfort is very important. The electronics are great but not overpowering. The operator's not going to be constantly looking at the electronics."

Andy notes that the simple effectiveness of the electronics typifies the operation of the loader in general. "That's one advantage of a KCM; it's a simple machine. It's smart enough to know what it has to do but still simple enough for an operator of any type, with experience or without experience, to get into it and feel comfortable running it. One of the things we pride ourselves on is that KCM loaders are designed to be easy to operate."

Adam agrees with Chris's statement about operator comfort and takes it one step further. "Like Chris said, there are loaders that you run an 8- or 10-hour shift and you feel like you've just been beaten; you're physically exhausted at the end of the day. But with the KCM machines, they're not like that at all. I cover for the guys at times and I'm like, 'No, no, I got it.' I'm excited to get in it because it is a such nice machine."

Chris also likes the visibility of the 95Z7. And not just the visibility, but the way it's engineered into the operator experience. He says other machines place the operator high up on the machine in an effort to see over the machine and thereby improve visibility. But, says Chris, the trade-off is unacceptable. "Because the machine is sitting so much higher, your head, your neck and your lower back experience a whipping action. When you go to load a truck, you turn, you shift, you go over hills, it's like a roller coaster. You get that whipping effect."

With the cab up high, the loader feels unstable due to its high center of gravity. Chris says on other demo machines "I was probably on a 3 percent grade, 4 percent grade and I felt like the machine was going to tip over. Felt very insecure. I was shocked by this."

Instead, he says, KCM designed the 95Z7 so its components don't intrude into the operator's line-of-sight. "The fenders. The hood. The mounting of the cylinders." This allows the operator to sit lower on the machine, and "because you feel more secure in the machine, you can do more with the machine." And it's not that the visibility is as good as the top-heavy machines with



Jeff Beaver, Ryan Woodard, and Chris Beaver standing in front of the 95Z7 in for PM.

high cabs; it's better. "When I backed up in the other machines, I couldn't see. I felt like I was going to hit something all the time. With this machine I felt secure."

When it comes to assessing the value of the 95Z7 loader, says Chris, the bottom line is, literally, the bottom line. "We had to run the numbers. You need to get everything you can get. Value per ton. What will this loader's value be at four years? After a five-year or 10-year period? Is this a piece of equipment that we must sell in four years because the value we paid for is no longer there? The electronics, the motor, the cylinders, the electronics on the transmission?" Of the 95Z7 he says, "We felt this is a piece of equipment we could add to our fleet and keep for a long, long time."

It wasn't just weighing the choices in a single piece of equipment. Buying new equipment was a new approach for Beaver Gravel, a cultural change for the company. "I've been buying equipment for Beaver Gravel for 30 years and only one other time did we buy a new loader. Here I was looking at one piece of equipment that could cost more than I spent in 10 years on multiple pieces of used equipment."

But the downturn of 2007 through 2010 taught some harsh lessons in asset management, says Chris. "I had no control over my financials when a loader lost a transmission, torque converter, rear end, or when I had to buy bucket parts, tires. I couldn't control any of that. If I lost a torque converter, it was \$50,000. If I lost a motor, it was \$40,000. Those checks just had to be written. There were no financials on it. You just wrote a check and hoped to get some return on that money. By purchasing these two KCM loaders, yes, my production's gone up while my hours have gone down. But the biggest thing is, I have more control over my cash flow."

Adam sums it up by saying, "Our production is up. We don't have downtime. These loaders are a huge asset."

Fussy, fussy

Operators can be a fussy lot. That came into play twice in a way that affected the relationship between Beaver Gravel and RECO Equipment. The first time was when Chris and others from Beaver went to demo that 95Z7 at Purdy Materials. "The operator was younger and kind of got kicked to the side

because of his age. He was given the piece of equipment, the 95Z7, that no one else wanted to run. But those other operators just sat on a certain name, a certain brand, a certain label. This operator wanted to be producing. He wanted every edge."

Chris Beaver says the other operators "were just running a piece of equipment back-and-forth. They weren't getting 100 percent production; I'd guess it was more like 50 percent." But Chris and Andy watched Hank Ottman work with the operator of the 95Z7, showing him the settings and explaining what each setting did. They saw that as a result of Hank's efforts the operator was able to consistently achieve peak production. "That was impressive to Adam and me," says Chris. "We could see that if we had different operators in a KCM loader, a factory person would come and work with them. And Hank wasn't choosing a setting because he liked it. He said, 'Let's find a setting that makes the most sense for you so you can get the most out of this piece of equipment.'"

The second instance involved Beaver's own fussy operators. The company was looking for a bulldozer. It came down to RECO Equipment and a competitor. In the end, Beaver went with the competitor. "It made sense for us because of the two operators we had at that time," says Chris. "If we'd had operators willing to learn to run something that wasn't the norm, then I'd have gone forward with RECO." Chris says Ryan handled the news graciously. "He realized at that time it was best not to get pushy, not get upset. He didn't say, 'Look at the deal I got you on these loaders. You owe me.' He said, 'Hey, I get it. I understand why you did what you did.' That's the mark of a quality person."

No "I" in "Team"

Ryan is happy to be recognized for his success at RECO, but he's also humble and appreciative. "I feel like when you're honored for something you give credit to those who played big parts in your development." He quickly credits everyone at RECO and especially the sales support, parts and service departments. He also appreciates the support he got from everyone at KCMA and at Beaver Gravel and from certain individuals. "I'm definitely thankful for Andy and I learned a lot from Adam, too."

But it's when he talks about family that Ryan is most sincere. "I thank my mom and my older sister, Ashlea, for putting up with me through all the years." He has pictures of his dad serving active duty in Vietnam on his phone and shares them with others with obvious pride. "My dad had a brain tumor in 2001. He's doing all right. Some days are better than others. He hasn't recovered 100 percent, but he's still with us. He was a very big influence that helped mold me and make me the person I am today."

Ryan's parents remain in Kansas and he says he feels like he hasn't spent enough time with them of late. He made up for that a bit by planning a week with them over the Christmas 2017 holiday.

Recognizing the importance of family is another mark of a quality person. While sales professional Ryan Woodard is many things – intelligent, educated, persistent, loyal – he is, first and foremost, a quality person. And that, it seems, is the first item on the list of qualifications that customers desire most in a salesperson.