

FORETHOUGHT CONVERSATION

Love Your Customers

A Conversation with Joe Girard

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Born into poverty, Joe Girard sold 13,001 cars over the course of 15 years—not fleet sales but sales to individual car buyers. He holds the Guinness World Record for being the world’s greatest salesman. In 1973, he sold 1,425 cars, and in one month, he sold 174—a record that still stands today. HBR senior editor M. Ellen Peebles spoke with Girard about overcoming personal hardship and how he created thousands of relationships, one at a time. Now out of the car business, he speaks to people around the world about how to sell.

Most car salespeople sell four or five cars a month. You averaged six or more cars a day for years. How is that possible?

When you bought a car from me, you didn’t get just a car. You got me. I would break my back to service a customer; I’d rather service a customer than sell another car. After a few years, there was pandemonium outside my office, there were so many people waiting to see me. So I started seeing people by appointment only. And the reason people were willing to wait a week for an appointment rather than go buy from someone else right away is because they knew that if they got a lemon, I would turn it into a peach.

People are sick to death of sitting around in service departments. When I was selling cars, my right-hand man could go to the service department while the customer’s car was at the curb and get three or four mechanics to come right out with toolboxes and take care of the customer in 25 minutes. Sometimes they would install \$15 or \$20 worth of parts—a lot of money back then—and the customer would say, “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing,” I’d say. “I love you. Just come back.”

You get service like that, where are you going to buy next time? That’s what makes businesses big: word of mouth. If you create it, it’ll make you. If you don’t, it’ll break you.

And the reason I could get the mechanics to come out right away is that I loved them, and I let them know. I made a deal with a nice Italian

restaurant, and every third Wednesday I would take all of the service people to dinner—the people who wrote up the service orders, mechanics, the parts department, everyone. I would eat with them and tell them how much I appreciated them, how much I loved them. Once a year, I invited all the service people and their families over to a big barbecue at my house, to eat with me and my family. This is something that all executives should think about: There are service people in every company. They are the ones you wine and dine.

You say you love your customers. What if they aren’t so likable?

It’s like a marriage. You need to like each other. And if you treat people right, you will love them. I told my customers that I liked them, that I loved them, all the time. I would send a card every month with a different picture, a different greeting, and the card would say, “I like you.” I would close a sale, and I would say to my customer, “I love you.” I even gave them buttons that said “I like you.” People may have had to wait for an appointment, but when I was with them, I was with them body and soul.

I grew up in the ghettos of Detroit. I started selling cars in 1963 at the age of 35. I was out of a job, had no savings, and was in serious debt after a failed home construction business, and my wife told me there was no food in the house to feed our children. I pleaded with a local car dealer for a desk and a phone and promised that I would not take business away from any of the other salespeople. I wore my finger black dialing a rotary phone trying to get leads, and that night, when all the other salesmen had gone home, I saw a customer walk in the door.

What I saw was a bag of groceries walking toward me. I literally got down on my hands and knees and begged, and I made my first sale. The customer said that with everything he had bought over the years—insurance, houses, cars—he had never seen anyone beg like that. Then I borrowed \$10 from my boss against my commission and bought food for my family. So

I appreciate every person who bought from me so much. I would tell them, “I thank you, and my family thanks you. I love you.”

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