



©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/RVANKING999

CONQUERING THE CURVEBALL

Practicing and studying the pitcher are the keys to hitting baseball's most unhittable pitch. F&I trainer says the same applies in the F&I office, which has faced quite a few curveballs of late. **By Rick McCormick**

Growing up in the same town as Los Angeles Dodgers Pitching Coach Rick Honeycutt, whose assortment of breaking balls made him one of the best middle relief pitchers in Major League Baseball, I know hitting the curveball is one of the toughest things to do. About the only way you can develop any consistency hitting “old Uncle Charlie” is to practice your technique and study the pitcher’s habits.

Well, the F&I office has faced quite a few curveballs of late, starting with today’s consumer. Not only are they more educated, they wield mobile devices that allow them to check and challenge our facts in real time. Then there are the multiple layers of

compliance requirements, which are eating into our F&I delivery process and forcing us to sell more in less time. The aggressive efforts by insurance companies, local credit unions, banks and other retail players to sell traditional F&I products represent yet another challenge F&I professionals face.

But like the top hitters in baseball, top F&I performers adjust to the changing metrics of their craft, prepare for every eventuality and are ready to help every customer regardless of the challenges they might pose. So let’s review some of the skills that drive consistent success in the F&I office.

1. Preparing to Win

I recently had the privilege of listen-

ing in on a group training call led by a best-selling author who specializes in personal growth. He said he realized early on that he was never going to be the smartest person in the room, nor the best looking or most charismatic. What he could be was the most prepared person in the room, so that’s what he became. Now he’s more successful than his more talented contemporaries.

Well, as all F&I pros know, the battle is usually won or lost before it starts. So it’s important that you involve yourself in an intentional pre-deal effort to put yourself in position to succeed. And by that I mean having a copy of a current repair order to help build value in a service contract. The repair order will illustrate to buyers what retail customers are

seeing in the service department. You should also be aware of the most frequent and most expensive repairs the service department has handled in the last 90 days.

The same intentional effort is required when selling road-hazard protection. You need a list of costs for both tires and wheels for every vehicle in your dealership's inventory. Yes, creating that list will take time and effort, but your customers will accept, trust and pay for that knowledge and expertise. And that translates to more sold products.

2. Know How to Listen

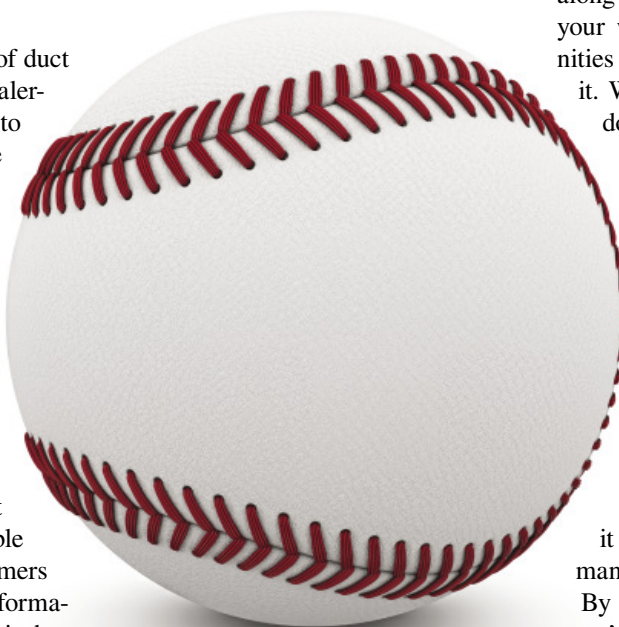
I have started carrying a roll of duct tape with me when I visit dealerships. Not only do I use it to emphasize to my trainees the importance of not talking so much, it reminds me that talking less and listening more is a recipe for success. See, most F&I professionals are hired because they know how to sell and are skilled in talking customers into making a decision. Problem is, talking customers into buying doesn't work when selling intangible products. That's because customers don't want to listen to our information; they are more interested in being heard.

Now, listening has two applications. The first and most obvious is to use open-ended questions so the customer is talking 70% of the time. But learning why they need our product is only one of the benefits. See, when customers encounter someone who genuinely listens to them, they tend to trust that person and the information he or she shares. And that is invaluable in the F&I office.

The second application is more of a preventative measure. See, when attempting to overcome a customer objection, most of us will review the facts that point to the need for the product before we go for the close. Problem is, while we're sharing that

information, the customer is most likely thinking of other reasons to object once you stop talking.

A better way is to focus on getting customers to state the facts that validate their need for a product. Remember, when customers say something, they are 10 times more likely to act. And your customers won't have time to come up with another objection if they're too busy telling you why they need the product. And when they do that, that means they're engaged in your process. That's important because a disengaged customer is one



who can't wait to say "No," while an engaged customer is one who is moving closer to saying "Yes."

3. Properly Identifying the Competition

F&I managers are competitive by nature. We are driven professionals who are always striving to outperform the people around us. However, the only person we need to compete with is the one we see in the mirror.

See, it is so critically important that we consistently grow our skills and knowledge, especially as our industry continues to change at an unprecedented pace. The good news is the ability to artfully communicate with today's customer can be achieved

with principals we have known about for decades. What does change is the information we communicate. That's why successfully presenting product to today's customer requires that you continually grow your knowledge.

More than 70 years ago, former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt made a powerful statement about her commitment to personal growth. She said: "If you want to reach your potential and become the person you were created to be, you must do much more than just experiencing life and hoping that you learn what you need along the way. You must go out of your way to seize growth opportunities as if your future depended on it. Why? Because it does. Growth doesn't just happen — not for me, not for you, not for anybody. You have to go after it!"

Setting goals is a healthy exercise. But if you focus on growing your skills, you will meet and exceed your goals consistently. Hey, successful F&I pros are always raising the bar. They realize that growing their skills should never be something a dealership demands; it should be something you demand of yourself.

By the way, the only year my town's Little League team won the Southern version of the World Series was when Honeycutt came back to coach the team. I guess taking batting practice against a great curveball pitcher was all they needed to prepare for whatever pitch came their way. You need to do the same in this constantly-changing retail environment, and you can start by focusing on pre-deal preparation and any activity that grows your skills consistently. Just don't forget the duct tape. ■

Rick McCormick is the national account development manager for Reahard & Associates Inc., an F&I training company providing classes, workshops, in-dealership and online training. E-mail him at rick.mccormick@bobit.com.