

By Greg Billings

# THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER

There's a new phenomenon on cable TV. Cesar Millan, a feisty Mexican immigrant, has swept his way into the nation's heart as the "Dog Whisperer." His book, *Cesar's Way*, is a *New York Times* bestseller. Many of his viewers, however, don't even own a dog. Of course, I have a dog, so I can be forgiven for becoming a fan.

"Dog Whisperer" is the ultimate reality TV show, but without the genre's usual meanness. In each episode, Cesar arrives at the home of a typical — which is to say odd — American household with an out-of-control dog. Whether Pooch is attacking the mailman or eating shoes, the owners are always at the end of their ropes, and the dog is always out of control. Yet within minutes, Cesar will neutralize the dog and begin counseling the owners. In 20 minutes, we see a happy family and a calm hound. I can't help thinking about the implications Cesar's wisdom has for the customer-salesperson relationship in music product stores, a kind of reality show that happens every day.

To anyone who has read a few canine behavior books, there's no magic here. Cesar is applying the fundamentals of dog psychology. In canine social structures, there is always a pack leader. Individual dogs do not have to be the leader, but in the absence of leadership, dogs are genetically compelled to



Greg Billings and Curley

## Greg Billings discusses the ideal salesperson type and how to create it

strive to become pack leader. Fido is happy to follow, as long as he has stable leadership. The stressed-out owners are having trouble because their pet thinks he's the pack leader in their home, and he's right. So, it all

comes down to leadership. As soon as the dog understands Cesar is the leader, its behavior changes almost instantly.

Leadership is also a central issue for the social structure of humans. *The Wall Street Journal* once published a great axiom for supervisors: "Almost no one wants to be managed, but almost everyone wants to be led." We demand leadership, and in its absence, someone will invariably step up. We are desperate for leadership in almost every aspect of our lives. Especially when we are unsure, like when we're shopping for something we don't know much about, like

a musical instrument.

If you ever have a chance to chat with Bruce Stevens from Steinway, Keith Mardak from Hal Leonard, Dennis Houlihan from Roland, Bob Taylor from Taylor or Joe Lamond from NAMM, you'll feel it, too. It's energy. We can't see it or touch it, but we can feel it.

Cesar Milan has contended that dogs sense energy. If you emit calm, assertive, confident energy, they will instantly submit to your authority.

Communication in the animal kingdom relies on this energy. Last year, my wife and I went to the Galapagos Islands.

While on one of the Zodiacs looking for sharks, we came upon a school of golden rays and followed them. It was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen; watching them swim in perfect synchronization of every movement and turn. Animals can communicate instantly without the verbal and non-verbal cues on which we humans rely.

In 2004, half a day before Hurricane Charley hit south Florida, 14 electronically tagged black tip sharks, which had never before left their home territory, suddenly headed for deeper water. In *Cesar's Way*, the Dog Whisperer tells of the tsunami that struck and devastated parts of Indonesia without warning. According to eye witnesses, an hour before the wave hit, captive tame elephants started wailing and even broke their chains in order to flee to higher ground. There are energy forces at work in the world we don't fully understand.

If we can accept the existence of a language of energy in our world, even if we don't fully understand it, we can apply that language to better communicate with and serve our clients; and, if you happen to have a dog, her too.

The reason humans didn't follow the elephants to higher ground is because we have come to rely on our intellect more than our natural instincts. This is not to say we have completely overcome our primal instinct. Consider mob mentality at sporting events, the paparazzi or even romance. Like our furry friends, we rely on instinct to feel energy, or to smell fear. Humans just do it in more subconscious ways.

**THE ENERGY OF LEADERSHIP**

How can we apply our understanding of energy language to serve our customers more effectively? Let's pause to recon-

sider the selling aspect of our business. If we view selling more as guiding our clients through a decision-making process than persuading or convincing, we make a great leap toward humanizing the experience for both the customer and our sales associate.

In my 40 years on the sales floor, I've met some wonderful people who became customers. If pressed to rank my favorites by occupation, musicians wouldn't come in first. Generals and undertakers top my list. If you're at a party, these are the guys you want to be talking to. They are friendly and enthusiastic, with big smiles.

Think about the morticians. Their customers are always in the same circumstance — they

have lost a loved one and need to get through the funeral. To be effective, the mortician must guide grief-stricken people through a memorial process. In every sense of the word, he must lead. He must be calm, assertive and in control of the situation.

Years ago, there was a popular sales training philosophy that relied on analyzing customers' personality types and structuring the presentation to their classification. The technique was quite complex and blatantly manipulative, which is probably why it passed into oblivion.

Maybe there are only two personality types: leader and follower. And maybe each of us is constantly switching

roles, depending on the situation. (Gen. Colin Powell tells a charming anecdote about being handed a shopping list by his wife at breakfast the day after he resigned as Secretary of State.) Usually the one asking the questions is leading. It is vital in our customer interactions that we lead or, in canine terms, are the pack leader.

Rather than customer personality profiles, let's consider salesperson behavioral profiles. Your sales associate's personality is naturally going to be somewhat assertive or more submissive, and either calm or excited.

Assertive is not the same as aggressive. Assertiveness is simply acting in a bold, self-confident manner. Aggression

## ⊕ HOW TO CREATE A CUSTOMER WHISPERER

1. Hire calm, confident people, and encourage them to stay that way.
2. Train, train, train. Hold weekly sales training sessions during non-business hours. Spend an hour teaching just one aspect of sales, like greeting, qualification or handling objections. Use outside sources, books and experts. Let the strong train the weak. When you have exhausted every topic, start over at the beginning. Prepared associates are confident associates.
3. Practice, practice, practice. Role-play until it's perfect. Videotape it. Review it. Refine it. Make it fun.
4. Create a customer- and community-focused mission statement, and repeat it until everyone in your organization can say it in their sleep. Share your traditions, plans and dreams. Associates who buy into your vision are going to represent you more confidently and sincerely.
5. Make it easy for your associates to be confident by having your store properly merchandised. Qualification and closing stations should be convenient and properly supplied. Product should be clean, in tune, accessorized and arranged as good, better, best. Refreshment (water, coffee and soft drinks) should be available.
6. Reward actions rather than results. Let your staff know what's expected. Results can be a long way off, but proper actions lead to desired results, so reward actions.
7. Create a great environment. Clear out the dead wood, wet blankets and bad apples. You may be able to get a submissive associate to be more assertive by increasing his confidence through training, but it's doubtful an excited associate can be calmed down. Confidence encourages confidence, fear breeds fear and calm creates calm. If you can't quickly train your associates to the desired behavior, eliminate them.
8. Let your reps do product training. In fact, force your reps to do product training! If they want an appointment, encourage them to come an hour before the store opens, and let them bring the donuts. The good ones will be thrilled and the bad ones will stay away. After the reps have trained, refine their presentation to suit your store's style.
9. Be the "employee whisperer." All great leaders have had great mentors. Remember, your employees are watching you all the time. Your calm/assertive leadership will be their model.

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## {PIANOSALESSTARS}

implies combativeness and tends toward dominance. Submissive people are more disposed to yield to the authority or will of another. In your store, you must be the authority. Acting in a confident, assertive manner will compel your client to assume the submissive role. Being assertive and confident generates very good energy. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. Acting in a submissive manner will force your client to assume an assertive role.

To be calm is to be free from agitation or excitement. Think about how you feel in the presence of a calm person, especially if you're stressed. It is wonderful for your customers to get excited about your presentation, but you must remain calm. Calm is very good energy to transmit.

Excitement is the arousal of an emotional response. Hormones like adrenaline are secreted. It's exhausting. When the effect of the hormones subsides, there's a crash. If your customer gets overexcited, you'd better close the sale fast or the ultimate crash will kill the deal. Ask any veteran salesperson which customer is the coldest lead to follow up, and they will tell you it is the prospect that was the hottest yesterday.

### THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER

Let's look at the four behavioral profiles and how they play out on the sales floor.

The **submissive/excited** salesperson is afraid of the customer and thinks it's all about the product. He's worried the customer will walk away and buy from someone else. He's obsessed with the competition. These are the first guys to hand out business cards or chase clients to their cars with a brochure. In our business, they tend to retreat to their comfort zone of musical ability or techni-

cal knowledge. The energy they transmit is fear. Customers feel it and either try to take advantage of it or excuse themselves.

The **submissive/calm** associate is also afraid of his customers but thinks he can win them over with kindness. This associate follows customers around the store like a puppy dog, dutifully providing information rather than asking probing questions. This so-called salesperson is reactive and incapable of making a recommendation, even if asked repeatedly.

The **assertive/excited** representative is your worst nightmare. His excitement causes his assertiveness to morph into aggression. He doesn't waste time qualifying customers, and he rarely asks questions. This guy may be your top writer for awhile by virtue of his sheer force of will, but he has most of your kick-outs, service problems and unhappy customers. He moves from job to job, leaving in his wake unfulfilled promises and customer-service nightmares. The energy he generates is bad, but many customers will succumb to its power. He has been seduced by the dark side of the force. If this guy is working for you and writing a million dollars a year, fire him. He is not trainable, and in the long run, he'll do more harm than good.

Finally, we have the **calm/assertive** associate. This is the true customer whisperer. She reassures her clients that they have come to the right place. She offers a refreshment. She is confident because she has been thoroughly trained, and she is prepared for any eventuality.

Quickly, she gets permission to ask questions. She is truly interested in learning everything she needs to know to guide her clients. She knows her store has the best possible value in its product categories, and she truly

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believes participating in music, using the products and services she offers, will enhance their lives. Clients sense her genuine concern because she is asking questions about them, their families, their homes, their needs and their desires. The energy is positive, and the clients begin to relax. They've found a leader they are beginning to trust. Now

### The calm/ assertive sales associate is the true customer whisperer

they're free to think about products that will satisfy their desires. The more they consider their true needs, the less important price becomes, and the more predisposed they are to select higher-quality instruments.

Because of her meticulous preparation, the customer whisperer knows she will be able to demonstrate and speak knowledgeably about every product in the store. Her presentation will raise her customers' excitement level while she remains calm. She knows this process is not just about products, it is about people. When their excitement peaks, she'll gracefully guide them through the closing phase by asking the right questions. And, if she is confronted with a question she can't answer, she knows where to find the information. She's convinced these clients are fortunate to have met her because she will make sure they are treated fairly, will receive knowledgeable guidance and get great value. Furthermore, she will be there to assure their satisfaction after

the sale.

She knows these people probably won't be able to find the perfect instrument themselves. If she can find some common ground and achieve empathy, trust will follow.

Her assured confidence lets her be assertive without becoming aggressive because of the excellent training she has received from her manager, who she in turn sees as her "pack leader." She's not worried about competition because her clients had several choices and still chose to visit her. She knows stalking them will reinforce their anxiety, so she's not afraid to let them wander around for a few moments to decompress. Customers sense her calm/assertive leadership and are attracted to her.

She's calm near the end of the process because she is not afraid of losing the sale. Because she has been thoroughly trained in handling objections and in closing techniques, she can be assertively persistent and send her new friends home to enjoy their new musical instrument. If the transaction cannot be closed for one reason or another, she knows her follow-up habits will keep this prospect in the fold.

We've been taught for generations that great salespeople are born, not made. But, customer whisperers can be created in your store with the right training programs and leadership. All of the principles to help your associates become customer whisperers must be first applied by you, so you become the "employee whisperer." Cesar Millan says he doesn't train dogs; he rehabilitates dogs and trains owners. In the same spirit, our real work is with our associates, and it begins today. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Bonita Springs, Fla.

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