

SALES&MARKETING

# BACK TO THE FUTURE



# SELLING GARAGE DOORS

By Dan Apple, The Apple Group, LLC

*Many things have changed since I joined the garage door business in 1978.*

Forty-three years I wore shirt and tie to work, Saturday Night Fever was in theatres, the Bee Gees disco hits were at the top of the charts, Jimmy Carter was in the White House and a hamburger from McDonald's cost the same as a gallon of gas (\$0.64). The garage door business has changed as well. There has been much progress made and numerous innovations in our industry, overwhelmingly for the better. However, some critically important aspects of sales success have remained the same.

Let's take a look at the evolution of products and highlight sales basics that are unchanged.



## PRODUCTS

### Garage Doors (then)

When I started in the garage door business, our residential product lineup followed Sears Roebuck and Company's "good-better-best" approach to marketing. "Good" wood-panel garage doors were available primed or unprimed, glass or solid, with hardboard or plywood panels, with additional redwood or hemlock raised panel options. I recall that a basic, wood-panel single car garage with glass sold for \$125, installed.

"Better" doors were steel, ribbed doors that were primed and looked like they belonged on a metal commercial building. They

*Continued on page 53*

Continued from page 50

## SALES &amp; MARKETING



**Garage Doors (then)**

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required less maintenance than wood but had zero curb appeal. “Best” were fiberglass garage doors, like Frantz’s “Filuma.” Standard colors were white, green or tan. They were lightweight and nearly maintenance free, but anyone with a pocketknife had a key to your door.

#### Garage Doors (now)

Where do I start? Raised panels pressed into ribbed steel doors changed the industry and are still the most widely sold garage door today. Much better insulated versions emerged by sandwiching polyurethane insulation between outer and inner steel skins. From there, we moved on to composite materials (PVC, urethane, fiberglass) that made garage doors even less costly to maintain. And so many colors to choose from. If you don’t see what you want in the standard offerings, you can get a powder-coated door in any color you like (provided money is no object). The “carriage house” style that cropped up in the last 15 years has skyrocketed to prominence in today’s garage door lineup. First hand-crafted, the custom-made wooden doors were very expensive and looked like a beautiful piece of furniture on the home. Not everyone could afford that level of luxury, so manufacturers found ways to give a similar look to steel doors by adding embossed stampings and overlay boards to dramatically reduce the cost. Today we even install full view aluminum doors on homes with a contemporary architectural style. They were known as “service station doors” when I started in the business. Yet after all the innovation, re-invention and iteration, the best of the best garage doors continues to be wood. In the evolutionary process, it’s “back to the future.” Prices have evolved too. These days, we’ve quadruple the price point mentioned earlier for a plain, solid raised panel steel garage door.

#### GDOs (then)

In 1978, garage door openers were considered a luxury item. Like most dealers, we tried most of the popular models, including Genie, Stanley and Clopay’s “Duralift.” Back then, all were electromechanical units. We settled on Allister units. First the “RS,” which evolved into the “ARD,” the most reliable opener we found.

The customer’s options for openers then were limited mostly by the horsepower rating (typically 1/3 hp) and type of drive, chain or screw. Radio controls were moving toward solid state, but some had to be tuned to match the tone needed. The “wall control panel” was a simple door bell button and if you wanted an exterior wall mounted secondary access we could provide a wired key switch.

We were giddy when we would sell a half dozen openers in a good month. In 1978, the average price of an installed garage door opener was under \$100.

#### GDOs (now)

Today there are many choices, and to help customers choose the perfect garage door opener we have to know:

- How quiet will they want it to be?
- What kind of power is needed?
- Suspended from the ceiling or side-mounted?
- Is battery backup required?
- Do they want to control it remotely by smartphone?
- Should it work with other household devices? (Security system, HVAC, etc.)

Continued on page 54



# SALES&MARKETING



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Continued from page 53

## SELLING

### Selling Garage Doors (then)

When I called on homeowners, homebuilders or GCs in 1978, my marketing tools were brochures, section hand samples, a business card and a list of satisfied customers as references. Appointments were made by telephone and transcribed to my Day-at-a-Glance hand-written calendar at the job site. If I was running late to the appointment, I'd stop at a phone booth to let the customer know. There were no garage door showrooms, only the tailgate of my station wagon. Estimates were created one at a time from scratch and calculated using the manufacturer's price book and a discount multiplier. Occasionally, a call or two to the factory was required. Quotes to customers were seldom given on the spot. Instead, they were typed on a quote form and mailed. The whole process could take a week or longer. Follow up was done via telephone or mail.

### Selling Garage Doors (now)

Today's marketing tools are mostly paperless. We share our lineup on smart devices and scroll through models and options with customers in real time. Showrooms are popular now and often customers will opt to come to you. It's wise to use the old-school section hand samples and color chips, but everything else (including your quote) is communicated electronically. Salespeople can also utilize garage door visualizer software to show their customer what the door will look like on their home before they buy. Communications with customers are most often done via email or text message. Phone booths have been replaced by mobile devices. The weeklong process of providing a quote and gaining acceptance has been replaced with on the spot quotes using price lists and product codes. A professional looking proposal can be delivered on a 10" digital screen and no pen is required to sign and accept, only the customers



index finger. The new process can take as little as 15 minutes, with email and text follow up. Though some really savvy salespeople still understand the value of speaking to the customer by phone to close the sale.

## MARKETING

### Advertising (then)

Advertising for garage door businesses has never been easy or inexpensive. But in the old days it was simpler. Then, the lion's share of the budget was typically allotted to advertising in the Yellow Pages and left little for direct mail, newspaper or mass media outreach. It was simpler, because you dealt with Yellow Pages once a year and hoped that your phone would ring because customers noticed your ad among the other dozen or more competing door company ads. Marketing to residential home builders was handled by going directly to the job site and introducing yourself to the builder.

### Advertising (now)

Yellow Pages have largely been replaced by the internet. Advertising budgets have evolved too, with dealers spending the bulk of their ad dollars on web-based marketing. And it's no longer simple. Internet advertising is fragmented and requires dealers to be well-versed in pay-per-click, search engine optimization, display and banner ads. Overall, the cost of digital advertising is less, but it's so highly effective and targeted that budgets have increased. Google is king and changes to their algorithms force constant changes to advertising strategy. The dealer's website "store" is open 24/7 and customers can shop online at their leisure. The best online advertising links back to the dealer's website and drives potential customers to complete contact forms. Presto, a lead comes to your inbox. Having an effective online advertising program requires ongoing attention. No more approving your ad and going to sleep for the other 11 months of the year. The good news is that online advertising is trackable, so you can quickly determine what is and is not working and make adjustments to placement, timing and key words and phrases. This process can tug on your time,



Continued on page 56

## SALES&MARKETING

Continued from page 54

but you can also outsource this to an internet advertising company you can trust.

*Advertising may have been simpler to administer in 1978, but it could not possibly reach the number of potential buyers of products and services as today's online marketing.*



### WHAT HASN'T CHANGED?

While today's garage door products have improved and become more energy efficient with better curb appeal with increased convenience, one thing has remained constant. Whether in 1978 or 2021, the garage door product we sell is only as good as the service supporting it from the first day it is installed. Garage doors are mechanical items that will occasionally need attention. Customers rarely remember which garage door product they purchased but they never forget the service they received. Back when we had a very limited offering of (mostly wooden) garage doors, we differentiated ourselves by jumping all over problems when they arose.

Today's garage door salesperson has many electronic sales and communication tools to make their job more efficient. And many more products and options to offer. They can create a quote in a couple of minutes and close the sale with a swipe, click and signature scrawled across a device screen. But basic selling skills haven't changed since 1978. These seven steps are still required, regardless of the wiz-bang tools salespeople have at their disposal today:

- Establish rapport
- Qualify the need
- Product selection
- Presentation
- Reveal the price
- Overcome objections
- Close the sale

A mobile device can't achieve any of those without the skills of a salesperson who practices the **Golden Rule** of how to treat people:

- **Be on time** – If you're going to arrive late to a sales appointment, call the customer and let them know. Phone booth no longer required.



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- **Listen carefully** – Practice active listening so your customer knows that you're interested and engaged in their garage door selection or solution.
- **Know your products** – There's no replacement for having a solid command of products specifications, features and benefits. Study not only your product line, but your competitor's too. Remember, the customer is just a click away from any garage door product information. Wouldn't it be better for you to explain how your product is a better solution than the competition?

### SUMMARY: BACK TO THE FUTURE

As we celebrate the garage door industry's centennial year, we should recognize that there have been many changes, and most are for the best. Garage doors are now available in a vast array of materials, styles and finishes and customization options never before available. Garage door openers are now considered part of the total garage door system and no longer seen as a luxury item. We enjoy having numerous ways of controlling our doors from more than just a button on a wall or a transmitter clipped to our vehicle's sun visor. Not only can we access our home's garage with a smart device, but we can monitor each time the door opens and closes and record who enters the garage via a webcam! But no matter how garage door products continue to advance, or how many electronic gadgets we use to streamline our sales efforts, they're all only as good as the support provided by the PEOPLE who sell, install and service them.



When I started in the garage door business my Dad reiterated time and again that service comes first. Even then, when the few crews we fielded had schedules full of installations, if a customer called and had a car trapped in a garage, they got our attention first. Customers seldom remember how good a deal that they got on their garage door, but they'll always remember the time they needed emergency service and how your company responded.

When I'm asked what the keys are to selling success in 2021, I advise door dealers to focus on their service game. When things get really busy it's easy to lose focus. The best way to get back on track quickly is return to what has worked in the past. If it helped you succeed in 1981, it will most likely work in 2021.

***Some things just don't change. While we press forward, we can't forget to bring the best of the past with us. In this way we go back to the future!***

