

# think outside the cashbox

At Inspiration Furniture, the name applies as much to the salespeople as it does to the high-quality Danish merchandise. Earlier this month, owner Steen Skaaning flew retail sales consultant Ron Martin out from Honolulu for a return engagement to the store's West Sixth Avenue location in Vancouver. **BY GREG FELTON**



STEEN  
SKAANING

“He entices me to come up a couple of times a year,” said Martin, who prefers to call himself a sales “resultant.” “I work with 100s of retailers and service centres across the U.S. to improve customer service and sales techniques.”

Martin's main advisory delivery vehicle is the daily Morning Report, which goes out to about 450–500 clients in 28 states in the U.S. and Canada, including Inspiration Furniture. Martin takes raw sales data and gives it back to the client reformatted as tables, graphs and sales competitions to make selling more inspiring. At \$10 per

day, per report, this is a bargain for any business, but is a nice income for Ron Martin's “Easy Team.” With such a comfortable niche carved out for himself, Martin said he doesn't leave Hawaii for less than \$5,000, but doubtless Skaaning feels that he's worth the investment. After all, he met Martin at Inspiration Furniture's 80,000 sq ft. store in Honolulu, which just happens to be run by brother Peter Skaaning.

On this particular evening, Martin stood before an audience of about 30 staffers, friends and family, many of whom had previously heard Martin talk about his “easy” approach to business or had read one or more of his books: *Sales Management Made Easy*, *Success Made Easy* or *Public Speaking Made Easy*. Part sales guru/part stand-up comic, Martin could easily be mistaken for a refugee from the Summer of Love. Of medium height and slightly above-medium girth, he wears his salt-and-pepper hair in a ponytail, and wears Hawaiian shirts. But those of us gathered in Inspiration Furniture heard a relaxed largely anecdotal presentation on the importance of selling customers on the uniqueness of the store, value of the products and not just on the price.

The story that best illustrated this point, as well as Martin's comic timing, concerned his experience buying a juice-maker. The store in

question carried three differently priced models; \$99 (“The Juiceman”), \$199 and \$299, the latter two made by Acme. He asked the salesman how the three models differed as was told, simply:

“They all make juice. This one's \$99; this one's \$199; and this one's \$299.”

Given the banality of the response, Martin bought “The Juiceman” lest he look like an idiot for paying more than necessary. It broke within days. Martin went back to the store and again inquired about the other two juice-makers. After receiving the same non-answer, he

bought the \$199 model for the same reason. The only difference between it and the \$299 model concerned the nature of the bowls—porcelain versus stainless steel. After taking the \$199 model home, he discovered that every time he made juice he had to perform about 30 cleansing steps to keep the porcelain bowl from becoming permanently stained. Finally he went back to buy the \$299 model, which he should have done in the first place.

What goes for juice-makers goes for any other product. “We have an obligation to our customers to give them the information they need to make intelligent buying decisions—whether it is Yes or No.” “Our customers should know who we are and how we are different from anyone else.” “Sales should be based on true value—not price alone.”

In that same vein, he warned against giving discounts. Some retailers, he said, overprice their goods so they can “appear” to give discounts to those who ask for a discount. Those who don't ask for one end up getting soaked. A customer should be convinced that your store's price, even if it's higher than a competitor's, still represents a better deal.

“Don't play the discount game,” said Martin. “Everyone should pay the same price—a fair price.” □



RON MARTIN

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