

# **The Wisdom of the Christmas Tree Lot**

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I did not know it then. I was just 18 years young. I was presented an opportunity to run a Christmas tree lot by an old family friend. It sounded like fun. The family friend owned the tree farm that would supply the lot. He had the history and the knowledge. I had the youth and enthusiasm. I did not know that these years of running the tree lot would be so formidable. Looking back, so many lessons of business and life were found there. In the spirit of putting out there what I feel will help you in your life success road, here are the lessons of the Christmas tree lot.

## **Lesson One:**

“Fresh” is very good thing! Nobody wants worn out and spent. Everyone wants Fresh and New. Keeping your thoughts and your ideas fresh is critical. In the tree business, keeping the lot looking tidy, well presented, and “fresh” puts customers in the best frame of mind. Dead limbs, dead needles, flat stacked trees all create an impression of lifelessness. Full trees, clean isles, crisp presentation.....this is what people want. When we put ourselves out to the world, putting out there an old, tired, dragging self will have the same negative effects as a dead and worn out tree lot. We receive what we put out.

## **Lesson Two:**

In every group, there is a decision maker. Figure out what the decision maker wants, and you will solve the puzzle. When some families walked on to the lot, it was all about height, width, and will the base fit into the stand, For others it was about smell and the ability to display properly certain ornaments. What are the primary concerns? Who is the ultimate decision maker? Understanding the concerns, and addressing and solving those concerns with the decision maker will lead to a sold tree. People want to be heard and understood. To get a sale, understanding the decision maker is paramount.

## **Lesson Three:**

Understand your market, and stock what they want. The location of the tree lot was between the University of Washington student housing, and the affluent residential districts of Seattle. There was little middle ground. Students, or wealthy. The first year, I took delivery of a starting shipment of trees that were sent me from the tree farm. They gave me a sampling of trees. There was something for everybody, and yet, like I said, “everybody” was not who we had. As a result, the middle range trees sat. I took good notes that first year, and as a result, put in a custom order from the second year and going forward. I ordered “table top” trees, which amounted to the pruning tops of all the tree farms noble firs. Often time’s nobles will create double tops, and so the tree farm will lop off the top two feet to create the tree they want. These just lie in the field and go nowhere. I paid a worker to go through the field and pick up all the tops and bring them to me. I sold hundreds of these for student’s dorm rooms. The best part, other than a laborer to pick them up and the cost of a truck to transport them to me, the tree itself cost nothing! The second part of the shipment was all high end noble firs, grand firs, and pruned

full firs. These of course were to cater to my high end crowd. I ordered very few of the normal six foot Douglas fir. Very few of these middle range trees sold. Knowing the market of your area became the critical lesson, and one that let to nearly everyone who walked on the lot left with a tree.

#### **Lesson Four:**

People need to know you are there and in business! We had a good location in general, but we sat behind a Texaco station. From the main road we could not be seen. This had to be handled! It was a simple and effective plan. We made a door hangar for our two main markets and delivered them. Every dorm, fraternity, and student apartment got one, and every high end home in the adjoining neighborhoods got one. It was amazing how quick the response. To the students, the hangar emphasized “cheap” trees. To the upper class neighborhoods, the hangar emphasized Noble, Grand, and Sheered Firs and custom base fitting at no charge. It was amazing how quickly the flow of customers changed. We were busy because people knew we were there. So simple, yet so profound.

#### **Lesson Five:**

Love what you do. In my mind, when I go back there today, I get a huge smile on my face. The smell of the trees, the pitch on my hands, the laughter in the air, and the sound of holiday music. It was a happy setting, and I loved every minute of being there. When the crowd dissipated in the evening hours, I loved sweeping the isles, and restocking the tree slots in the stands. I loved the physical nature of the work, and the goal setting of profit beyond cost. I could not imagine the scene with a bad attitude or a scowl. It could not be successful placed in this setting. The simple lesson is one that has repeated itself many times in my awareness....at the

core of success, there is passion. It is just that simple. Love what you do, and do what you love.

I am certain that there has not been a business month that has gone by since where I have not reflected on one of these simple lessons.....the lessons of the Christmas Tree lot. As we approach the holidays, it seems that there is a reminder chip installed in my brain that requests a re-visit on these principles and puts them for me to ponder again in question form. Am I ready for the holidays....asks the voice inside? Am I checking the dipstick of the five principles of the Christmas tree lot? It helps me, as a year comes again to an end, to go back to the basics and check the main systems, ending in the question of all questions.....do I love what I do? And it is here, I pass on this question to you.....Are you ready for the holidays?