

Ice Smashers

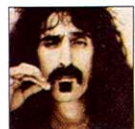
The initial meeting with a prospective client is too important to rush into your sales pitch. "It's all about bonding and rapport," says Bruce Curtis of Washtenaw Woodwrights, Ann Arbor, Mich. He typically devotes 5 to 15 minutes to small talk before steering the conversation toward the real purpose of his visit.

TRIED-AND-TRUE STRATEGIES FOR BREAKING THE ICE

■ "Be comfortable and be yourself; be casual yet professional," Curtis says. Put the clients at ease because, after all, you are a stranger in their home.

■ "Look for things that are fun to talk about," Curtis adds. Ask about their kids, how long they've lived in the home, and what the home was like when they bought it. "There are no gimmicks," he says, but it never hurts to be "really friendly with the dog. If the dog likes you, that can go a long way."

■ Greg Antonioli of Out of the Woods Construction, Arlington, Mass., holds initial meetings in his office, whose walls are "strategically lined with prints and things that are an easy cue for the prospects to 'break the ice' themselves." These include music CDs, pictures of his kids, and framed posters of, among others, Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart, Ella Fitzgerald, and John Cleese as the Minister of Silly Walks, from "everyone's favorite Monty Python skit."



■ People's reactions indicate whether they have a sense of humor, which is a critical litmus test for Antonioli. Those who appreciate the Python reference are probably "fun people who don't get hung up over little issues," he says.

■ When prospects are referred by a previous client, Antonioli and Curtis both ask about the person they have in common. "Then I can go into how much we enjoyed working with Joe and Mary and some nuance of their project," Antonioli says.

■ Don't come on too strong, cautions Dave Bryan of Blackdog Design/Build/Remodel, Salem, N.H. "Ours is a consultative sell, not high pressure," he says, "so it is sort of like a first date." —L.T.

SALES SCHOOL 101

Working with Negotiating Cultures

THE PROBLEM

Foreign-born clients and prospects who try to negotiate every aspect of the project.

THE REALITY

Get used to it. "Most of the world negotiates everything," says Michael Lee, a multicultural marketing consultant. As your market becomes increasingly diverse, your growth may hinge on homeowners from the "negotiating cultures" of Asia and elsewhere.

For perspective, consider that the average hourly wage in India is 33 cents. "It can be a big deal for someone from India to save \$10," or \$1,000, Lee points out. Time may be money here, but elsewhere time is for developing relationships. They're not bargaining to beat you up, but because bargaining is deeply and irreversibly ingrained in their cultures.

THE SOLUTION

Become a better negotiator. Lee, who teaches a workshop called "Black Belt Negotiating," says you should expect to do some negotiating but should also know how to shut it off. Try saying, "If there's no more negotiating, I will give you a very special gift at the end of the project." From then on, each time they try to bargain you down, remind them of the gift in a casual, light-hearted way.

Prepare for "nibblers," or clients who ask for freebies after signing the contract. For example, "If they ask for upgraded hardwood," Lee says, "ask them to increase their deposit or something." Be firm. They'll soon realize that you'll always nibble back, and they'll stop.

If you absolutely never negotiate, say so in a way that negotiating clients understand. They'll think you're a liar if you flat-out say, "We don't negotiate." Say that because you've charged this price for other projects, to save face with your other clients you must do this job at the same price. "They'll never ask you to lose face," Lee says.

CAVEAT

Select a gift unique to the client or to their project, but be careful. Some gifts — even colors of wrapping paper — can be offensive. To Asians, for instance, clocks symbolize the winding down of time; "It's like saying, 'I wish you were dead,'" Lee says. His book, *Opening Doors* lays out gift-giving do's and don'ts.

Michael Lee, www.ethnoconnect.com; 800.417.7325. Lee will be speaking at the *Remodeling Leadership Conference*, May 18-20, 2006. For more information, visit www.remodeling-conf.com. —L.T.

