Product knowledge may be a dangerous thing

It seems perfectly sensible to assume that all salespeople are completely familiar with all aspects of their product. They are expected to have the answers to all the clever questions, as well as the dim and the frankly daft ones, about what they are selling. What is the handle made of? Where are products sourced? Is there a helpline to provide user support? Which is the most popular model?

For some salespeople the product knowledge issue is no problem because they have chosen to sell products they are deeply interested in. Don’t keen golfers open golf shops? Don’t boy-racers choose to become car salesmen? Don’t great cooks open restaurants?

Can there ever be any downside to sales staff being enthusiasts? Possibly, particularly if the customer does not share the same outlook.

Try a car showroom. Most of the sales staff are youngish men. And they know their stuff. Many live and breathe cars. They might not know the capital of Serbia, the plot of Macbeth or the way to calculate the circumference of a circle, but they know about obscure car names and numbers. They know the models well. Some probably make Clarkson look like an ignoramus.

The same pattern is found in other shops selling technical equipment. Camera and IT shops, DIY warehouses and those wonderfully old-fashioned hardware stores.

It’s pretty clear what managers want from salespeople. They need to be socially skilled, attentive, energetic and robust. They need to be optimists able to cope with setbacks and hardships.

They need to be able to “read the customer” and have sales IQ. They need to be adaptable to their needs: see where they are coming from and respond appropriately. And whatever else they do, they must not “leak contempt” for the customers’ taste and preferences, or worse, pooh-pooh their suggestions or choices.

Most people can describe an experience where sales or service staff intimidated them. That used to be the way the poorly paid head wine-waiter (sommelier) got his revenge on some nouveau riche.
wide-boy out to impress his girlfriend – the slightly raised eyebrow and
snarled lip as the hapless beer-drinker chose and mispronounced the
“wrong” wine to complement the food.

Women say this happens in posh dress shops; men in places of high-
tech products. Try going into a specialist electronics shop that deals with
computer games to buy one for a 12-year-old, mad-keen nephew. Where
to begin?

The really well-informed, product-enthusiast salesperson may be a
problem for three reasons. The first is that they may find it difficult to hide
their contempt or pity for someone so obviously ignorant about something
so important. How, they wonder, can anyone at the beginning of the twenty-
first century not know, care about or use a Wii or Sony PlayStation 3? What
is their problem? Are they dim, pathetic, or worse – a non-believer? Do you
have to speak really simply or slowly to these people so obviously unable
to keep up with modern progress? So they patronize. Not a recommended
response for sales staff.

The next problem is revenge. Sales staff are often not paid well. Some
even eschew better pay to be around their favorite products. A sort of labor
of love. A sacrifice worth it. And some are easily made jealous of guys
with thick wallets. The multiple credit card owner. The get-it-at-any cost
customer. They seem naïve, gullible and childlike. Indeed their ignorance
makes them unworthy of the best products. A wine waiter once refused a
drunken party of businessmen one of his best bottles of claret because they
were not in a state to appreciate it.

The whole point about being gullible is that on some level the client
becomes an easy target. Easy to sell old stock; less popular models; low-
priced tat. The purchaser does not know what questions to ask, how to
specify criteria or indeed how to interrogate the salesperson. So the venge-
ful, greedy, product enthusiast can make an easy killing. But he or she
certainly doesn’t guarantee the customer loyalty or repeat purchasing.
Chances are that those customers discover they have been duped and never
return. Short-term gain, long-term loss.

The final problem is egocentrism. People buy and use products for
many different reasons. Most never use all the fancy add-ons and spe-
cial features of cars, computers and cameras. Some do: that is why
they bought them. Lots don’t. The sales skill is finding out what peo-
ple really want the product for. Don’t confuse, overwhelm or intimidate.
What is their situation, what is their problem, what product will satisfy
that need?