

# SBM

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## Differentiating Your Selling Process

### Two Five-Cent Mints Can Make A Difference

by Fred Firestone

**Two five-cents mints can make a difference.** I read in one of Tom Peters' books about the individual who hurried into Beltramo's Liquor Store in Palo Alto, Calif., told the clerk what he wanted and threw down his American Express card. He wanted the clerk to move. That day American Express's processing time was inordinately long. Customer became extremely frustrated. At whom—American Express? No. His anger was directed at the clerk behind the counter. Finally, Amex approved. The clerk realized the customer's frustration and how Beltramo's service image was in jeopardy. He reached behind the counter and brought out two five-cent mints and put them in the customer's bag. He thanked the customer for his business and asked him to accept mints as a small token of appreciation for the customer having to wait so long. His sincere words and action went beyond what the customer expected. The customer walked out feeling good about the clerk and Beltramo's.

Two lessons. **Lesson 1:** Whether one is satisfied with a purchase has as much to do with the buying experience as with whether the product/service actually does what it's supposed to do. **Lesson 2:** Quality of buying experience is a function of customer's expectations—if not much is expected, the greater the perceived value.

**Two five-cent mints can make a difference.** I was waiting to board my Southwest Airlines flight. An announcement was made that the flight was cancelled and that passengers should check in with the gate agent to secure a spot on

a future flight. I got in line and saw what seemed like miles of people in front of me, all with a ticket and all with an "attitude," silently fuming about the inconvenience and the implications of not reaching their destinations on time. I recalled the Beltramo's incident. The similarity struck me. I was selling and the ticket agent was buying. Other than valid tickets, the only other thing the buyer/ticket agent expected from our line of disgruntled passengers was a lot of "venting of frustration." It occurred to me that if I could provide the agent with a better buying experience than she expected, I could differentiate myself and have a better chance of being on the next flight.

I happened to have had two five-cent mints in my coat pocket. Finally, my turn. As I presented my ticket, I put the two mints in her hand, told her not to misconstrue my actions and inquired whether there might be a seat on the next flight for me. She looked at the two mints and with a deadpan expression said, "For four mints, you're first on." We struck a deal. The fact that the clerk expected an "attitude" to accompany each ticket worked to my benefit.

**Two five-cent mints can make a difference.** For years, I fared poorly in getting past gatekeepers to get to decision makers. All too often, the response to my inquiry was, "send us your literature and we'll get back to you." Sound familiar? After sending out what seemed like thousands of dollars of literature that probably ended up in round files, I started to think about the applicability of the Beltramo's incident and my experience with the Southwest flight. Why couldn't I use two five-cent mints

to give the gatekeeper a better buying experience than he/she expected from the typical salesperson. Not dissimilar from the Southwest agent, gatekeepers didn't expect much from salespeople trying to crash their gate.

This was an opportunity to provide more value. I changed my system. I would call the gatekeeper and tell him/her this was a sales call and that they could hang up any time. (I definitely sounded different and never heard the dial tone.) I wouldn't ask to talk with the boss; rather, I would ask for the gatekeeper's advice. I told them I had something of great value for their company. Could they please help me by pointing me in a direction—how does one get material in front of the decision maker? More often than not, I would be rescued: "Send it to me and I'll see that it's looked at." Because I wasn't throwing the fastball they expected, the change-up (more honest, asking for advice) was working. Now the five-cent mints. I would put my literature in one envelope and address it to the boss. I put that envelope in a bigger envelope that I would address to the gatekeeper. I would include a thank you letter and tape to it...two five-cent mints. Would I get in front of the decision maker every time? No, but my opportunities to do so improved considerably.

**Two five-cent mints can make a difference.** Try it.

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