

Building rapport with your customer

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In a field that at times feels hyper-focused on spreadsheets, financial statements and ratios, it is crucial that credit managers not lose sight of the value of strong communication in all facets of their work.

Why it matters: Building a strong relationship with your customer is the cornerstone of a strong credit approach. While it may feel irrelevant, gaining customers' trust can help you gain valuable information that can shape your credit decisions going forward.

“Communication is the root of any relationship,” said Chris Birdwell, credit manager at BG Products (Wichita, KS). “I made sure my team adhered to the Five Ps: Professional, Persistent, Persuasive, Prepared and Passionate. Embracing them ensures strong communication in all manners and levels of conversations.”

Having a strong bond with a customer helps credit managers be more proactive about budding cash flow issues or bankruptcies brewing beneath the surface. And further down the line, when times get tough for their company, customers may reach out to you directly and prioritize paying their debts to you. Of course, building that rapport takes time and can feel awkward to newer credit managers. It is important to approach these conversations with curiosity.

“Ask all the questions!” said Somer John, AR team lead at Trinity Logistics (Seaford, DE). “Make your questions strategic but also ask them in a conversational way that shows you want to work with them, not that you are a credit dictator.”

Those questions will get you the basic information you need on a customer, but when it comes to building a rapport, you want to dive a bit deeper. “Something we do at Trinity in our credit and collections department is a ‘Get-to-know-your-customer call’ where the collector or credit manager will choose a few customers a month to call and just say, ‘Hey! This isn’t a collections call, instead I’d just love to get to know more about you and your company,’” said John. “Usually, the conversation is about how long they’ve been at that company, what they love about their job and sometimes it even gets personal about their family or home life. These conversations almost always deepen the connection and create a better relationship.”

It’s important that you learn not just the ins and outs of your customer as a company, but that you also take the time to learn more about the people who are running the operation. “I try to learn as much as I can about the person and what they’re interested in,” said Kevin Stinner, [CCE](#), [CCRA](#), credit manager at J.R. Simplot Company (Boise, ID). “I have one customer that loves baseball, so whenever I call them up, I always pull up the MLB standings.”

Building a relationship with a customer also means gaining their trust, something immensely valuable in a field where sensitive documents like financial statements are critical to assessing credit worthiness. For Stinner, building a customer’s trust meant calling him as he was driving to work in the morning to discuss his account and help find a level of credit that they both felt comfortable with.

“At first, I could not extend the level of credit he wanted to without seeing his company’s financial statements, but I said he could wire me the money every month,” Stinner said. “After two years, he eventually gave me the financial statements. It took two years to get them from him, but since we had

formed a relationship, he felt comfortable enough to send them off to me fully knowing that I wasn't going to run off with them.”

The bottom line: The importance of strong communication with customers cannot be overstated. Whether you are looking to secure more information on a company, talking out a dispute or just looking to strengthen your relationship, the way that you approach conversations and the questions you ask can make a big difference.