

HAND-SELLING

A TRAINING MANUAL PROVIDED BY



TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE BASICS.....	3
PRODUCT STRATEGY.....	5
SOCIAL STRATEGY.....	9
READING CUSTOMER CUES.....	11
ACTIVE LISTENING.....	13
PRACTICE & EXERCISE.....	14
CONCLUSION.....	16

THE BASICS

What is Handselling?

Handselling is a term that originated in the book industry. It refers to the practice of promoting books through personalized recommendation rather than by publisher-sponsored marketing. Handselling comes easier for some folks than for others, but it is a learnable skill. With a little effort and care, everyone can become better at handselling.

The best handsellers share the following traits:

- They have genuine enthusiasm for their product
- They are active listeners
- They know how to ask open-ended questions
- They have knowledge about their products
- When they don't know something, they understand where to find the information they need

Why Handsell?

Handselling is more fun for everyone involved—as a salesperson, you get to talk about the books *you* like best, not just the new hot title of the week. Your response to the customer provides a moment of connection, not just a transaction—they will also get to talk about the things they like!

When done right, handselling feels more like an *organic interpersonal experience* than a high-pressure sales tactic. It works by building connections between the salesperson and the customer. Our shops are part of a greater community, and taking time with each customer helps us better understand the individuals in our community and the community as a whole.

Training Objectives

On the next page is a list of the overview of objectives you will learn throughout this training. Speak with your manager in regards to how they would like you to proceed through this manual.

Objective

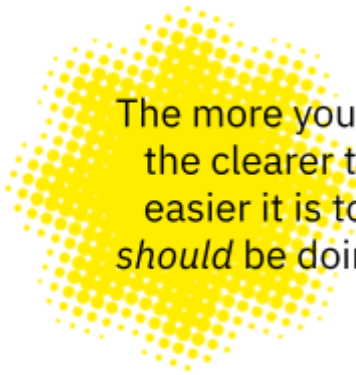
Gain a solid foundation regarding what **handselling** looks like, why we use it, and what the benefits of it are.

Understand the basics of using **Product Knowledge** to connect with customers and generate sales.

Understand how to use **Social Connection** to build rapport and create organic selling experiences with customers.

Learn to recognize common **Customer Cues** to better understand their responses.

Learn how to be an **Active Listener** when in conversation with the Customer.



The more you engage with customers,
the clearer things become and the
easier it is to determine what you
should be doing.

John Russell - CEO & Investor

PRODUCT STRATEGY

What is “The Product Strategy” of Handselling?

The Product Strategy of handselling is a sales technique built from the salesperson’s knowledge of their product. The Product Strategy is straight-to-the-point and easier to use with customers who are in a hurry or may, initially, seem uninterested in talking (in other words, may not be as open to the Social Strategy of Handselling).

Important Forms of Product Knowledge

Getting to know your product, especially in an expansive field like comics, is a long-term project—and you’ll never know *everything*. Here are some major “categories” of product you should familiarize yourself with:

New Releases	Many people are coming in for the weekly new releases. Take a moment every week to check on what titles have just been published, and what will be published soon.
Popular Favorites	Familiarize yourself with award-winning books and books that are frequently discussed by comics fans. Pay attention to the broader fan discussions of titles (at cons, online, etc), and also to what is specifically popular with your local community.
Age-Appropriate Titles	Know what books are appropriate for certain age groups and reading levels. Learn how to quickly determine audience and age level even if you are not familiar with the contents.
Product Lines	Familiarize yourself with certain publishers and imprints. For example, Vault Comics focus on horror, sci-fi, and fantasy comics. This can help you identify a book’s content and intended audience even if you are not familiar with the story.

Where Do I Get This Information?

There is simply no way you will be able to read every single book that comes into your store. That’s why it’s important to know where you can find information about books, even if you haven’t read them yet. Here are some sources you should turn to:

- **Your Fellow Staff.** Read any “staff recommendation” cards or posts folks make. If you have more questions, talk with them! Telling a customer, “[Insert name here] has been raving about this book!” still feels like an honest, genuine recommendation.

- **Solicits.** Flip through *Previews*, other preview catalogs, and marketing emails. These marketing materials will generally provide brief plot synopses and comp titles (see below).
- **Customers.** You can turn a conversation with a customer into a covert fact-finding mission. If someone brings up a book they like, ask what they are enjoying about the book.
- **Reviews & Discussion.** Do you have a favorite reviewer on Tiktok or Youtube? Or do you read a newsletter or a blog that recommends and reviews comics? These kinds of resources can be helpful for expanding your knowledge about books you haven't been exposed to yet.

Comp Titles

Marketing material for new books will often advertise a new book by including multimedia comp titles (short for “comparative titles”) like: “This book is like *X-Men* meets *The Breakfast Club!*” One of the most common ways you will use product knowledge to handsell books is by taking advantage of comp titles like these.

Comp titles are useful for a lot of reasons:

- They help you quickly describe a book without giving away plot spoilers or getting bogged down in details.
- They are very adaptable: you can “comp” plot, tone, visual style, or intended audience.
- They are an excellent shorthand for figuring out a customer’s specific interests.
- They are useful when you don’t have the exact title a customer is looking for, but have another title you think they will like.

Here are some important things to consider when suggesting comp titles for a customer:

- **What other media is a customer interested in?** This is especially valuable if a customer is new to comics! Ask them about their favorite movies, TV shows, video games, novels, etc.
- **Who is the author or artist of the work a customer mentions?** Is there other work available by those creators, or frequent collaborators of those creators?
 - For example, a customer may say they enjoyed the *Locke & Key* TV show. Of course you could show the original comic, but you could also show them other works by Joe Hill, like *Plunge* or *Basket Full of Heads*. Or, you could show them *Rain*, an adaptation of a Joe Hill short story. Or, you could show them Gabriel Rodriguez’s *Little Nemo: Return to Slumberland*.
- **What does the customer like about the work?** Is it the visual style, the writing style, the genre, or the theme? What *don’t* they like?
 - For example, a customer says their favorite TV show is *Bones*. They might like murder mysteries like *The Good Asian*. They might care more about the found-family aspect, and prefer something like *Runaways*. Or, they could be interested in stories about autistic characters, and therefore might enjoy a memoir like *Invisible Differences*. The only way to find out what a customer really wants is to ask!

Not everything will work the first time, and that’s okay! You don’t need to force a connection—and a rejection can also be a useful way to narrow down what the customer wants!

Age-Appropriate Recommendations

A parent comes into your shop one afternoon asking which Deadpool comic is best for their seven-year-old. A nine year old picks up *Fungirl* because they think it looks funny. What do you do?

The truth is, if you are not an area expert, it can be really tricky to figure out age-appropriate recommendations for kids...and the fact that we're selling comics makes things *extra* tricky. There is no standard rating system for comics like there is for video games, TV, and movies. There is also a long-standing cultural bias that associates all superheroes—and to some extent, all comics—as “kids’ stuff.” But we know that’s *definitely* not true! Luckily, there are few broad guidelines that can help you navigate the world of age-appropriate recommendations! Here are a few steps:

- **Ask about reading level.** You don't need to understand all the differences between a 4th and a 5th grade reading level. But, you can pay attention to some details. For example, if the text is small, it will be harder for younger and struggling readers to see. How many words are on a page? Very text-heavy pages will be appropriate for older readers, and difficult for younger readers. Take a glance at the length and difficulty of the words, too. Young readers appreciate simpler words and shorter sentences.
- **Ask the parents what values they have when it comes to content.** Some parents care very much about exposure to violence, and some don't...but do care if there is any sexual content. The same goes for profanity. Be frank and honest about content with parents, and they'll let you know what their boundaries are.
- **Check the book!** Many graphic novels will have a recommended age range printed on the back or included in the impressum at the front (this may also contain information on the theme and content).
- **Learn about kid-friendly publishers and imprints.** For example, Scholastic and Graphix produce books that are aimed at early readers through middle school. Same with Random House Graphic. First Second ranges from middle readers to young adult books.
- **For popular categories, like manga and superhero comics, make a short list of titles rated “G” and “PG”.** This way, if a third grader wants to read *Chainsaw Man*, but her dad doesn't want her reading violent content, you can jump right to your list rather than jumping through a series of comp titles that are still inappropriate.

SOCIAL STRATEGY

Social Strategy is a handselling approach centered around building a relationship with the customer, and creating recommendations based on the information you discover by connecting with the customer as a person. By making the customer feel welcome and seen, you build customer loyalty and encourage word-of-mouth marketing. The Social Strategy works for many types of customers, but is especially effective with folks who aren't traditional comic book fans.

Creating an Opening

When a customer comes into the store, greet them warmly. Then, create a conversation. Avoid asking questions that produce a simple yes/no answer. Focus on questions that begin with "What," "Why," and "How."

Instead of Asking...	Ask:
Can I help you today?	What brings you into the shop today?
Have you read (XYZ) series?	What kind of stories do you like?
Did you like (XYZ) book?	What did you like about (XYZ)?

Shopping With a Friend

There's a simple fact in retail: it's not the *product*, it's the *people*. Customers can go anywhere to buy a book, including making an order from home while they're still in their pajamas. If we assume the *product* is the primary focus of a customer's experience, we make it too easy for them to choose a cheaper or more convenient option. On the other hand, if you make the customer feel like it's worth getting out of their PJs to come into your shop, they are more likely to visit, browse, and explore—even if you don't have the exact title they thought they wanted.

A friendly atmosphere, pleasant conversation, and good recommendations—these are the things that create loyal customers that will come back over and over. You are trying to make sure every customer leaves having made a purchase they can feel confident in. You want your customer to feel like they are out shopping with a friend, not being force-fed something they don't want.

Little Things Can Last Forever

It doesn't take much to make a customer feel special...it just takes a little effort and a willingness to connect with new people.

- **Ask your customers' names...and use them!** This little thing makes customers feel less like cookie cutter cash cows and more like part of your community. It's okay if you mess up, customers will appreciate that you are making the effort.
- **Remember what a customer reads, and suggest comp titles unprompted.** If a customer bought issues of *Stray Dogs*, greet them by saying, "Hey, I remember you read all of *Stray Dogs*, did you know there's a new series by the same team?" or "Hey, this new book came in and I thought of you." If they are a subscriber, slip a copy in their box and bring it up when they are checking out. Much like remembering someone's name, remembering what they read makes a customer feel seen and understood.
- **Learn one interesting fact about your customer each time you speak to them, and try to recall that when it becomes relevant.** Like remembering names and what your customer reads, this lets your customer know you see them as a full and complex human, not a cog in your machine. In this case, your facts don't even have to be about comics! If it helps, keep a post-it note with relevant details in a customer's box.

You don't have to be friends with all of your customers. You don't even have to *like* them! But, if you want to build a loyal customer base, you'll make sure everyone—especially the ones who rub you the wrong way—feels welcome and important when they step inside your door.

READING CUSTOMER CUES

Whether you use the “Product Strategy” or “Social Strategy,” one of the key skills of handselling is learning to read customer cues. When showing products to customers, watch and listen to how they respond. What are they saying? What is their body language telling you? This will help you figure out your best next step.

It can be hard to understand a customer’s personality when you have just met them. However, there are social cues and elements of body language that can guide you. For example, a person who is interested in what you are saying may demonstrate behaviors like:

- Following you as you walk toward a book’s location
- Turning their body or their eyes towards you
- Asking follow up questions
- Reaching for the product as you hand it to them

A person who is disinterested may demonstrate behaviors such as:

- Turning their body or eyes away from you
- Looking at their phone
- Looking at a different section of the store
- Not taking a product you hand them
- Making faces that express dissatisfaction or interest



NOTE:

The examples listed above are very common social cues in the United States. But they’re not universal! Neurodivergent people or from different cultures may not follow the same social cues. And that’s okay! This is why it’s always important to listen to the customer’s feedback, and avoid making too many assumptions

Tick, Tock

Some customers come in to browse leisurely, while others need to get in and get out. Customers who want to browse will get annoyed if they feel rushed, while customers who are in a hurry will be annoyed if you don’t respect their time. Remember that you are not only working to find the right item for the customer, but to make their whole experience a pleasant one. That means you also have to make sure you find the right item in the right amount of

time! Watch the customer's body language and social cues to better understand the customer's timeframe.

Find the "Yes"

Sometimes, without realizing it, we say "no" for the customer. This is a sure fire way to miss out on a sale. What does saying no for the customer look/sound like?

- **Closed-ended questions.** If you ask a "Yes or No" question, your answer will be a *yes* or *no*. "Can I help you find anything" is the single biggest killer in retail sales conversations. We often instinctively say "No," when asked this question, even if we do need help. Find ways to start open dialogue with your customers.
- **Tasking not asking.** If you are on the sales floor, your first and most important job is helping customers. If you are working on another project, your customers may feel like they are bothering or interrupting you. So, if a customer is in the store, stop what you are doing and help the customer. If they want to continue browsing quietly, be sure to check in and let the customer know they have your full attention.
- **Mocking customer choices.** Customers appreciate honesty and transparency, but when you outright tell a customer you don't like something, especially if they ask about it, you risk alienating them. Remember that sales is not about you, it's about the customer. If a customer asks about something you don't like, find a way to be honest but also explain why other people enjoy the book. For example, "My coworker Sandy has been raving about this book!" Don't risk making someone feel bad for what they love, just because you didn't love it.
- **Stopping too soon.** When a customer asks for something, give multiple suggestions! If they ask about a particular genre, don't just point at the section; take them there and pull out a few favorites. Don't stop at the first or easiest suggestion. Of course, watch for a customer's cues to better understand when they are done, but until that point, keep working with the customer!

ACTIVE LISTENING

Hearing the words a customer says is a good step toward excellent customer service, but in order to be a great sales associate, you want to be an expert in active listening. Active listening means you are present in the conversation and responding to it. There are ten thousand things to do all the time, but they all only exist so that we can give our customers the best experience ever, so give your customers the time to actually listen and engage with them. Not only will it mean a lot to the customer, but it will also lead to further sales opportunities.

Eavesdropping is not only allowed in retail, it's encouraged! Listen to what everyone in the room is saying. Are you standing by a set of customers who are talking about their favorite characters? Ask them if they saw the latest issue featuring that character, or if they are excited about that character's appearance in a recent movie. If you hear someone say they can't find something while they are chatting with a friend or on the phone, find the item and take it to them. This kind of close, active listening not only helps you provide better customer service, but it's also a great loss prevention tool.

PRACTICE & EXERCISE

Instructions: Read the following customer interactions and answer the questions based on the information and social cues provided. Your responses should demonstrate your ability to actively listen, identify key details in the conversation, interpret social cues, and provide suitable recommendations or responses.

Scenario 1

Description: A customer enters the store, looking around nervously and avoiding eye contact. They are holding a list but don't approach the counter.

Customer: “My niece is 12 years old and loves adventure stories with strong female characters. She also loves to draw. But I don’t know a lot of details. What should I get her?”

Questions:

1. Using only the description of their behavior, what social cues suggest that the customer might need assistance?
2. How would you approach this customer to make them feel comfortable and offer help?
3. What key details did the customer provide about their niece’s preferences once you spoke with them?
4. List two recommendations that fit the customer’s request and explain why you chose them.

Scenario 2

Description: A regular customer comes in, looking excited and talking rapidly about a new comic book series they heard about. They are smiling and making frequent eye contact.

Customer: “Hey! I’ve been a huge fan of superhero comics for years, but I’m looking to branch out into something different. I’ve read *Saga*, and loved it. I’m interested in more stories that blend genres and have deep, complex characters. Any suggestions?”

Questions:

1. Using the description only, what do the customer’s social cues indicate about their emotional state?
2. What did the customer enjoy about *Saga*?
3. How would you respond to this customer's excitement and ensure they find what they're looking for?

4. What follow-up questions might you ask to find out more information?
5. List two recommendations that fit the customer's request and explain why you chose them.

Scenario 3

Description: A customer is browsing the shelves with a furrowed brow and sighing occasionally. They pick up a comic book, flip through it quickly, then put it back and move on to the next one.

Customer: "I guess I'm just feeling a bit overwhelmed by the choices. I've been really into mystery and detective stories lately. Where should I start?"

Questions:

1. Using the description only, what do the customer's social cues indicate about their emotional/mental state?
2. What actions would you take to assist this customer and alleviate their frustration?
3. What follow-up questions might you ask to find out more information?
4. List two recommendations that fit the customer's request and explain why you chose them.

Scenario 4

Description: A customer approaches the counter with a comic book in hand, but they are avoiding eye contact and speaking in a low, hesitant voice. They ask a few questions about the comic in their hand, but seem unsure.

Customer: "So, I read *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* this last year, but I haven't read much else. I'm looking for something unique to read next. I love sci-fi and dystopian themes, and I appreciate when the art style really stands out. But I also want something really thoughtful and smart. Is this book a good choice?"

Questions:

1. Using the description only, what do the customer's social cues indicate about their emotional/mental state?
2. What are the customer's specific interests and past reads?
3. How would you address the customer's uncertainty and help them make a confident purchase?

4. List two recommendations that fit the customer's request and explain why you chose them.

CONCLUSION

Mastering handselling skills in comics retail is essential for fostering customer loyalty and enhancing a customer's experience. By actively listening to customers and interpreting their social cues, a comic book retailer can provide personalized recommendations that resonate with each individual's tastes and preferences. Effective handselling goes beyond merely suggesting popular titles; it involves understanding the unique needs of each customer, whether they are seasoned collectors or newcomers to the world of comics. Building this rapport not only increases sales but also establishes the retailer as a trusted partner in the customer's journey through the wild world of comics.

Incorporating these handselling techniques into daily interactions will transform you from just another sales associate to a valuable guide in your community. The ability to connect with customers on a deeper level, combined with a thorough knowledge of comic book genres, authors, and artists, will ensure you can make impactful recommendations that can turn casual readers into passionate fans. As you continue to develop and refine these skills, remember that your enthusiasm and expertise are powerful tools that can inspire and cultivate a love for comics in every customer you encounter.