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Before a snowstorm canceled a grand opening event for NWTC's Corporate Conference Center Jan. 14, Hal Becker (standing on left) participated in some morning sessions with NWTC staff.

Selling the personal touch

In town for NWTC event, sales trainer urges everyone to take the extra step

By Sean Schultz

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"If I can train my dog to go to the bathroom outside, I can train anyone," said Hal Becker, a nationally recognized expert in sales, customer service and negotiating. "But I can't train my dog to be sweet."

Becker is also the best-selling author of "Lip Service," "Can I Have 5 Minutes of Your Time," and "Get What You Want," corporate-sales bibles on his favorite topics. He conducts seminars or consults to more than 140 organizations a year, always bringing humor to the forefront while helping his clients see that the personal touch with the public truly is a plus, whether your business is in a shop in the mall or if you operate out of the boardroom.

The born salesman tried to find humor when his reason for visiting Green Bay on Jan. 14 turned flaky when yet another snowstorm hit the region, cancelling the event that brought him to town in the first place. He was to be keynote speaker for an evening crowd at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College and its Grand Opening of the Corporate Conference Center, but that went kaput thanks to weather. An NWTC spokeswoman said the event will be rescheduled and Becker will return to lead it this summer.

Many would-be attendees were already familiar with Becker as a columnist in *The Business News*, business newspapers serving 22 counties in the region, where he offers tips on sales and customer service.

Knowing his flight back to Cleveland, his

home base, would be cancelled, Becker hired a rental car to get him back. He said he always enjoys his visits to friendly Green Bay. "When I come to Green Bay or anywhere in Wisconsin, the people are so nice," he said. "When I go to the south, they try to convert me. When you go to Cleveland, the people wave with one finger..."

He did meet with some people during the day at NWTC and said he encouraged everyone to go that extra step in their sales job, much like he did to become the No. 1 salesperson among Xerox Corporation's national sales force at the tender age of 22. He managed that feat by doubling the number of daily sales calls that were expected of him.

It helped that Becker was a born salesman, or so his high school aptitude tests indicated. He didn't buy it back then, thinking most salesmen are dishonest. When he had a chance to sell copiers for Xerox, his first thought was, "I don't think so," Becker said.

Attending a Xerox training session, however, transformed his life simply because he admired the science behind the training process. After that, "I always wanted to be a sales trainer... It's such a thrill when a person gets it. It's such a high when you reach someone."

One of the problems he sees in businesses large and small is that the management isn't always visible to the customers. "With the Packers, it's not a case of never seeing the coach. He's not in his office saying, 'Please just let me know if we won or lost. You need a coach on the field watching the players engage. That is everything,'" Becker said.

So it goes for the small retail shop, in the restaurant kitchen or dining room, or the large industrial plant. "You've got to be a coach on the sidelines watching the servers."

He admits to not wanting to work with the older employees on the job when he started his career. Now, at 59, he would be one of those older workers the young ones avoid. "Of course back then, our generation was high," he said.

Becker points out that a worker's performance steps up as time off approaches. "Isn't it amazing how much you get done the day before you go on vacation?"

He calls middle management "the weirdest stage in the business world's food chain. It's the worker's first taste of power and that's the worst drug you can do," Becker said. "People get a taste and abuse it. That's why 77 percent of people don't quit their jobs, they quit their boss."

The sad part of it is that companies don't seem to recognize this abuse of power and the loss of good staff because of it. "It used to be that if you lost your job, you could just get another one," Becker said. "Now, if you lose your job, there is no other one, and you lose your benefits."

This trainer believes that people can have successful careers without a college education if they have the drive and curiosity it takes to succeed. He claims the best sales people aren't the fast talkers as one might think. He even claims he's shy, although those who attend his sessions would be hard pressed to believe it. But, he said, "I'm not good at small talk. I'm good at being honest. The best sales people are low key."

Just as you can't train your dog to be nice,

you also can't train your workers to have a good attitude, to have empathy for others or to have the desire to succeed, maintains Becker. "They have to have the desire to make sales calls and a curiosity about people," he said. "I've only met a handful of great salespeople in my life."

Becker, who is semi-retired now, claims he's in the best shape physically today that he's ever been in. "I do pushups and sit-ups every day, 50 of each, and it takes me 15 minutes." But he remembers a time in his youth when he was nowhere near that able.

In fact, he was just 28 when he was diagnosed with cancer. Shortly thereafter doctors found that it had metastasized. "I was in the hospital for 8 1/2 months and I weighed 83 pounds," he said. "All my hair was gone." Even though chemotherapy and radiation therapy cured him of the disease, he still fears it. "I'm scared again with every pimple."

But Becker keeps traveling to spread his message, and he keeps writing his business columns. He also maintains a Cleveland presence serving on committees for the Chamber of Commerce and with other professional groups. And for pleasure, he finds his thrills as high as 10,000 feet piloting a parachute glider — "safer than biking," he said. More down to earth, he plays the drums at 30-some weekend gigs a year with his band, Backtraxx, known for their '60s and '70s renditions.

"I let music go out of my life for so long," said the man who picked up his first drumsticks at age 14. "I'd rather make \$62.50 playing drums than speaking."

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