What if your revenue could jump by 20 to 30% just by redirecting your focus to service rather than sales? Here's a true-life parable about that.

Back when my son was in middle school and high school, I nearly always had to help him with his projects for Science Fair or just for a science class. These projects often involved materials I wasn't used to working with. Now, if I had to do a straightforward but costly home repair and I knew pretty much exactly what I had to buy, I would go to a certain national-chain discount hardware big-box store and just walk up and down the relevant aisle until I found what I was looking for. I never expected to get more than cursory help—that is, when I could find someone in an orange apron who would talk to me. But with the science projects, I often wasn't sure exactly which materials to buy or how to assemble them. (Q: How many programmers does it take to change a light bulb? A: None—that's a hardware problem. I was that programmer.)

So when that happened, I went to my traditional full-service neighborhood hardware store. It was actually a pretty large store, though obviously not on the scale of the warehouse, and even had some basic lumber. That made it competitive with the big-box home care store, especially since it was more conveniently located. Like many other locals, I'd often stop in there for small items rather than shlep out to the edge of town to save a couple of bucks.

More important for my purposes, though, it also had very knowledgeable and experienced staff. So when I had science-project questions, I'd go talk to the resident expert, Doug, a gentleman who'd been with the store for at least twenty years (and who actually never seemed to age much). Doug would explain exactly what materials I would need and how to put the project together. And on top of that, he was kindly and patient, taking as long as it took to make sure I understood. No manager was breathing down Doug's neck to move him on to the next task. He was the original Helpful Hardware Man.

Result: a loyal customer who genuinely enjoyed the experience of shopping at the local store and who avoided the warehouse store as much as possible. Multiply me by several thousand and you know why, despite prices as much as 10% higher than the warehouse store in some cases, my local store was thriving.

The mortgage business has more in common with the hardware business than just being important to housing. Both operate within tight pricing constraints in a highly competitive market. The local hardware stores that have survived the onslaught of the big-box chain have learned that their edge is in *service*—which means not just having the right product at a reasonable price, but having staff on the sales floor who can guide shoppers to that product, explain why it's right for their particular needs, and give them tips on using or installing it. Those staffers don't come bustling up to a shopper and try to sell them something. They make sales not by persuading or pitching, but by being reliably informative, helpful, and friendly.

That’s good strategy for loan officers too. If a customer feels more comfortable with you, they are more likely to do business with you even when another company is trying to sell them a cheaper or “better” product.

Here are some tips:

Ask more questions. Your clients want to know that you understand them as individuals, with their own particular needs, motivations, and anxieties. Ask about their lives beyond the immediate business—not as if you’re interrogating them, but out of friendly curiosity.

Spend more time with every client. They’re contemplating a major financial decision, and you want them to be as relaxed as possible. So with your facial and body language as well as your words, convey to them that they have all the time they need with you.

Be more patient. Yes, clients can sometimes be frustrating—asking the same question several times even though you feel you’ve explained clearly, for example. But remember: it’s not clear until they understand it, no matter how obvious it is to you. Relax. You’ve got time.

Make yourself vulnerable. Trust is best built from a feeling of shared concerns. When you aren’t sure of the answer to a question, admit it candidly. When the client expresses a criticism of your company or what the client takes to be a misunderstanding on your part, apologize sincerely and express real sympathy and understanding.

Give more than you get. Clients are often nervous and reserved when they meet you. Draw them out with intelligent questions that show you’re interested and really listening. Project warmth and relaxation. Be prepared to create a context for the information you give them so that it makes sense to them.

Point out the risks up front. As I said, this is a major financial decision for the client. Be very frank with them about the potential downside. Ask them to weigh carefully the various factors that could affect them going forward. This is especially important since 2007, when it was discovered that shady mortgage companies had been selling loans to people who could not possibly afford them without explaining the terms and the risks those terms implied.

Be real. This is the most important tip, because if you *are* real—if you treat the client as a human being with the respect and attention they deserve and authentically engage with them—the rest will come naturally.

But remember—we can all smell BS from a mile away, so if you try to fake it and trick people into being your client, it will bite you right in your bottom line.