

Rooted in the HVAC business, Phoenix-based No Pressure Selling expands focus to other industries

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When Steve Howard was working as the service manager for Giffen-Trane, Inc. in the mid-70s, he wanted to give his techs weekly development training, but he was asked not to cut into their time in the field. So, Howard got creative.

"I made a deal with the techs," he said. "I told them, 'I will make it worth your while. I will put a program together that you'll be glad you took.'"

It was a technical training program, and it was a success. It also set the stage for the career path that would ultimately lead to Howard's nationally renowned training company, No Pressure Selling, which is part of Phoenix-based The ACT Group, Inc.

Howard also developed a training program that gave commercial customers options to make proactive repairs to equipment.

"All the techs would make a list of problems in the mechanical room, and ask customers if they'd like to solve these problems," Howard said, "and that's how we kept 16 techs busy in the slow months."

Later when Howard worked for Carrier, he regularly presented seminars to clients like the U.S. Air Force, hospitals and Motorola on how to run their chilled water plants efficiently. The program was such a success that Howard eventually started doing his own trainings on the side. As his business grew and his trainings became more in demand, his employer let him go.

Although it may have seemed like a bold move, Howard calls the experience "low-risk," because he knew he could always fall back into his former career.

"I knew I could always be a technician," he said. "You've got skills that are irreplaceable. The risk was that I would have to go and get a real job."

Howard never had to though, and in 1985, he and his wife, Charlotte, founded The ACT Group out of their home in Phoenix. They started with a catalogue, selling "The Profitable Service Agreement Kit"—ready-to-use service agreement forms—to HVAC contractors.

The niche allowed the couple to make a living, and then Howard started writing monthly columns in an industry trade publication. He heavily researched the articles and took his time providing valuable information to readers.

"My wife hated it because I did all my writing at night," Howard said with a laugh. "The printer was clanging all night long."

His articles on sales were so well-received that the industry started requesting Howard to conduct training seminars.

"That was the catalyst," he said. "It took off from there."

Today, Howard's HVAC training programs are offered exclusively to Trane and American Standard dealers. The Trane Boot Camp is celebrating its 25-year anniversary

home service/subcontracting industries.

"It's selling the way people want to buy," Mueller said. "No Pressure resonates with homeowners and customers immediately."

Howard added, "Because of the similarities between electrical and HVAC contrac-

tion meant to serve our industry at a much higher level...teaching his best practices, instead of doing," he said. "Steve utilized his one-of-a-kind skill set to educate our trades and business owners that there was a better way."

No Pressure Selling currently has five full-time trainers and two part-time trainers. The company is always looking to add new highly qualified experts to its team. One new hire they recently added to the team is Gina Hernandez, former marketing manager for Phoenix Wholesale. Hernandez, who Howard calls "a gift from heaven," is now heading up marketing for No Pressure Selling.

Hernandez said she has always enjoyed helping contractors, so she is excited to bring The ACT Group additional tools and skills to help contractors, homeowners and distributors.

"Steve is constantly asking questions and pushing the team to think outside the box to keep the valuable principles relevant and timely," she said. "I am enjoying this new chapter in my life, and love working with everyone here."

Even as the years pass and the industry evolves, the No Pressure Selling core philosophy remains relevant, and is poised to serve even more clients in the future.

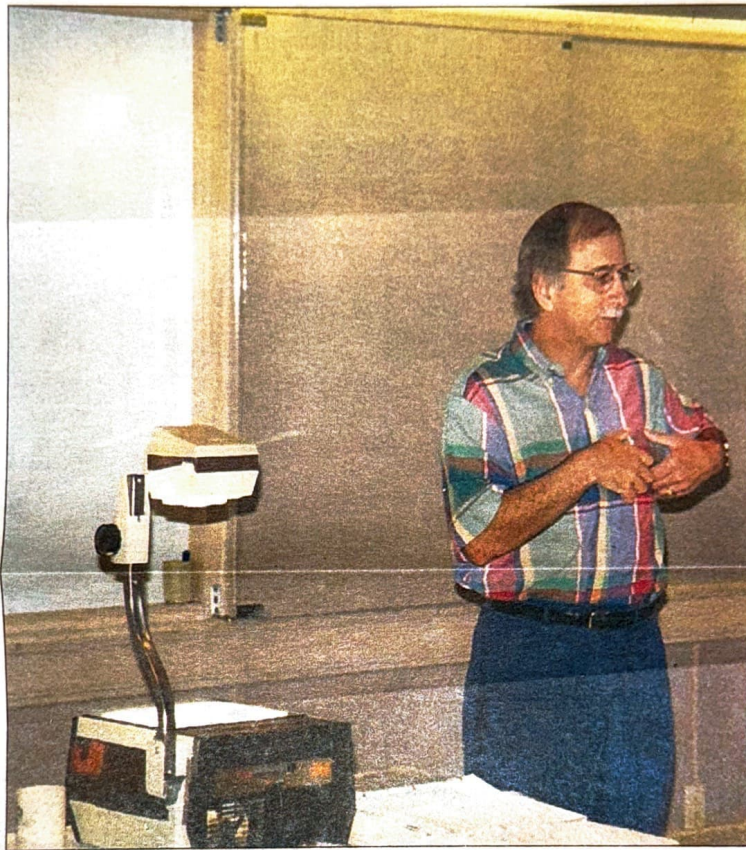
"The way people buy is continually changing, and the bar is continually being raised on our industry," Mueller said. "The beauty of No Pressure Selling is that it plays to that consumer."

And Mueller calls that a "win-win" for everyone.

"The manufacturer wins because they move more premium products; the distributor wins with higher margins and the homeowner wins with better comfort," he said. "The whole guiding principle is putting the customer first."

And at a time when labor shortages continue to plague the industry, Howard said it's a "win" for the industry as well.

"Trying to get young men and women to climb onto roofs and into attics in the heat of the summer is tough," Howard said. "We love this industry, and we are concerned about the future of this industry, but if we all do our part, the future will be bright."



Steve Howard presents at Boot Camp #1 in November 1993.

this year, and to-date has held more than 900 four-day classes throughout the U.S. and Canada.

"Ninety-five percent of our customers are referral customers," Howard said. "If you provide great value in this industry, you can grow."

Today, No Pressure Selling serves most industries where the sale is made in the home. This includes the electrical contracting industry as well.

President of No Pressure Selling James Mueller said the training is relevant in other

tors, the training we do is a perfect fit for the electrical industry. Most of these people are small contractors, who wear many hats, so they need to wear the most important hat first—the sales hat."

Louis Hobaica, president of Hobaica Services, said Howard and his trainings have served the industry well and calls him "a legend in our industry." Howard got his start in the HVAC industry in Arizona working for Hobaica's father, Paul S. Hobaica.

"Steve quickly realized that he was