

# Finding, Closing Customers with Competitive Intelligence



**Top-performing salesman Brandon Harris of Ohio Valley Ag shares his secrets for selling against the big colors.**

*By Mike Lessiter, Editor/Publisher*

**A** good salesman likes to talk, but the better ones listen. So here's your chance to learn the tricks of the trade from an award-winning salesman who talks about what has worked for him in doing battle against "Big Green."

In this article, part two of this issue's "Selling a Color Change" series, *Farm Equipment* got the chance to learn from Brandon Harris, an award-winning equipment salesman at Ohio Valley Ag, Owensboro, Ky., who was recognized at Equipment Technologies' annual meeting this summer.

Harris holds little back in sharing with others what has worked for him in going up against the larger, major-line competition. And *Farm Equipment* attentively listened for nuggets of information to help other dealer salespeople who are serious about gaining more of Brand X's business in 2008.

## Mining for Customers

Finding new customers to approach is of paramount importance to any salesman, particularly when you don't sell the color that the farmer's dad and granddad bought. The best tool that Harris has found for unearthing ripe-for-picking customers is the Environmental Working Group web site, [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org), which is known for its Farm Subsidy Database.

Regardless of your opinion on the farm subsidies or the fact that such



**For Ohio Valley Ag's Brandon Harris, the path to selling color changes include: mining the subsidy database for prospects, making meaningful cold-call visits and assembling the facts in order to present a true competitive analysis.**

information is posted on the web for the world to see, it's an excellent tool for the salesperson who knows how to put it to work.

In explaining the site, Harris notes that he uses it primarily to discover the farmers who may have a need for his self-propelled sprayer line, a big ticket item. Through this site, he can concentrate on the farmers receiving subsidies in his area. For a walk-through of how the site works, see the sidebar article, "How to 'Mine' the Farm Bill Database for Customer Intelligence."

## Making the Cold-Call Work

Once Harris has found a customer worth his attention, what's next? For

Harris, it's the cold-call visit, as he prefers to make his first impression a face-to-face encounter. "If it's someone I don't know, I drive there," he says. "And it's always someone I don't know."

Cold-calling is uncomfortable for a lot of salespeople, especially when the place of business doubles as "home." While his main purpose for driving up the lane is to make a sale, Harris acknowledges that you have to find something to offer the customer, some benefit of the visit (see "Finding Some Value to Offer on a Cold Call" sidebar article).

"You need something to offer, maybe just some information they weren't aware of," he says. "I'll even tell them, 'you need to know me and here's why ... we sell the type of equipment you own and might have something in our inventory or parts house when you need it.' If I was afraid to cold-call, I couldn't be a sales rep in this business."

The standard greeting, says Harris, is along the lines of, "You don't know me, but I work for Ohio Valley Ag and wanted to stop by tell you who OVA is and who I am." Often, he says, "they've heard of the dealership or seen our ads, but have questions

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about what we carry.”

It's a good lead into a first-time conversation, he says, and helps him talk about the type of crops being grown, farm size, the equipment used and then, into a conversation about parts. “Regardless of what they drive or pull, they'll need to replace parts at some point that we can help them with.”

The key to making cold-calling work, he says, is respecting the farmer's time. “Cold-calling is all about being respectful. You can't waste their time and you must offer them something.

“There are certain times of year when they're really busy and you

can't bother them,” says Harris. “During those times, you do something else.”

For those salesmen who are gunshy about the cold call, he has this advice. “You've sold more machines than that farmer's bought,” he says. “You've seen and received feedback from more guys than he ever will.” That alone should make salespeople feel more confident about the value they can bring to the customer — dealers possess the knowledge to help them drive a sound buying decision.

Like all good salesman, each of Harris' activities has a goal. “My goal is for every potential customer that

fits our category to know me, and not just me knowing them — there's a difference. I need them to remember to call me. Sometimes that takes several visits, but that's the long-term goal. When they call me at the dealership and don't want to talk to anyone else, that's what I want.”

Harris recalls the Purdue Univ. study that concluded it takes, on average, five contacts to close a deal. “I find that to be pretty close to being right on, including a good phone conversation. On some visits, you can see that some guys begin to know they have a buying decision to make, but might wait until next year. I won't spend a lot of time with them now if

## How to 'Mine' the Farm Bill Database for Customer Intelligence

The Farm Bill Database contains more than 358,000 individuals that have a dollar value associated with their subsidy benefits, which represented \$9.8 billion from 2003-2005. In addition to individual farmers, the database also displays the top businesses, ranked by the amount of subsidy payments they received from USDA over the same period.

To show how the [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org) web site works, *Farm Equipment* referenced the site to locate farm customers in Ohio Valley Ag's home county of Daviess County, Ky.

From <http://farm.ewg.org/sites/farmbill2007/>, we select the state of Kentucky. Here, on a statewide summary screen, we learn that \$338 million were made in commodity program payments for program years 2003-2005. At this screen, we are given the option of mining the state of Kentucky data by county. Because we are looking for farmers in a specific county, we select Daviess County from the pull-down menu.

We learn that Daviess County has paid out \$17.8 million in commodity program payments for program years 2003-2005, and that farm businesses received \$7.3 million. This screen gives the user the option of examining the top farm businesses or the top beneficiaries, by program year and cumulative 2003-2005, respectively. In this example, we will choose the top farm businesses by program year 2003-2005. The resulting screen is pictured above.

The user can drill down further by clicking on the farm name. In this example, we choose to examine Hubert Beyke & Sons, Whitesville, Ky., who we learn has received \$689,321 in crop subsidies from program year 2003-2005.

By clicking on this farm, we learn that USDA directly attributed \$893,050 in subsidy payments to Hubert Beyke & Sons in program years 2003-2005, with benefits of \$223,263 each to four owners. Further, this screen shows the direct payments made by crop, the countercyclical payments by crop, the loan deficiency payments by crop, the marketing loan gains by crop, the conservation reserve programs and the conservation reserve program benefits.

Additional clicks of the mouse show full program participation, program benefits by year, other farm locations and ownership interests, giving the user some good insight into the operation's size, crops and members of the buying team.

“I segregate my accounts by county to help me concen-

Rank	Farm Businesses	Location	Crop Subsidy Program PY 2003-2005 †
1	Hubert Beyke & Sons	Whitesville, KY 42378	\$689,321
2	Olis Craig & Sons	Maceo, KY 42355	\$391,415
3	Hamilton Grain Farms LLC	Calhoun, KY 42327	\$369,515
4	Zaunmann Brothers LLC	Owensboro, KY 42303	\$317,811
5	Castlen Bros	Owensboro, KY 42303	\$294,355
6	Goetz Brothers	Owensboro, KY 42303	\$259,544
7	Joe Foster Farms LLC	Owensboro, KY 42301	\$241,756
8	Mulican Settles Farm	Owensboro, KY 42301	\$238,699
9	Hilco Farms Inc	Owensboro, KY 42304	\$232,819
10	Sirois Farms Inc	Owensboro, KY 42301	\$229,025
11	Speaks Brothers	Owensboro, KY 42303	\$189,580
12	Taylor Brothers	Utica, KY 42376	\$172,433
13	Coil Farms	Owensboro, KY 42303	\$166,907

The [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org) site reveals the top farm businesses receiving crop subsidies for program years 2003-2005.

trate,” says Brandon Harris, Ohio Valley Ag. “If I'm working a county I'm not familiar with, I go to the website and pull up the county and use the locator to find the big guys, the ones doing the type of farming that fits the equipment we have to offer.

“If I don't know them, I have a book of county maps and write their name down and use a designated number and go find them. These guys are not always easily accessible. They can be in the middle of nowhere, down the backroads. But if I've noted where they are, I can go and find them when I'm in the area.”

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## What Doesn't Work? Failing to Ask for the Sale

Brandon Harris says he's seen other people do everything right on a competitive sales call, yet forget to ask for the sale. "There's a breaking point in the process of selling the equipment where the customer wants you to tell him what to do.

"If you're a good salesman and on top on your game, that customer learns to listen to you and not just resist your sales pitch. You've got to find that breaking point when the customer depends on the salesman to lead him in right direction. But you need competitive knowledge to do it."

they're not ready. With those guys, I touch base occasionally and when the time is right to get something done, I set up a time to talk hard numbers, equipment specs and what they really need."

He admits that he's gotten lucky on a single visit and sold a machine, sight unseen. "It does happen once in a while," he says.

### Doing the Competitive Analysis

Harris believes that much of his firm's success has to do with the sales team boning up on the equipment that they're competing with. Harris carries a document in his truck that his sales colleague, J.R. Mullinax, prepared.

"Once that farmer buys a green machine, it's hard to ever get it back," says Harris. "Deere has the advantage of a full line, with all the multi-unit discounts. It looks very enticing to the customer.

"When people buy John Deere, it's hard to ever get them out of it. If you don't prevent that sale to begin with, you'll have an uphill battle."

Selling the Apache self-propelled sprayer, Harris finds that his greatest competition is used Deere sprayers. It's tough to compete against the Deere name, so he believes you need to show the hard evidence to impact farmers' decisions. That's why you'll see him at the Farm Progress Show picking up every piece of literature on self-propelled sprayers that he can find.

"As a salesman, you need to load your arsenal. You don't know what kind of situation you'll walk into, so you've got to know the competition.

"I love it when I can go to a farm and look at the competitor's machine and talk specs on that unit better than the other salesman. To the farmer, he thinks, 'that guy really knows something.' Every machine has its advantages, but that doesn't mean I have to talk about theirs."

Harris cautions against selling in a way that gives the profession a black eye. "You can't mislead people, or even appear that way because then you're not viewed as being useful to the farmer," he says. "All information that we gather, we make sure that it's

**"As a salesman, you need to load your arsenal. You don't know what kind of situation you'll walk into, so you've got to know the competition..."**

accurate and useful to customer."

After some time selling against the used John Deere sprayers with only bits and pieces and qualitative counter arguments, Harris and Mullinax went through the exercise of assigning hard numbers to things.

### Facts & Figures as a Sales Tool

The first step, regardless of the type of equipment, is recognizing what you offer over the competition. While the following example pertains to spray equipment, Harris says that the same concepts, and the same level of competitive detail, can be found for any side-by-side equipment comparison.

In Harris' and Mullinax' competitive analysis document, they compared the new AS1010 Apache sprayer against 3-year-old John Deere sprayers (4700, 4710 and 4720).

In this case, they cited warranty, dry weight, mechanical drive, cost of operation and depreciation cost as key competitive advantages to exploit.

**1. Warranty** — a 5-year limited warranty vs. an as-is warranty on Deere machines more than 1 year old, or a 1-year, engine-only warranty on a more recent unit.

**2. Dry Weight** — The Apache unit weighs more than 5,000 pounds less than the Deere unit, resulting in less soil compaction.

**3. Mechanical Drive** — Their analysis makes three main points about the mechanical drive.

"First, the Apache offers a more efficient use of engine horsepower.

Hydro drive machines require up to 25% of the engine's horsepower to run the hydrostat. You want to use what horsepower you buy and not waste it.

"Second is the simplicity of the machine, as direct-drive units don't require all the hydraulic lines, electrical wires, wheel motors and power hubs, making it easier to service and repair.

"Third is increased fuel economy."

**4. Cost of Operation** — Here, Mullinax and Harris did their homework, drawing data from several sources: Equipment Technologies and John Deere web sites for machine specs, used machine pricing from [www.tractorhouse.com](http://www.tractorhouse.com), tire prices from Raben Tire, Evansville, Ind., and Deere parts prices from [jdparts.deere.com](http://jdparts.deere.com)

**Fuel Costs.** They used data from a chemical retail outlet and a customer who ran an 8500 Eagle in 2005 and switched to an AS1010 Apache in 2006. The customer tracked fuel consumption and found that when covering the same acres and putting the same hours on each machine during

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a set time of year, his fuel usage dropped from 100 gallons per day to 50 gallons per day. 500 hours of use during the first 6 months of the year averages 9 hours per day. 44.44 days x 50 gallons equals 2,222 gallons saved x \$2.70 per gallon. The net result: \$5,999.40 saved on fuel costs.

**Filter Costs.** \$672.17 vs. \$908.75 on the Deere unit.

**Tire Costs.** According to a local tire dealer, a used machine generally has about 25% wear on the tires compared to new. Titan 380/90R46 tires sell for about \$1,176 each, plus mounting. The tire wear on a used machine that a customer buys could cost up to \$294 per tire.

**Common Parts.** Apache uses industry standard items from Raven,

Banjo, Spraying Systems and Hypro, which can be purchased nearly anywhere. Deere, meanwhile, has some proprietary items that can be purchased only at a John Deere dealer, often resulting in higher price repair parts.

**Repair Cost.** Ohio Valley Ag documented the following for the Apache AS1010 and the John Deere 4720 sprayers, respectively.

**Transmission.** IITL 6-speed powershift: \$5,266 remanufactured vs. Deere hydrostatic transmission: \$7,725 remanufactured.

**Breakaway Outer Boom Tips.** 80- or 90-foot boom: \$419.29 vs. Deere 80-foot boom: \$2,000.

**Poly Tank Replacement.** 1,000-gallon poly: \$1,168.29 vs. Deere 800-gallon poly: \$1,560.

**Flowmeter.** Raven 60P: \$352.75 vs. Deere \$1,070.

**Boom Ball Valves.** Banjo power head: \$111.13 vs. Deere Actuator: \$245.

**Product Pump.** Hypro pump and motor: \$725 vs. Deere pump and motor: \$1,090.

**5. Depreciation Costs.** In their analysis, Mullinax and Harris came up with facts to cover with customers regarding the cost of depreciation.

A 2005 new Apache AS1000 had an average selling price of \$125,000, while a used AS1000 with 500 hours has a retail price of \$115,000, resulting in a depreciated value of \$10,000. When dividing that figure by the hours of use, it has a \$20/per hour depreciation cost.

In making a correlation to used Deere sprayers, Harris and Mullinax examined a pair of used 4720 2006 model year machines. The first had 241 hours and sold for \$161,500, while the second sold for \$140,000. The depreciated value was \$21,500 with a difference of 470 hours difference between the machines. Dividing the depreciated value by the hours, the Deere machine was depreciating at a rate of \$45.74 per hour.

"The cost of ownership is what really sticks out in people's minds,"

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says Harris. “\$100 here or there might not be a make-or-break deal. Instead, you’ve got to focus on the big things such as fuel consumption or boom tip repairs. It’s not an ‘if’ but a ‘when’ thing — the farmer is going to need to do it. We try to show how much they’ll save with our machine on these kinds of items.”

Harris has paper copies of the analysis (on a PowerPoint presentation) and keeps it in a folder in his truck. He lets the conversations drive whether to use it or not, and he doesn’t generally reach for it unless there’s a need to.

“I recently had a guy tell me he was going to buy a used John Deere unit. We talked about how he was going to be buying someone else’s junk for a lot of money, and that maybe he didn’t need that type of machine for his particular operation.

“I went through the analysis with him, and then he did more research

## Finding Some Value to Offer on a Cold Call

Asked for some practical examples of what he means by offering “value” on a cold-call, Brandon Harris cited some recent examples.

“I recently found a farmer that bought a used Apache unit several years ago. I pulled up there, walked him through why he needs to know me and our dealership, how we carry shortline parts and precision equipment and talked about the experience of our service staff. We always carry conversation pieces, things like moisture testers. I showed him the latest moisture tester and he played with it and he liked it. He didn’t buy that day, but it made the visit memorable.

“But we did set him up with a parts account that day. He didn’t spend anything, but now he’s ready to, and the dealership knows him now.”

Another of Harris’ favored approaches is doing updates on precision farming equipment. “We sell a bunch of Raven Envizio units, and you need to do regular updates on the receivers. That’s a great way to get face time with customers, doing the updates for them. Some farmers don’t know anything about updating things on a memory stick, so it’s worth a lot to them.” When on the farm to do such updates, Harris has sold moisture testers and even a used sprayer.

From a competitive perspective, he gets a chance to differentiate himself from the next salesman, and will often do a quick update at no charge. “I’ve done the updates on some precision pieces that the farmer bought somewhere else, and have answered questions that the guy he bought it from could not. These are the kind of things that get them calling me next time.”

on his own, including online work and also getting feedback from other farmers.

“We helped him decide what’s

more important, the color of the machine or having money at end of the year. He’s driving one of our machines today.” **FE**



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