

Keys to Relationship Selling

Budgets drive business development and marketing plans, and given the state of our economy, companies have to carefully consider how, when, and with whom they spend their marketing and advertising dollars. Shrinking markets keep business plans in flux, and gathering information is critical because the company that pounces on the opportunity *du jour* often wins the prize. That said, I'd like to concentrate on the *how* rather than the *what* to do to increase sales. And when I say *how*, I'm actually referring to technique. Without the application of proper technique, the best thought-out business strategy in the world is tantamount to a fisherman casting a line without a lure: fishing without bait. I don't intend to provide an in-depth analysis of these techniques—that's the purpose of sales meetings and seminars. I just intend to mention a few, and briefly discuss their importance.

Professionalism is characterized more by the way you conduct business than the business you conduct. This is so deeply woven into the essential fabric of the practice of selling its integrity is rarely disputed. Business-to-business selling, or relationship selling, is about building a friendship with and listening to the needs of your prospects. Although this is true, there is also the added dimension of showing an interest in more than just the dollar-end of a business transaction. This is achieved by employing the thoughtfulness and consideration gained from empathy. Empathy plays a crucial role in selling, and its application is more art than skill. Moreover, its artful application can mean the difference between being just another vendor and a valuable, irreplaceable resource...or at least being perceived as one. The empathy burgeoning from the old adage, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care," conjures up a wellspring of behavioral constructs that forge the quality of human relatedness. The inclusion of these constructs in a sales presentation can only deepen the bond between a salesman and his client. This bond is a major contribution to repeat business for years and years to come. Books have been written and are still being written on this subject, but for the purposes of this exercise, I'll focus on the few that I deem critical in the practice of my craft.

The politics of kindness

One of the definitions of politics is sagaciousness in promoting a policy. Someone once said, "The greatness of a man is measured in his kindness toward other people." This is much more than an essential element of civilized society—it's the best moneymaking technique around. It doesn't begin with your clients, however...it begins with your co-workers. The pursuit of successful selling begins with how to greet fellow workers as you enter the building every morning. Try to treat them with the same respect you have for your best customers, because without their combined effort and support, you can't possibly succeed, regardless of your skill as a salesman. This effort should be applied to everyone at every income level within the company.

I was reminded of this a couple of weeks ago when it became painfully apparent that the lunchroom garbage pail along the

By Gary Coon

wall which adjoins my office hadn't been emptied for a couple of days. It smelled like...well, it smelled bad, and I actually considered breathing into my shoe for a breath of fresh air before bolting for the exit. Business, at least for me, came to a grinding halt. Now I know what you're thinking. Yes, I emptied the garbage can myself, but it set me to thinking about what would happen if all of the trash cans weren't emptied and the bathrooms never cleaned. What then? How would any work get done? In that moment, those who sanitized and cleaned became the most important people in my business world. After all, I could vanish for two weeks and business would go on, but if they disappeared for two weeks? Thank heaven for janitors; without them even the greatest company couldn't succeed. Moral: the contribution of all is important. And if you are bereft of the social skills necessary to make your fellow workers feel appreciated, at least avoid treating them in such a way that causes them to lament your arrival and cheer your departure. The *Golden Rule* is not rocket science!

Phone calls

How you answer the phone makes all the difference in the world to the person making the call. My standard line is, "Thank you for choosing (your company). This is (your name). How may I help you?" I'm also partial to, "It's a great day at (your company); this is (your name), how may I help you?" Now this might sound corny, but before you pick up the phone, take a deep breath, put a smile on your face, conjure up a cheerful thought, and go for it. This simple discipline will enhance your delivery and make a big difference to the person on the other end of the line. The big difference? More business for you. Once the caller identifies himself, repeat his name back to him whether you know him or not (especially important if you don't know him, as this helps you to remember who it is you're talking to) and ask him how his day is going. This technique is not only pleasantly disarming, but it paves the way for a free-flowing exchange of information. If the caller thinks you care more about him than you do about getting his business, he'll give you more of his business. It is as simple as that.

When you make a phone call, take the curse off of the call. You do this by engaging a simple courtesy. There are a number of ways to do this. Ask if you are interrupting anything important. Truth be known, you are always interrupting something—the question is one of importance. Ninety-nine percent of the time you'll be invited into a conversation just because you demonstrated a regard for the person on the other end of the line. Besides, if you try to weasel your way into a conversation with someone who feels they have more pressing matters, you're not doing yourself any favors. If they display any hesitation to engage in conversation, apologize for the interruption and ask them when would be a good time to call back. When you do call back (and call back when they tell you to and not 15 minutes later...it's like being late for an appointment), you're likely to find them more willing to talk to you and more responsive to your offers and queries. Do this and the only thing you'll have to give up in the exchange is a little bit of courtesy. Not such a terrible sacrifice

is it? Don't forget to always end your conversation by thanking them for their time and wishing them a great day. Tending to the needs of a company can make you money. Tending to the needs of the people working for the company can make you a rich.

The important thing to remember when either making or receiving a call is that the ultimate goal should be to make the person on the other end of the line feel better for the experience. Helping someone find solutions to their business challenges is crucial, but in the final analysis, most of our competition can offer the same remedies we do. All other things being equal, people do business with people they like.

Emails

Seventy percent of communication is nonverbal. Body language (including facial expression, as well as voice inflection) conveys much of the message embedded in our everyday conversations. In my opinion, email is the least desirable form of business communication for anything beyond the exchange of raw data. Most of us write much differently than we speak, and because we are not present to assess how our message is being internalized, we are deprived of the opportunity to amend the message and mitigate any misunderstanding. That said, email is here to stay, so careful consideration must be given to its use. It's very useful in providing a summation of ideas either exchanged on the phone or in person. It also creates a written record of the topics discussed which may prove to be useful in the future. But if you are going to rely on email to make offerings, it is always wise to have someone proofread your email to ensure that you are not the only one who understands the terms and conditions of your offer. If you offer them A, end up selling them B, you'll surely get an F.

When I use email to reply to a request for quote (RFQ), I employ the same strategy I do when making a phone call. I reply to their request, but I never forget to make sure there is some genuine concern for their well being in evidence. I do this by ending most every email by writing, "I hope this gets you a deal. Call me if there is anything more I can do. Thank you for considering our company. And above all, have a great day and good selling." If you are not already doing business with the company requesting the quote, and the RFQ is your first encounter, always returning the quote with a piece of literature attached is good practice, and one displaying your picture is best. Unless the interested party requesting the RFQ is aware of the stature and credentials of your company, the only criterion they have for making a buying decision is price.

Sales presentations

If you don't have a mastery of a sales presentation that touches on both the credentials and the feature benefits offered by your company, you run the risk of losing sales. Also, there's no excuse for not being able to recite your presentation word for word to any and all willing to listen. We don't always have the luxury of a captivated audience, and the opportunity to make a formal presentation doesn't always materialize, but knowing your presentation inside and out makes it possible for you to weave critical feature benefits into your conversation with prospects. And trying to conjure up an unrehearsed, coherent sales presentation off the cuff is both a recipe for disaster and the mark of a true amateur.

Make work fun

The serious side of work is a given and we all understand it. But as a patron, I would rather pay to see a band of musicians with mediocre musical skills having fun and enjoying themselves on stage, than paying to watch a pack of lifeless virtuosos bored with the passing of every musical phrase. Make it one of your goals to make work fun, and whenever possible, include your client in the festivity. Who wants to do business with a tranquilizer addict just trying to make it to the end of the day?

Conclusion

In the world of selling, how you treat people is often more important than what you are treating them to. This is particularly true in relationship selling, and it is unwise to believe this can successfully be pursued insincerely. Take pride in being a salesman and take pride in your craft. We make our living helping others prosper by bringing our products and ideas to bear on their problems. The more people we help, the richer our rewards. What could be nobler? Good luck, good selling, and above all, have a great day.

About the author

◆ Gary Coon, a 16-year veteran of the water conditioning industry, has successfully trained hundreds of sales professionals in the water treatment industry. His seminars, *What They Mean by What They Say* and *The Theater of Selling Water*, offer instruction in closing methodologies and presentation techniques. Learn more by visiting www.theonecallclose.com

