

Effective selling for maximum results

by Weelan Ho



Integrity is paramount

Effective selling is not hard selling or exaggerating the benefits of the products or services in order to close the deal and secure the order. On the contrary, integrity is paramount, for it underpins the trust we have in one another and on which human relations are built. There is nothing contradictory about integrity and making a profit. Profit is the return for employing capital and labour. Smart sales professionals do not rely on just one transaction, i.e. sales are not transaction-based. Smart sales professionals instead minimize their costs and maximize profits through multiple transactions that are based on a relationship – a relationship that is built on trust. You can fool your customers some of the time but you can't fool your customers all the time. Ultimately, it is customers' perceptions about products and services and how they feel about transactions and relationships that count.

Effective selling skills

While no two customers are the same and the time it takes to close a deal may differ, yet one guiding principle never changes – the more the sales person understands the customer and his / her underlying needs and motivation for purchase, the easier it is to collaboratively come to a purchase decision that is best for the customer. In other words, the selling process should be interactive.

In addition to sales planning and preparation, selling basically involves five stages:

1. Customer needs identification
2. Sales presentation
3. Handling objections
4. Closing – asking for the order
5. Negotiating and finalizing the terms

Customer needs identification

This is perhaps the most crucial step within the selling process. Needs are identified through questioning, discussions, answering queries, and exploring underlying motivations and intentions. This is also an opportunity for seller to educate the customers and help them see things clearly. Knowing how to communicate and interact effectively is fundamental to finding the customer's needs. The ability to listen actively with the appropriate framing and probing of questions and responding in a manner that is apposite to the customer are down to communication and people handling skills. This is not the time to “bulldoze” customers, as is often done during a hard sell.

Four types of questions can be asked:

1. **Situations questions** – to find out about the situation, circumstances and facts
2. **Problem questions** – uncovering dissatisfaction, issues, problems, bottlenecks and negative consequences

3. **Implication questions** – answering the “what if” questions to find out the implications to determine potential benefits
4. **Needs-payoff questions** – an extension of “what if” questions that focuses on benefits, positive consequences and payoffs in terms of returns

It is through interactive questioning, probing and responses that customer needs are identified and the central issues are addressed during sales presentations. The inability to identify customers’ needs may raise more questions, queries and objections, making it difficult to close the deal and requiring a return to the basics again, i.e. identifying customer needs.

Sales presentation

Customers don’t buy features: they buy benefits that the product or service offers. Needs identification provides the basis, structure and contents for sales presentations. The presentation must answer the customer’s main concerns. For example if the customer’s main concern is quality, there is no point in trying to persuade the customer about the price competitiveness of your product or service. Try to identify the one message that can address the central issue and capture the customers’ interest. The sales presentation can adopt the pyramid approach of starting with the conclusion (which is often the message), and then following this with three or four points to support the conclusion. It is important to relate to the customer’s needs and pitch the sales presentation at the appropriate level using words and a format or style that is simple and easy to memorize. Remember: Less is more.

Handling objections

Comments and objections are two different things. The former is a remark of some sort, which can be a smoke screen, while the latter reflects dissatisfaction, hesitancy or a lack of buy-in to what has been presented. It is important to handle objections strategically, i.e. to listen to all the concerns and questions first before answering. Side stepping is an effective technique used to extract all concerns or objections. Examples of phrases used for side stepping are “Besides ...what other ...”, “Besides ...anything else...”

Opportunities come to those who are well prepared, so make sure you anticipate likely questions and are well prepared for them.

Closing – ask for the order

There are many ways of asking for the order, or closing the sale. Different customers respond to different styles. The closing can take a direct or a less direct approach.

- Direct close – ask directly for the order (e.g. “Shall we agree and go ahead?”)
- Alternative close – offer two alternatives (e.g. “Do you prefer to start with a pilot project or shall we go ahead with the whole project with scheduled review?”)
- Assumptive close – build a case in which both sides assume the willingness to buy – (e.g. “So, when shall we start?”)
- The plus and minus close – highlight the pros and cons of the accepting and rejecting the offer.
- The lost sale close – use this as a last resort if the customer sticks to no – (e.g. “What would I have said to make you change your mind?”)
- Silence – pause, after the question and wait for the answer. A minute may seem a long time.

Negotiating and finalizing the terms

Negotiation is a back-and-forth communication, designed to reach an agreement that is acceptable and beneficial to both parties. The old framework of prepare, discuss, propose and then bargain to narrow the differences and get what you want is not sufficient. A preferred approach to conducting negotiations is to take the perspective of mutual interests instead of positions. Negotiations need not be a win-lose situation; achieving win-win workable solutions and agreements should be the goal. Long-term business relationships should be built. The best negotiated outcome is one that keeps the customers coming back again and again because you provide value – that value may not necessarily be the price, it could be something qualitative such as friendly and hassle-free service. **T/D**

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