

Ask, and Ye Shall Receive

Three easy steps to a successful selling career

BY ANUP GUPTA



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After being in the selling profession for 20 years, I firmly believe more than 90% of people in selling do not know how to actually sell. How do you and I stack up? Below are three points that will definitely help you succeed.

1. Learn the Art of Asking Questions

Selling is more about learning about the prospect than just bragging about your product, service or organization. The more you know about the prospect and his or her needs, the more you can customize your presentation to help close the deal. How many times has it happened to you, when somebody comes to sell you products and starts touting their superiority over the competition without even knowing your needs?

That's exactly what happened to me. We had a supplier rep come to see us and talk about the new products his company was offering. Without asking us any questions, he started showing off his product line. Over 40% of the products he showed us had no relevance to our client base. He would have saved both himself and us time had he tried to understand our business and target markets better, and customized his presentation accordingly.

Quite simply, don't be afraid to ask questions. Some salespeople feel they would be wasting the prospects' time by asking questions. The fact is, by asking questions you make the prospect feel more important. Also, ask open-

familiar? "Hello Mr. Prospect, I am calling to see how you're doing, if you're working on any apparel projects, and if you had a chance to see my e-mail I had sent yesterday?" This is far more common than you might imagine.

2. Write Winning Proposals

After a successful meeting, you have gained the opportunity to quote on something. Excitedly, you go to your computer, type your price into the template or the quote form and send it to the prospect. Then the waiting game starts, where you're hoping your price will be the lowest. But there are other things you could have done to win that order.

First, if you asked the right questions in your initial meeting, you should be armed with a lot of information that would be key in swinging the decision to your favor. In your proposal, reiterate the problems the prospect told you (directly or indirectly) she was having. The key is to detail how you can solve those issues and eventually add to the prospect's bottom line. Remember, pricing is just one of the factors in the final evaluation, not the only factor.

Next, make sure to list a number of things: the benefits of your services, what differentiates you from the competition and how your "total cost of ownership" will be lower.

Lastly, make sure to attach some references or testimonials from satisfied clients. Add certifications, licenses, accreditations, awards and other recognitions you and your company have earned. This adds to the credibility of your company and might just be the "tipping point" in your favor. These credentials give the peace of mind your prospect would need, especially if they have no track record of working with your company.

3. Hone Your Follow-Up Skills

I remember talking to a purchasing manager of a *Fortune* 500 company at an industry expo where his company had a booth to meet small businesses. I asked him to share with me some of the issues he has noticed as an impediment for success among small-business owners. The answer surprised me. He told me that dozens of small-business owners spend money and time to attend such events and make their pitch to buyers, and yet only 5% of them actually take the time to follow up. The rest just expect the corporate buyer to call them and hand over the business, which most of the times does not happen. So make sure you have a system to follow up with your prospects at various points in the sales process. ■

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ended questions. Next time you are on the phone with a client, note how many closed-ended questions (yes or no answers) you ask. Just by switching to open-ended questions (which involve who, what, where, when, why and how), you will be amazed at the amount of information you are able to gather.

Also, keep questions simple. One big mistake I have noticed a lot of salespeople make, especially on the phone, is asking multiple questions in one long question. The prospect chooses the part of the question he feels most comfortable answering and leaves the rest. Does this sound