

The Smartest Guy In The Room

Smart is good. That's my starting point for today. I'm a very strong believer in hiring intelligent people to work for you, especially in the sales role.

There's a point, though, at which a salesperson can be too smart for his or her own good. I've seen several examples of that over the last couple of weeks, and watched several of my clients' salespeople talk themselves out of good selling opportunities. In each of these cases, the salespeople were knowledgeable, but not intelligent. I think you'll agree, that's not a very good combination.

First Example

The first example was a second meeting with a prospect. At the first meeting, the salesperson and the prospect had discussed a mailing to support a holiday sale. The salesperson was to come back with a quote and a design concept, and his design concept included a complete redesign of the company's logo—something that had not been discussed in the first meeting.

The logo caught the prospect's eye immediately.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's your new logo. My designer and I both felt that you need to present a more upscale image," the salesperson answered. "This is a lot more modern. It will appeal to a wider range of buyers."

The meeting went downhill from there.

Better Strategy

I happened to agree that this jewelry store would probably benefit from a more modern image. Ultimately, it was a good idea presented badly. As we drove away and "de-briefed" the call, I asked the salesperson how well he usually liked being told what he "needs" to do, especially by someone he's only talked to once before. To his credit, he got the point.

"But how do you get them to do what you know is best for them?" he asked.

The answer is that you do it with questions, not statements. I explained that I would have brought two versions of this mailer to the meeting, one with the old logo and one with the new one. I would have shown the old logo version, and discussed the prospect's likes, dislikes, etc. Then I would have asked a question: "Do you think your logo helps or hurts this piece, or for that matter, your overall branding?"

I would expect that question to stimulate some discussion, and probably to position me to show the new logo version. Which I would do with a question: "What do you think of this?"

Please note the word "probably." If the prospect is in love with his/her logo, I'm not going to fight that fight today. Remember, we're talking about a prospect, and the immediate challenge is to get that first order and turn the prospect into a customer. If you lose the first battle, it's much harder to win the war.

Second Example

Another salesperson took me on a call which involved four people on the prospect side, her contact, her contact's boss, and two more people whose responsibilities weren't clear. At one point, one of those people asked a question which begged a simple yes or no answer, but the salesperson chose to complicate the answer by explaining why it was yes. After a two-minute explanation, the questioner said something to the effect of that being more than she needed to know.

A few more minutes into the conversation, another yes or no question was asked, and again, the salesperson chose to go into greater—and believe me, unnecessary—detail. About 30 seconds into that, the original questioner got up and left the room, followed by the main contact's boss, who re-appeared about 15 seconds later.

"Paula asked me to tell you," she said, "that we want to know what time it is, not how to build a watch."

This salesperson didn't get it, so I quietly told her that I'd explain later. Then I asked, "Where does Paula fit into the hierarchy here?" The answer was: "At the top. She owns the company."

As I explained as we "debriefed" in the salesperson's car on the way back to the office, sometimes it's smartest not to tell people everything you know. Smart is good, but it's not always good to be The Smartest Guy In The Room.