

The Opposite Of Yes

I presented a seminar at an industry conference last weekend. Immediately afterward, I had a table set up alongside the stage to sell books. I processed a few sales with cash and credit cards and finally there was only one person standing in front of me, with a book in her hand.

“Can I sell you that book?” I asked.

“I haven’t decided,” she said. “I have to go to the bathroom. I’ll be back.”

She didn’t come back, of course, but you have to give her credit for creativity. I have experienced rejection in many ways in my sales career, but that was a new one on me.

Common Obstacles

There really aren’t that many things printing buyers say when they’re not saying yes. That means you can prepare your response to those obstacles in advance. For example, two of the most common obstacles I hear about come up at the very earliest stages of prospecting, when the salesperson is trying to set up that first appointment, and the buyer says either “I’m really busy right now,” or “I don’t need anything right now.”

The typical response seems to be: “Can I call you some other time?” That’s on the right track, but not the best strategy. I would rather have you take it out of the realm of a *permission* question and turn it into a *collaborative* question: “When would be a better time?”

The difference between *permission* and *collaboration* goes to the very common mindset that the buyer is more important than the seller. It’s a variation, I guess, on the idea that the customer is always right. Great salespeople, though, understand that the goal is a relationship between equals—a happy customer and a valued supplier—and that’s the relationship they position for right from the start.

Call Me Next Week

So you say: “When would be a better time?” The buyer says: “Call me next week.” Please don’t say: “When would be a good time for me to call you next week?” I see that as pushing too hard against a soft obstacle. Just say: “I will.”

When you make the call, remind the buyer that you’re keeping the promise he/she asked you to make. “Hi, this is Dave Fellman from Dave’s Printing. We spoke briefly last week, and you asked me to call you this week. We were talking about setting an appointment. How does your schedule look for (some appropriate time)?”

Now, what if the buyer says: “Call me in 6 months?” *That’s* the obstacle you should push against, because that’s what they say when they’re hoping you’ll forget about them between now and then.

So how about responding this way: “I can do that, but first let me ask you one more question. Are you saying that you do want to meet with me, and that 6 months from now is the right time to do it? Or is it that you don’t want to meet with me, but you’re trying not to hurt my feelings? I appreciate that, but I’m a big boy/girl. If it’s bad news, I can take it.”

In my experience, this approach positions you more as a person, and less as a salesperson. It might warm the conversation up enough to get you the meeting you want. Or it might not. I’ve been told everything from “yes, I didn’t want to hurt your feelings” to “no, I couldn’t care less about your feelings.” Either way, I don’t think I risked much by pushing at this obstacle.

Push Even Further

And depending on the circumstances, or maybe on just how I’m feeling that day, I might push even harder. I have said in the past: “I don’t get it. Why would you not want to talk with someone who really knows his business, and could maybe bring some value to yours?”

I’ve had people hang up on me at that point. I have also had people apologize and start talking seriously with me.