

It Takes Certain Skills To Be Successful At Selling

Last month, I started writing on the theme that selling is a game. Like every other game, I wrote, it has rules and it requires certain skills. I also noted that the selling game has an incredible amount of history attached to it, and that while there are new wrinkles being added all the time to the way the selling game is played—especially as technology has changed the way people who sell things and people who buy things communicate with each other—the essential skills required really haven't changed all that much. The “ground truth” of modern selling is that most of the best players in the selling game are using tried-and-true strategies and techniques that work just as well today as they did in the “old days.”

You might find that statement hard to accept. After all, it's been universally accepted that the Internet is changing all of the rules of modern marketing. But let's make sure that we're all on the same page here in terms of terminology. “Marketing” and “selling” are not two words with the same meaning, even though many people seem to want to use them interchangeably. If you'll indulge me in my own personal definitions, “marketing” is the broad business discipline by which people and/or organizations get connected with the products and/or services they desire or require. “Selling” is one of the sub-disciplines of “marketing,” and I define “selling” as the person-to-person act of convincing a prospect to buy those products and/or services from you.

There's no question that “marketing” has been changed by technology, but many “modern marketing” strategies still stop short of actually closing the sale. When it comes down to the person-to-person act of convincing, we're back at the “ground truth” that not much has changed in terms of what it takes to build trust and confidence and establish a relationship.

Remember the First Rule of Selling which I quoted last month: All win-win buying/selling relationships are based on trust. Remember too that those win-win relationships are the only ones you really want to have.

Skills And Attitudes

OK, it takes certain skills to be successful at the selling game. What are those skills? I think most people will tell you that a salesperson must have good communication skills, and while that's certainly correct, it's a little bit too general for me. It's been my experience that the most successful salespeople—and most successful sales managers—get beyond the general and gain a much more specific understanding of what is required for success. So let's expand our definition to include four specific categories of communication skills: interrogative skills, listening skills, cognitive skills, and convincing skills.

Interrogative skills are the foundation of selling success. As I've told thousands of salespeople in seminars over the years, if you ask the right questions, the people you're hoping to sell to will tell you two important things. They'll tell you what they want and what they need, and in doing so they'll tell you exactly how to sell it to them. The greatest value of an interrogative approach to selling is that it tells you what buttons to push, and I think 99% of all top-achieving salespeople will tell you that gaining that knowledge significantly increases your chances of winning at the selling game. (By the way, the other 1% think they succeed strictly because of their personalities. I think of those salespeople as the exceptions that prove the rule.)

Of course, asking the right questions is only part of the battle. You also have to listen to the answers. But is listening really a skill?

Yes, to a large degree it is. It's a skill that can be taught and developed through practice. But the listening component of the selling game involves something else too. Listening is not just a skill, it's also an attitude. You have to be *willing* to listen in order to be successful at the selling game, and many of the underachievers in our business are stuck at that status simply because they don't have a “listening attitude.” We've all met people who seem to be in love with the sound of their own voices, and interestingly, there are many people who think that a “talkative” personality is one of the requirements for a successful salesperson. As a consumer, I'd much rather buy from someone who will listen, and as a salesperson/sales manager, I've always operated on the philosophy that you should never expect anything that doesn't work on you to work for you. That's why I'd reject any sales candidate who didn't demonstrate a “listening attitude” right from the very first interview.

Cognitive Skills

Listening, of course, is not enough to insure success. A winning salesperson must also possess cognitive skills: the ability to interpret information and arrive at the right conclusions. As noted, the main reason for asking questions in selling is to identify the prospect's “needs” and “wants.” The “needs” are often pretty straightforward. (I need a

brochure to help me to sell my own products and services.) It's the "wants" that provide a salesperson with the greatest opportunity. (I want to design the brochure myself in my own computer, and then send the file to the printer and have him/her take care of the rest. I want the project turned around quickly. I want half of the brochures delivered to be at my office, and the other half divided up and sent to my salespeople at their branch offices. I want my brochure to look great!)

Many printing salespeople seem to be confused about the relationship between "wants" and "needs." I address this confusion with my sales coaching clients by explaining that a salesperson should be asking two types of questions during the interrogative part of the selling process: fact-finding questions and opinion-finding questions. Fact-finding questions deal with need. Opinion-finding questions deal with the customer/prospect's "wants." Success at this phase of the selling game begins with the understanding that there is a difference between fact and opinion, between need and want. For example, "I need the brochures delivered before Friday because they're going to be used at a trade show that start on Saturday" represents a completely different selling situation than "I want the brochures delivered before Friday because I spent three weeks fooling around with the printer on my last project, and I don't want to go through that again!"

The salespeople who win consistently at the selling game start by asking the right questions. Then they listen to the answers. Then they *think* about the answers, and ask a few questions of themselves: (1) Does this person *need* something that I can provide? (2) Does he/she *want* something that gives me a competitive advantage? (3) How do I present myself—and our company—as the solution to this person's problems?

Winning salespeople don't go out looking for print jobs to quote on. They go out looking for problems to which they can provide solutions! They understand that customer/prospect problems represent opportunities for a salesperson.

These winning salespeople clearly understand that if a prospect—someone they're not yet selling to—has no problems, he/she has no real reason to consider switching printers. They also understand that if a current customer does have problems, those unfulfilled "wants" represent a weakness in the relationship and an opportunity for a competitor!

Convincing Skills

Now we're down to the fourth and final element of a printing salesperson's required skillset: convincing skills. Once a problem/opportunity has been identified, the last stage of the selling game is to convince the prospect/customer to buy the solution you propose.

In working with printing salespeople as both a sales manager and a consultant for nearly 20 years, I've observed three common approaches to this challenge. The first approach (generally attempted by the underachievers who seem to make up the majority of the industry's salesforce) is to "ask" for a chance to "prove" their ability to handle the project. Another fairly common approach is to try to convince people through overpowering logic. (You should buy from us because we have all of this really cool equipment, and we never miss a delivery commitment, and we've been in business for 27 years, etc., etc., etc.) The flaw in that strategy is that the "logic" is all internal to the salesperson's perspective.

While both of these strategies produce an occasional victory, I've observed that the real winners at the selling game use more of a "judo" approach to convincing. As noted earlier, they ask questions to identify the customer/prospect's hot buttons, and then they push those buttons!

"You told me that you want the brochures delivered before Friday because you spent three weeks fooling around with the printer on your last project, and you don't want to go through that again. I understand that completely, and I have a plan to keep it from happening. Here's what I think we should do...what do you think?"

Complete Package

Do you see how all four of these skill categories tie together? It's important to understand that a "one-dimensional" salesperson will probably not succeed. A salesperson with interrogative skills but without listening skills (or a listening attitude!) will never gain the benefit of the questioning skill he/she does possess. The same is true for a salesperson who can ask questions and listen to the answers, but doesn't have the cognitive skills to understand what those answers really mean in terms of selling opportunities. The bottom line here is that a salesperson must develop each of the four skills in order to win consistently at the selling game.

How do you make that happen? You do it through training and practice! Training comes first, where a salesperson must be taught the fundamentals of each individual selling skill. From that point, as the old saying goes, practice makes perfect. (Well, maybe not perfect, but practice certainly contributes to both a salesperson's comfort and experience levels, and both of those factors increase the likelihood of success.)