

Pitching vs. Storytelling

This is the third installment in my series on “The Top 5 Ways To Talk Yourself Out Of A Sale.” The topic for today is Pitching vs. Storytelling.

I should probably begin with a definition of “pitching.” In this usage, it is a derivation of a term from the sport of baseball. And while I know that baseball is somewhat popular in Australia, I also know that rugby is “somewhat” popular in the United States, but most Americans would not know that rugby is played on a pitch, as opposed to a field. So forgive me if I am telling you something you already know.

The Official Rules of Baseball state that a pitch is “a ball delivered to the batter by the pitcher.” In American slang, though, we often refer to the words a salesperson uses to try to get someone to buy something as a “sales pitch.” And it is usually not considered a complimentary term.

Consultative Style

Most salespeople employ a presentation style as opposed to a consultative style. What is the difference? In a presentation style, the seller tells the buyer all about products or services or capabilities. In a consultative style, the seller asks the buyer about wants and needs. In a presentation style, the seller is saying: “Here is what I think you need to know, now please make a decision.” In a consultative style, the seller is saying: “By asking the right questions and providing you with specific answers, I think I can help you to make the best possible decision.”

Which of these selling styles would you rather be on the buying side of?

There is more to this than just style. The more one person talks in any selling conversation, the less the other person is likely to listen. Think back on the last time your customer dominated any part of the conversation. Did you really listen to everything that was said, or were you thinking more about what *you* wanted to say?

I had a salesperson call me just this morning. The phone on my desk has a timer, and when it got to 60 seconds, I could remember saying only nine words. Rather than listening, I was thinking: “Is this guy ever going to shut up?”

OK, I know I covered this issue in the first installment: Too Much Talk, Not Enough Listen. But it is important enough that I think it needs repeating.

Storytelling

Even in a consultative style, there comes a point where the seller must present a proposal. There is a difference, though, between starting with a presentation and finishing with one. In a consultative style, the tailored presentation comes after the needs analysis: “Based on what you’ve told me about your wants and needs, this is what I think you should do.”

Now, here is where the storytelling comes in. With all due respect to the Star Trek franchise, very few humans really want to go where no one has gone before. We do not want to take chances, we prefer the tried and true. I will grant you that many of us will take chances personally in search of recreation or entertainment, including anything from skydiving to trying out a new restaurant. I hope you will grant me, though, that buying printing has very little thrill potential attached to it. Print buyers want to make safe choices.

So how do you convince a buyer that you and your company are a safe choice. The salesperson who called me this morning told me that his company has been in business for 35 years. He also told me that they invest heavily in new manufacturing technology. He then hit several more “bullet points” before asking me if I would meet with him.

Let me suggest an alternate strategy: “Mr. Fellman, I have a story I would like to tell you. John Smith founded this company almost 35 years ago, on a shoestring, like a lot of other small businesses. He was undercapitalized and underequipped, and because of that, he had to do pretty much everything the hard way. But he always paid attention to what was going on in the industry, and when he started getting a little bit ahead, he started investing in technology that would let him do things the right way, with greater efficiency, producing better quality. He also likes to say that he made every possible mistake during those early years, but he thinks he learned how not to make them again. So, I guess I am asking you, do we sound like the kind of company you would like to work with? And if so, would you agree to meet with me?”

Yes, ultimately this is a sales pitch — a set of words used by a salesperson to get someone to buy something. So maybe the question is this, does the storytelling element make it a *better* pitch, one more likely to get the desired result? Obviously I think so, and I hope you will start thinking about incorporating storytelling into your own selling.