

Opening the sale by Harry Friedman

For years I have felt that the probing process in any sales presentation is salespeople's biggest weakness. I've also been known to give long-winded speeches on how important probing is. After all, it's the point in the presentation that you not only find out what the customer wants or needs, but also the point at which you find out all of the valuable extra information that eventually helps you in many ways. The extra information is necessary to know what points to emphasize in your demonstration to create value in the customer's eyes. It also helps you know what merchandise is the most likely and logical add-on(s). And, last but not least, the concern you show for the customer's needs and desires during the probing process establishes trust, which is certainly a plus in making the sale.

So if this step is so important, why do salespeople do such a miserable job at it? I've always thought that it was because of one or two basic reasons. Number one, many salespeople don't have the necessary information on how to probe effectively, and therefore, not realizing the importance of it, they end up winging it. Number two, most salespeople are so eager to demonstrate merchandise that they just don't bother finding out anything but the absolute minimum necessary to go to a particular item.

I've since discovered that a different reason (that I was always aware of but didn't feel was so much of a problem) may be the biggest reason for poor probing. This discovery has altered my views on which step in the selling process, if you feel inclined to pick one, is really the most important. An ineffective opening may be the biggest barrier to effective probing. In other words, the better you are able to open the sale, the better you are able to probe.

I've always said that each step in the selling process builds on the previous one. Consequently, the better you do with one step, the more success you will generally have with the next step. In fact, success with opening the sale, probing and the demonstration should actually cause fewer customer objections and cause more customers to say, "I'll take it," on their own without you asking. So some steps done well will even eliminate the need for later steps.

Opening the sale is an absolute necessity in every sales presentation. You earn the right to probe by opening effectively. And salespeople may be falling down on opening the sale far more often than probing. In fact, the salesperson's inability to open well may be the single biggest reason they fail at probing. Forget whether the salesperson knows how to probe, understands the importance of probing and/or tends to want to demonstrate merchandise too early. Fixing any of these problems without taking a hard look at how the salesperson is opening is a waste of time initially. Instead, improve how the salesperson is opening which should allow them to do well in probing. Then if the salesperson doesn't know how to probe effectively, you can take care of that problem. But fixing probing skills first would be like putting a bandage on cancer.

Our consulting division works closely with retailers to help them install a system of selling. Certainly resistance to change is an obstacle that we encounter in every single case. We expect it, and we're trained to deal with it. People generally don't discriminate when it comes to which step they resist. They don't hesitate in resisting all of them so we naturally encounter resistance with opening the sale. However, in terms of skill, opening has never been one of the more difficult steps to learn and do. Yet it appears to be the most difficult step for salespeople to master.

We use the word schmoozing to refer to making small talk with customers to put them more at ease and establish a person-to-person relationship as opposed to a salesperson-to-customer relationship, thus breaking down the resistance that seems inherent in customers today. We have three basic rules to adhere to in order to accomplish this.

1) Opening lines must have nothing to do with business.

2) Opening lines must be questions to encourage conversation.

3) Opening lines must be creative, unique and/or special.

Using opening lines that have nothing to do with business is a must. **Never say anything that indicates to a customer that you are a salesperson instead of just another human being making a spontaneous remark to another human being.** Since we know that customers have no love lost for salespeople, saying anything initially to remind them that you are a salesperson is immediately jumping off to a bad start. So that rule alone wipes out any possibility of saying, "Can I help you?" or any variation of it such as, "Is there anything in particular you're looking for?" The burden is on the salesperson to come up with a topic of conversation for every customer who enters the store.

Rule number two makes things more complicated. Not only does the salesperson have to open the sale with something not related to business, but they have to phrase their remarks as questions to encourage the customer to take an active part in the conversation, as well. We know that in life people are more comfortable when they are talking with others who seem genuinely interested in what they have to say. And to get your customers to feel this way, you have to listen more than talk. **Opening lines must be questions to encourage the customer to converse with you.**

Sounds fairly straight forward and relatively simple so far, right? Yes, but the next rule is where most salespeople miss the boat. Opening lines must be creative, unique and special. Customers weren't born yesterday. If you're in a store with huge picture windows lining the front of the store, you certainly don't want to ask a customer how the weather is outside. They'll look you dead in the eye and say, "I'm just looking." Customers are very perceptive and will quickly detect a phony attempt at making conversation with them.

If you really want to succeed at opening the sale, you need to put a tremendous amount of attention on your opening lines. Sure you can come up with questions. And sure you can come up with questions that have nothing to do with business. But being creative with the topic of conversation is difficult.

Some people have a natural gift of gab that enables them to walk up to virtually any human being and start a conversation. They are comfortable with it and, as a result, the customer is comfortable as well. Unfortunately this just doesn't come naturally for most salespeople. Consequently, there are thousands of salespeople who are overusing compliments and comments about the weather and failing miserably at opening the sale.

I strongly believe that anyone can learn to open the sale effectively. What does this mean? It means writing down one hundred possible opening lines and practicing, practicing, practicing. Just because your opening lines should be custom-made for each customer, doesn't mean that opening the sale is a step you can't rehearse and role-play. Just because opening lines should be custom-made for each customer doesn't mean that you might not use the exact same opening line for every customer on a particular day if it's appropriate and it works. You have to really put more thought into it. Take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself. For example, if the Super Bowl was yesterday, ask every man that comes in if he watched it. That takes care of opening lines for men for the whole day. Why talk about the weather or use compliments when you have an easy alternative for the day?

Opening lines don't always come naturally. Making sincere conversation with customers can be difficult. If you agree, you must stop letting yourself off the hook and really work at opening lines. And I do mean work. The more you put into opening, the more you'll eventually get from probing. You can get so good at opening that probing questions will hardly be necessary! Customers will just spill the beans with a little schmoozing and guidance from you. It's worth the effort. So put it on your agenda, and make it happen.