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Handling Objections: Part Two “Winning Hearts, Minds and Dollars”

This is the second of two articles on handling objections. In last month's Link & Learn column, we discussed how using good sales techniques to position the value of your products can address a prospect's concerns before they come up as objections. Although adhering to a sales process that engages the customer and encourages them to reveal business needs that your products can solve will greatly reduce the number of objections, unfortunately, it doesn't always work. Sales people need to be prepared to respond to a customer's objections. Note that you should “respond” to a customer's objections rather than try to “counter” them. Your goal is not to “win” an argument, but rather you should seek to “win over” the customer. Taking an adversarial approach will only alienate the prospect, force them to defend their position, and strengthen their resolve not to purchase advertising. The sales person must never forget that the prospect always retains the right to say “yes” or “no,” if we are to make a sale, we need to help the prospect see the issue in a different light so that they will change their mind on their own.

Objections arise when the sales person asks the prospect for one of two things, both of which they value greatly, their time or their money. Objections often occur at the very beginning of a call, sometimes before the sales person has even identified themselves. We walk in the door and are greeted with a stern look and a “*not interested.*” In saying this, the prospect is not referring to advertising in your paper, they are telling you that they are “*not interested*” in talking to another blankety-blank sales person. Our prospects are constantly besieged by hundreds of sales reps offering them a wide variety of products and services. If a prospect took time out to listen to every sales person that called on them, they would have little time left to run their business. Furthermore, most of the sales people that they do agree to meet, have little to offer them. The majority of sales reps launch directly into a sales pitch, touting the virtues of their products and telling the prospect why they should buy them. They do not show them the respect to inquire about their business needs and their concerns before offering to “rock their world.” If someone appeared in your home uninvited and began ranting about how great they are and asking you for some of your hard-earned cash, you would most certainly show them the door, so it is understandable why most prospects are “not interested” in talking to salespeople.

The key to handling an immediate “*not interested*” objection is to differentiate yourself from the typical salesperson. The instinctive response to this objection is to try to push through it, “Mr. Customer, I'm sure if you allow me to show what we have to offer, you'll see...” This old school “foot in the door” approach only hardens the prospect's resolve to see your backside going out their front door. A less confrontational approach is much more effective in dealing with these call opening objections. Since you have not proposed anything as yet,

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this is not a true objection. Even the prospect has no idea what they are objecting to, they simply do not want to suffer through another sales pitch and you should give them exactly what they want. Let the customer win this one by saying, *“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, but I know that advertising in my paper isn’t for everyone. I appreciate your honesty and that you’re not wasting my time.”*

This shows respect for the customer, and that you are accepting rather than challenging their statement. You are also praising them for being upfront with you. This practice also demonstrates that you are not interested in wasting anyone’s time. Since most sales people will try to push through this objection, your passive response will surprise the prospect and put them a bit off balance. The next step is to “notice” something in their place of business and open a discussion. For example, when calling on a restaurant you might say something like, *“Something smells delicious, do you offer carry out at dinnertime?”*

By doing this you begin to engage the customer in a conversation that allows you to slip seamlessly into probing them for their business needs. It helps to do your research before the call so that you can open with something like, “I saw something on your website (Customers love it when you mention their website) that I was curious about could you tell me...”

You’ll find that you will get very few objections during the discovery portion of the sales call. Most business people like to talk about their business and themselves. You will begin to meet resistance when you propose a program and try to close a sale. As a young salesperson (a long time ago), I was taught the “Feel-Felt-Found” method of handling objections.

“Ms. Prospect, I understand why you FEEL our prices are too high, many of my customers FELT that way in the past, but they FOUND that our products are really a great value considering the results they got from their ad.”

Though this technique is a bit simplistic for today’s sophisticated prospects, it is based on a sound understanding of sales psychology.

I FEEL your pain

Legendary business consultant Peter Drucker once said, “The biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” It is vital that before responding to an objection, that we fully understand what the customer is saying and how they feel about the issue. For example, I was working with a salesperson when their prospect said, *“I advertised in the XYZ Gazette (Our competitor) and I didn’t get a single phone call. It was a huge waste of money.”*

Our sales rep quickly launched into a list of reasons why businesses should advertise. When the customer spoke, she heard, *“Advertising isn’t worth the money,”* but I wasn’t so sure. I jumped in and asked him, “You said the XYZ didn’t work, why do you think that is?” He told me, *“Well their papers are delivered all over the area, while my customers come from around here and they don’t hit a lot of homes in this neighborhood.”* I followed up with, “Do you think if you could target your ad to all of the homes in this neighborhood, it would produce results?” When he answered affirmatively, I went on to explain how as a direct mailed community paper we could do just that and closed the sale.

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Before attempting to answer an objection, you should ask questions to confirm that you fully understand it from the customer's point of view. Many people tell you one thing when they actually mean something else. One of the most common objections is, *"I don't have the money to advertise."* This is sometimes the case but more often the customer is really saying, "I don't see the value of what you're offering." This explains why simply lowering the price or going to a smaller program seldom wins the sale. They use the "price" rather than the "value" objection because it is hard to argue about how much cash they have on hand, theoretically making this an "unbeatable objection." Also, most people are too nice to insult you by telling you they think your product is worthless. Since many emotions play a big part in the decision-making process, it is just as important to gauge how a prospect feels about an issue, as it is to know what they think about it. Asking good questions gives you all the information you need to address the objection. This process also makes resolving the objection a cooperative rather than an adversarial process.

It is also important to pay close attention to the customer's tone of voice. Their tone indicates how they truly "feel" about the issue at hand than the literal content of their words. An angry or confrontational tone indicates a much deeper problem than a concern over pricing. In this case, you cannot proceed until you discover the root of their feelings toward your products. The direct approach is the best way to handle such emotionally charged situations by saying, "Mr. Customer, I sense that you have some serious concerns about our paper, may I ask what they are?" This shows the customer that they have your full attention and are genuinely interested in their concerns.

Others have FELT that way

The second part of the process serves several purposes. First it further validates the customer's feelings, "they are not the only one who feels this way." This step also opens up the possibility of change for the customer. Very few people are so enlightened that they willingly admit that they were wrong. This coupled with our natural dislike of being told what to do makes getting a prospect to say "Yes" to you after they have already said "No" extremely difficult. Even if the prospect sees the value of your offering after they have turned you down, they will stand firm to protect their ego. This is why it is important not to force a prospect into taking a firm position which they will defend like it was the gates of the Alamo. By describing how others felt the same way and changed their mind makes doing so far more palatable. The customer must believe that they have changed their mind of their own free will.

What they FOUND was...

Plumbers, electricians and other repair people all drive vans or trucks packed with the tools of their trade and the parts they need to handle any problem they might encounter. Likewise, smart sales people always carry everything they need to "fix" a problem with them. Rather than hammers, pliers and valves, our tool kit includes research, our products and testimonials. You should always have your audit and circulation information within easy

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reach to present to a customer. Most people think in terms of stories and not in numbers so it is important to present your data in a narrative form. For example, instead of saying, “60% of our readers have an income in excess of \$60K,” you should say, “since our circulation includes Richburg and Bucksburg, our readership is very desirable and quite affluent. Did you know that over 60% of our readers make more than \$60K?”

This bias towards information in a narrative format is why testimonials are your most powerful tool for responding to objections. Prospects are understandably skeptical of anything a sales person says. They are much more inclined to believe their fellow business people. You should equip yourself with a battery of testimonials from your company’s satisfied customers. You can deliver these orally, but written testimonials are far more effective. As a sales person, I often asked my regular customers to give me testimonial letters to use on sales calls. I kept these in a notebook paired with photos of my customers and their businesses. This notebook proved to be my most powerful selling tool.

Bring it all together

Here’s how this process works:

Customer: “I don’t really want to spend the money right now.”

Rep: “Ms. Prospect, I can understand how you feel. Many of my customers tell me that they are careful where they invest their money these days. I sense that you have some other concerns about our paper, may I ask what they are?”

Customer: “Well...I’m not sure that many people still read a local paper anymore. Everybody seems to do everything online these days.”

Rep: “I can understand how you feel, my whole life is on my phone, but my customers tell me that a lot of people still use the paper to find local businesses. Take a look at what Mike at the Jones Hardware told me.”

It’s a tough job but...

Every sales person encounters objections from their prospects and no sales person can overcome every challenge. True sales professionals are prepared for anything their prospects throw at them. They take the time to listen to their clients and try to understand the situation from their point of view. These top performers know that if they use good sales techniques to respond, rather than react, to the roadblocks put in their way, they will be able to overcome most objections and close more sales. *This article was written by Jim Busch.*

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