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Framing Your Sales Message

The writer and diarist, Anais Nin, was a keen observer of human behavior. Her understanding of how we interact with one another led her to write, *“We do not see the world as it is, we see the world as we are.”* In recent years, psychological research has determined the accuracy of her observation. Psychologists and communication experts have dubbed this phenomenon, “framing.” As we go through life, we use our individual life experiences to build a “frame” which shapes how we see and understand the world. No two lives are exactly the same, even identical twins raised in the same home by the same parents, experience life in slightly different ways. Because no two lives are the same, we all have a unique way of looking at the world.

Breaking through the frame

The fact that we filter everything we encounter through a personal frame makes communicating with each other a challenge. We need to find common ground, to identify points where our “frames” overlap to get our point across. This makes how we say something at least as important as the content of our message. Noted communications consultant and pollster, Dr. Frank Luntz describes this challenge as,

“You can have the best message in the world but the person on the receiving end will always understand it through the prism of his or her own emotions, preconceptions, prejudices and preexisting beliefs...the key to successful communications is to take the imaginative leap of stuffing yourself right into your listener’s shoes to know what they are thinking and feeling in the deepest recesses of their heart and mind.”

It is easy to find a practical demonstration of framing in today’s polarized political environment. Sit with a group of people with a new report or political speech on the television. The same sounds will reach everyone’s ears, but what each individual “hears” will be impacted by their political leanings. The way a person interprets what is being said will be colored by their preexisting beliefs. A Republican listener will be predisposed to doubt a liberal speaker and vice versa.

Framed as a salesperson

Consider the impact of framing when calling on a prospect or making a presentation. From the moment, you identify yourself as a salesperson, everything you say will be suspect. Prospects know that a salesperson’s job is to paint their products in the best possible light. They also know that many salespeople are not above bending the truth to accomplish this goal. Until the prospect is convinced otherwise, you will be framed as the stereotypical, fast talking anything-for-a-buck salesperson.

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Most people consider stereotyping, putting people in a box instead of judging them on their personal merits, as a bad thing, but we all do this. In psychological terms a stereotype is a “heuristic.” A heuristic is a mental short cut which allows us to act without taking the time to think. This explains how we can jump out of the way of an oncoming bus before we realize what is happening. If we took the time to think, *“There is a large bus coming this way, I am standing in the street and will be hit if I don’t do something I will be killed, perhaps I should jum...”* we would have tire tracks down the middle of our flattened body.

Psychological frames are built out of very tough material. They are virtually impossible to destroy or to alter. The odds of convincing a prospect to abandon their beliefs about the veracity of salespeople make winning the Powerball look like a sure thing. It is far more effective to convince the client to switch frames to one that is more favorable.

If their “salesperson frame” says that these untrustworthy characters talk about themselves and their products all the time, talking about them and taking an interest in their needs may make them wonder if they’ve pulled the wrong frame out of their bag. Perhaps this person would fit in a “consultant frame” or even better a “friend frame,” perhaps I should listen to them and see which one works best.

Straightening your own frame

To put framing to use, it is wise to begin by examining your own frames. A frame is a shorthand version of how we see the world and our place in it. It is the story we tell ourselves to make sense of our environment. It defines our mission in life and how we think about other people. As sales people our story should be about how we can help our customers achieve their goals. As advertising professionals, our mission is to bring together people who have something to sell with the people who need their products to the benefit of both parties. We will never be able to convince prospects that we are genuinely interested in helping them, if we do not truly believe this in our own minds. If we frame our clients as “idiots” or “cheapskates,” these opinions will taint every interaction we have with them. We need to see our clients as who they are, hardworking people trying to run a business in a challenging business climate who both need and deserve our help. Our species has lived in social groups for millions of years and we have evolved a highly developed “B.S. detector.” The only way to be perceived as genuinely interested in the welfare of our customers is to be genuinely interested in the welfare of our customers.

We need to think about how we present our products to our prospects. Any discussion of our products should be directly linked to how they will advance the customer’s agenda. For example, when discussing readership,

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instead of simply saying, “we have X number of readers,” it is better to say that, “we have X number of readers which means that you will reach thousands of potential customers all within a few miles of your location.” It is important to realize that working in the industry gives us a better understanding of how advertising works than the prospect is likely to have. We need to spell out exactly how our products work in the context of their business. It is unreasonable to expect them to understand advertising as well as we do, it is our job to help them to do so.

Peeking inside the customer’s frame

As discussed above, frames are an ingrained part of the prospect’s psyche and virtually impossible to change. Pressuring someone to abandon their frame and accept our worldview is not effective, but will cause the other person to dig their heels in and hold on to their position evermore firmly. Since we cannot change a prospect’s frame, we need to show the prospect how what we are proposing fits into it. To do this we must first try not only to understand their situation, but also how they see themselves and their business in it. This goes beyond traditional “*just the facts ma’am*” information gathering on a sales call. You not only want to know about their products and customers, but also how they think about them. Understanding the customer’s personal motivations and how they see themselves is critical to knowing how to sell them.

The first step is to research the customer and learn as much about them as possible. Go to their website, look at its design and what is featured on it. Do the same for the customer’s Facebook page and any blogs they may have. Try to “read between the lines,” what does the information they choose to put online tell you about what is important to them. Their mission statement or goals provides another piece of the puzzle, as does the types of photos they post. Look beyond the factual information for insights into the business owner’s personality. Do the same when talking to their employees and customers. Think about what the physical layout and design of their business says about them. Everything we do is an expression of our personality, customers leave their “*fingerprints*” on every aspect of their business. Use these clues in planning your sales approach. For example, if a prospect’s website and storefront are simple, neat and well organized, chances are that they will be impatient with a salesperson who is disorganized and rambles. On the other hand, a customer who post lots of pictures of their employees, their customers and even their pets and who shares a lot of personal information online will probably want to engage in small talk to build a relationship and most likely will reject a more direct approach.

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So, tell me a little about yourself

During an interview with a prospect, a sales person should ask “what” questions to learn about their business and “why” questions to learn about them. The goal of these questions is, to use Dr. Luntz’s words, “*stuff yourself right into your listener’s shoes to know what they are thinking.*” It is far more important to understand why they decided to go into business than to know that they opened in 1999. The why question provides insight into their decision-making process and their life goals. This information is invaluable when it is time to close the sale. You can frame your recommendation in alignment with their goals. For example, if they told you that they “always wanted to own a friendly neighborhood café and coffee shop where people could relax and de-stress,” you can talk to them about an “*Oasis in a crazy world program to share their vision with their neighbors.*” This will dovetail with the prospect’s frame, their personal vision of what their coffee shop looks like, and make them more inclined to buy the program. If they opened the shop to, “*escape the greed and stress of the corporate rat race,*” an appeal to “driving traffic and profits,” may counterintuitively strike them as undesirable even though they need to be profitable to survive. Frames are deeply personal, using the one size fits all approach to presenting your products is the sales equivalent to rolling dice—sometimes they will land just right, but most of the time you will lose. Using probing to gain insight into the prospect’s thinking and decision making process will greatly improve your closing ratio.

The framework of selling

The real work of selling takes place not on the phone or in the prospect’s office but between their ears. Selling for a living is a challenge because we need to accomplish the difficult task of inserting our ideas into another person’s frame. We will examine framing techniques further in next month’s Link & Learn but I will close with this thought from journalist Sidney J. Harris, “*The two words, ‘Information’ and ‘Communication’ are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through!*”

This article was written by Jim Busch.

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