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S.P.I.C.E. up your presentations

After more than three decades in sales I still love my job. Unlike many people my age I still find my work interesting and engaging. A friend once told me that he found golf so addictive because you can learn to play the game in an afternoon and spend a lifetime learning to master the game. This is how I feel about sales, after thirty plus years I am still trying to master the advertising sales “game.” On one level, sales is a simple process of reaching out to potential buyers, telling them about your product and demonstrating how you can help them. On another level, sales is quite complex, we deal with the most complicated entity in the known universe—the human mind. We play our “game” on the ever changing and ever unpredictable course that lies between the ears of our customers. I’ve found that studying psychology is one of the best ways to learn more about negotiating this tricky landscape. Recently I read an outstanding article in Scientific American Mind (Mar. /April 2010) that goes right to the heart of what we do—persuade others.

The article titled *The Power to Persuade* describes people that author Kevin Dutton calls “supersuaders”. These are people who are very, very good at getting others to see things their way. They are able to circumvent the mind’s natural reluctance to change and are able to convince others to take the course of action they recommend. Dutton studied these masters of persuasion and identified the specific behaviors that they use to work their “magic.” He is convinced that anyone can learn to be a “supersuader.” Here are the steps he describes and some ways to apply them to selling advertising.

Add a little SPICE

Dutton uses the acronym *S.P.I.C.E.* to describe five basic techniques used by “supersuaders. *S.P.I.C.E.* stands for:

- **S**implicity
- **P**erceived Self Interest
- **I**ncongruity
- **C**onfidence
- **E**mpathy

Used in conjunction with one another these skills form a powerful system to engage another person and gain their agreement. For maximum effectiveness it is important that you include all of these elements in your conversations with potential advertisers.

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Simplicity

When I started in sales, I was taught the KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid) principle. Dutton's research proves the validity of this time-honored practice. He found that the simpler, the shorter and sharper the message, the more likely it is to convince the listener. This is a true case of less is more, providing too many facts confuses the listener. When you confuse a customer, their brain shuts down and tries to sort out the information. If you confuse a prospect you will never convince them. You are more likely to convince someone if you focus on one or two key points rather than trying to bury them with a hundred reasons to advertise. Before he became president, Abraham Lincoln was a very successful attorney. To convince juries, he made a practice of boiling down a case to one essential point. In their summation his opponents would rattle off a long list of reasons to find for their client. Lincoln would concede to most of the points made by the other side and then he would tell the jury, "there is one point that is more important than all the others", and then elaborate on that point. Lincoln was successful because he helped the jury simplify the issue in their minds, making it easier for them to make a decision.

In his article, Dutton also offers some advice that applies to ad design. He described a study where two groups of students were given a recipe and asked to judge how difficult it would be to prepare. Both groups were given the same recipe, but one was printed in a simple Times New Roman typeface, while the other was printed in a fancy cursive brush font. The students given the simple font felt the recipe would be easy to prepare and the other group felt that it would be challenging to make. The take away lesson is that simple ad layouts are more likely to generate response. Ads that are busy and which utilize hard to read fonts may confuse the reader and cause them to skip over it entirely.

Perceived Self Interest

Prospects buy for their own reasons. A sales person who talks about how his/her publication can help the customer will be much more successful than a rep who talks about the paper without relating it to the prospects needs. To persuade, it is vital to present your product in a way that it appears not to be in your own interest, but in the best interest of the customer. Prospects know why we are calling on them. This is why it is important to adopt a win/win attitude and be genuinely concerned about giving customers real value for their advertising investment. You can't fake a concern for the customer's welfare.

One way to engage a customer is to offer something of value when you first meet them. I often will offer the prospect a research report or some promotional

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idea to help win an appointment and open up communication. This also has application to ad creation. In his article, Dutton relates the results of a Wharton School study done at a car wash. The car wash offered a “loyalty” program that gave customers a chance to earn a free car wash. They tested two designs for the card, one with 8 blank circles to be stamped and the other with ten circles with the first two pre-stamped. Both cards required the customer to purchase eight washes to get the “freebie.” Thirty-four percent of the cards with the “2 free stamps” were redeemed while only nineteen percent of the cards with the eight circles were completed. By “giving” something to the consumers upfront they were persuaded of the value of the loyalty program.

Incongruity

Incongruity refers to breaking patterns, about doing the unexpected. When you can make a prospect laugh or do something unexpected you force the prospect to pay attention and break down the barriers to communication. It is particularly effective to do an unexpected kindness for a prospect. Psychologist David Strohmetz conducted an interesting study of the interactions between three groups of diners and their waiters. The first group was given a mint with their bill and the second group was given two mints. The third was initially given one mint and then the waiter would turn around and give them a second mint. The group that gave one candy received tips that were 3.3% higher than waiters that did not give one, and the group that gave two mints were tipped 14.1% higher. The group that gave the “extra” mint received a 23% larger tip. The third group received a larger reward because they did the unexpected and made the customer feel special. Keep this in mind when building relationships with customers. Something as simple as a hand written thank you note can have a big impact on how the customer sees you and their willingness to listen to your ideas.

Confidence

Successful sales people are big believers in the power of positive thinking. This is one of the reasons they are successful, research has found that confidence is a key component of persuasion. To convince others we need to be convinced ourselves. Human brains contain “mirror neurons” that help us sense the emotional states of other people. Emotions are literally contagious; we are hard wired to mimic the feeling of others. If the sales rep is not 100% confident of their recommendation, the prospect will sense this and begin to doubt the wisdom of the program. To convince others, we must first convince ourselves.

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Empathy

Empathy is simply an understanding of and a concern for the feelings of others. Recent brain imaging research into the human decision making process has found that most decisions are much more emotional than rational. We learn to “trust our gut” to make good decisions. A salesperson that empathizes with a client and uses this understanding to reassure prospects is more likely to make the sale than a rep that is only concerned with presenting the facts. Never forget that people make buying decisions based on emotions and justify the decision with facts. A customer will never be persuaded to do something that “doesn’t feel right” regardless of what the facts say.

Conclusion

Selling advertising is an endlessly interesting way to make a living. We need to be designers, writers, entrepreneurs and psychologists all wrapped up in one package. Most of all, we need to be persuaders, we have to persuade the prospect to see us, to listen to us and of course to buy ads from us. Our success or failure depends upon our ability to convince others. We need to continually think about, and work on, improving our persuasive powers. S.P.I.C.E. up your presentations and you will not only be super-successful; you will be a “supersuader!”

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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