

Negative attitudes about sales process can be costly problem for small business owners

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Business guru Peter Drucker once observed that when you reduce business to its lowest common denominator, you have a product or service and someone to sell it. For many entrepreneurs, professionals and small businesses, the person who sells also makes the product or delivers the service. While wearing many hats is characteristic of small business, these particular hats are challenging to wear at the same time.

The key distinction of sales professionals is their attitude. People who sell for a living know they can succeed; others are convinced they can't. Many non-salespeople have an inherent dislike of sales. Ask them for their attitudes toward sales and you'll get responses like *sleazy, pushy, uncomfortable, dishonest, crafty*. Images of used-car salesmen and telemarketers rush into their heads.

Understandably, with attitudes like these, many in small business shy away from sales. Worse still, unlike those who sell for a living, entrepreneurs and business professionals are seldom, if ever, trained in sales. Typically, sales professionals spend hundreds of hours in a classroom environment over their careers. Not only will they receive initial training in sales, but they'll also get a refresher course in the basics at least once a year. And they'll typically attend at least one corporate sales rally that will put them in touch with their peers and excite them about new product and service offerings.

For the entrepreneur or small businessperson, selling comes with higher risks. Sales people work for salary plus commission, but entrepreneurs don't eat if they don't sell. Successful selling also offers greater rewards for the business owner. Highly successful career sales people make good money, but the companies they work for do even better. Entrepreneurs can benefit from their own sales success with profitable, expanding businesses, not just commissions. But first, they need to transform the minefield of sales into a meadow of wild flowers. How exactly do you do that?

Our three-part sales workshop series called *Hate to Sell, Have to Sell* is designed for people who don't like selling but can't succeed at business without it. Not only do we provide the hands-on sales training most business people never get, but we also offer the conviviality and community of a sales rally. It's a small rally, granted—we limit our sessions to 12 people. Consistently our feedback informs us that the group interaction is as valuable as the information we offer about the sales process.

The first session covers “The Basics,” which is the topic of this column. In future editions of *Berkshire Trade & Commerce*, we'll address sales process and sales style, which make up the balance of the three-part series.

Two ears, one mouth

The most fundamental sales technique is the one most often abused by novice salespeople. It's questioning—finding out from prospective customers what they want and, most importantly, why they want it. “You have two ears and one mouth,” we remind our students. “And that's the proportion in which you should use them.” We include role-playing in our workshops. Frequently, the eager entrepreneur talks on and on about the virtues of his offering without once pausing to ask the key questions that will focus the sales conversation.

Once participants get past their initial dislike of sales, another level of complaint arises. “I spent hours and hours with this prospect, and in the end they were just wasting my time, checking me out for what they could learn. I don't think they ever planned to buy from me.”

Qualifying is the fine art of finding out, early on, whether the person you're talking with is a real prospect, worthy of your sales effort, or simply a tire kicker. This isn't a simple matter and even experienced sales professionals can misread the tealeaves. However, there are some questioning skills that can increase the odds of investing your time with the right prospects.

To begin with, find out the real, but often hidden, reason the person is looking for your product or service. Don't settle for the explicit, or obvious, motivation. For example, one of our participants is a personal historian. Through books and tapes, he helps people capture their personal and family history. An initial inquiry might begin with the prospect saying she wants a videotape of a relative. Further questioning may reveal why. Is this relative ill, near death perhaps? Is there a rift in the family and such a project might heal the wound? Did this person see something on the Oprah Winfrey show that lead her to desire a better understanding of her own personal history? These are all valid reasons, but each one suggests a different sales approach. If time is of the essence, you may want to act quickly. If some deeply buried secret is seeking to be revealed, a different strategy is appropriate.

A full and complete understanding of the motivations to buy is also helpful if the buyer begins to back peddle. If you, as the sales person, really understand the reason the person needs this service, you can remind them when they start to get cold feet. If you don't understand their true motivation, it will be too late when they start to retreat from the sale.

Hat trick

Good questioning helps you qualify prospects and close sales, two of the most challenging elements in the sales process. Fully understanding the prospect's needs means you can shift your stance from selling to helping people buy. If you're the person who will deliver the service as well as sell it, this is very important.

In larger organizations, when the sales person completes the sale, the customer is handed off to another department for service or product delivery. In small and micro businesses, the sales person takes off his sales hat and puts on his provider hat. This is a hat trick in the true sense of the word. And the transition is greatly smoothed by offering a caring, consultative sell rather than a hard sell.

Helping people buy may mean not selling your product at all. When you don't offer exactly what they want and need, but your competitor does, send them to your competitor. Later on, they'll thank you. In the end they may send you more business by referrals than you would have gotten by force-fitting your round peg into their square hole.

Welcome objections

We also remind our participants that objections are their best friends. This may seem counterintuitive, but notice how it works. Let's say you offer a trial close. "Would you like to schedule a session on Wednesday, March 8 or would Thursday March 16 be better for you?" Your prospect responds: "Well, I'm still not sure I can take the time at all." Ah ha, an objection. This is the time to use what you learned in the qualifying and questioning portion of the sales process. Remind them of the benefits they will get from this session and how it will further their long-term objectives. There may be another objection after the first one. But if you stay calm and take them one at a time, objections will show you where the prospect is still resistant. If time is their problem, offering them a price discount won't help. You have to deal with each objection on its own merits.

Closing is the payoff in sales both for the professional and for the novice. But if sales success is your entire motivation, you're in for a lot of disappointment. Professional sales people delight in the process—they enjoy the chase even when they don't close the deal. For an entrepreneur or business owner, losing a sale is more painful. It's easy to take this loss personally since it is your product or service that's being rejected. Part of the transformation our workshops offer is the chance to enjoy the journey—to enjoy the wildflowers in the meadow—even when the process doesn't add cash to the bottom line.

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