

Demystifying the selling process

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Sales and marketing are like two brothers. Everyone knows they are different, but people often call them by the wrong name. Here's how to keep them separate. Marketing brings in the leads; sales brings in the dollars.

In order to sell, you must market—people need to know about your product and how they can buy it. Brochures, ads, articles, trade shows, word-of-mouth and, best of all, repeat business bring the customers to your door. Once they are there, you engage in the sales process. Sometimes it's as easy as writing an order. But when it's not, the sales process can take days, weeks, months or even years.

Some sales are typically more complex than others and there's great variation in products and services, but most sales go through a process similar to the one we'll talk about here.

First comes qualifying leads. Conventional business wisdom says that 80% of your business will come from 20% of your customers. People experienced in sales learn how to check out each inquiry to determine whether the buyer is serious or just shopping. A series of careful questions works well here. Why is the customer interested in this product? What value does she see from this service? Has the company purchased something similar before? How did that turn out? These questions help to find out why they aren't returning to their previous supplier. You can't usually ask that directly, but it would be nice to know. Often, if you get a prospect talking, you can learn valuable details that will help you close the sale.

A photographer recently took our workshop series. He often finds prospect's problems are with the photographic process, not with the previous service provider. Photography, many art and design projects, construction and consulting are often difficult to sell because you can't always estimate the exact total cost at the beginning.

This is where budget comes in. You need to verify that the buyer's expectations are realistic. A consultant we know spent a lot of time with the president of a small company before he learned that this executive budgeted for consultants the same way he did for temporary help. But budgets are tricky. While you need to know that the prospect is realistic about what your product or service will cost, you don't want to get locked in to a lower fee when good selling would encourage the prospect to buy a higher quality product.

In addition to money, timing can be a stumbling block. Suppose you're a contractor and a couple want to remodel their kitchen. If they want to get started right away and you're booked until summer, you're probably wasting your time if you spend more than a few minutes on the phone. But, if everyone else is just as busy, you might be able to sell them on the quality of your work if they are willing to wait.

Needs and solutions

Let's say you've had a phone call or two, perhaps a meeting and you're convinced you've got a lively prospect. The next step is to analyze your potential customer's needs in detail. Are you speaking to the decision maker? If not, how will the decision be made? In business you often have several people to satisfy. Let's take our photographer again. Obviously, he needs to satisfy the business owner, but suppose the owner's wife is handling brochure production. She needs to be satisfied along with the graphic artist who is producing the brochure. Maybe there are others as well. It's best to find these things out early in the sales cycle.

Once you're clear on needs, it's time to craft your solution. In some businesses, this process is pretty straightforward. You now know what they need, you have it, and it will cost x dollars. But other businesses require complex proposals, often many pages long. One of our businesses is like that. We always say our customers write the proposal. We don't mean that literally. We put on paper the agreements already reached through previous meetings, phone calls and correspondence. Another way of saying this: When the written proposal turns up, there should be no surprises.

Don't ask, don't sell

Next, ask for the order. It seems obvious, but studies show that many sales efforts fail because no one actually asked the prospect to buy. If prospects don't jump at the offer, they will usually have an objection. Understand each objection; it can be the key to successful sales.

If they don't buy at first, you need to follow up. And you'll probably have to follow-up along the way from the initial contact to the proposal stage. A computer-based contact manager is the best way to keep track of an active prospect list. Unlike databases that only have customer names and addresses, a contact manager includes reminders, notes on previous conversations, and "to do's." Some also feature what's known as pipeline management. This will let you see the overall status of your future sales—who has made inquiries, who is considering a proposal, who has recently said "yes." There are a great many products on the market, but among the best known are: ACT!, GoldMine, SalesLogix, Maximizer and WinSales. Most are priced in the \$200 to \$300 range.

While it's often time consuming to get all your data into a computer, the effort will be rewarded many times over when you can effectively keep a prospect from falling through the cracks. For many of us who wear several hats, sales is sometimes not at the top of our "to do" list. Having an organized reminder that it's time to check with Charlie about his next purchase can simplify a harried entrepreneur's day.

Up to now, you've still got a prospect—someone who *might* buy your product or service. Turning that prospect into a customer means you'll have to close the sale. Many books have been written on this critical subject. One tip—listen for buying signals. Even comments that sound negative may indicate a light at the end of the tunnel. "The only

way it would work would be . . .” or “We can’t get started until next month” are both signs that the prospect is ready to buy. So are “How soon can we get delivery?” and “Can I pay by credit card?” If the buyer is still on the fence, remind him of the benefits of your product. If your services need to be scheduled, you can also gently suggest that you’re coming into your busy season and you’d like to be sure to save time for them.

You don’t want to be seen as a pesky salesperson, but you need to follow-up regularly. Finding the right mix of reminders without being excessive is part of the art of sales. You can get help from your prospect. Ask them when they’d like you to be in touch again. Change the way you remind them. If you’ve been calling, send a postcard. If you’ve used fax, send them an Email. At some point, you have to call it quits and move on. Even though you qualified, promoted your benefits and followed up, they aren’t going to buy. When this happens, just know that’s the way it goes in sales. Focus on the prospects in your pipeline that are moving well and get another round of flyers in the mail. That will bring in the new leads and enable you to start the process over again. As we say at the end of our workshops, “Good luck and good selling.”

“Demystifying the Selling Process,” Will Ryan, co-author, June 2000, *Berkshire Trade & Commerce*.

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