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Dealing with Objections

As a professional sales trainer, I am supposed to tell sales people that they should welcome objections; that they should learn to love objections, that they shouldn't take objections personally. At the risk of being drummed out of the loyal order of sales trainers, I have to say that's an 18 wheeler sized load of crap. I hate objections, I have always hated objections and I will always hate objections. After more than thirty years in sales I still take objections very personally. We've all seen the sales poster that reads, "Selling begins when the customer says NO!", but I know that "Paychecks begin when the customer says YES!" This is why I have dedicated my life to the complete and total eradication of objections from the face of the earth. In this article I will share some of the things I have learned in this battle.

"What we have here is a failure to communicate."

The dictionary defines objection as "to prevent agreement or action, an adverse reason or argument," or (my personal favorite) "a cause of trouble or sorrow." A more useful definition for our purposes is that an objection is a misunderstanding. Either the customer doesn't understand the value your products provide for their business or the sales person doesn't clearly understand the customer's business problems. The remedy for all misunderstandings is communication. Communication builds a bridge of understanding between the prospect and the sales person. The highway on that bridge has to run both ways, listening to the customer is just as (perhaps even more) important as getting the customer to listen to us.

When speaking with the customer keep everything as simple as possible. Use stories and analogies to make your points. It is human nature to reject the things we don't understand. When a customer is confused about the details of your program, they will object to your proposals. Frequently ask questions to make sure you are getting your point across. Never ask a prospect if they "understand", but rather ask "did I explain that point clearly." The responsibility of making sure you and the prospect understand each other rests clearly with the salesperson.

The salesperson must carefully listen to the prospect and pay close attention to their body language. Questions are the power tool of communication. If you have any doubt of what the prospect is trying to say, it is important to ask for clarification. Nodding and leaning forward will encourage the prospect to keep talking. Observe the prospects body language as well. Look for them to loosen up and move toward you. It is important that you do not proceed until you have established open communications with the customer and clearly understand their challenges.

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Make a preemptive strike against objections

The best time to handle an objection is before you get one. Research conducted by Huthwaite, Inc. found that the likelihood of making a sale decreases in direct proportion to the number of objections that the salesperson receives. I am sure that “DUH!” passed through your mind when you read the previous sentence, but the significant finding of the Huthwaite research is that the salesperson’s ability or inability to answer these objections had no effect on the outcome of the call. Simply raising the objection puts the prospect in a negative frame of mind that prevents them from buying. This is why it is far better to prevent objections rather than to respond to them.

The #1 cause of objections is proposing a solution too early in the call. Imagine walking into your doctor’s office and telling him that you’re not feeling well. Without a moment’s hesitation your doctor looks you in the eye and says, “I’ve got a great deal on appendectomies, I’ll set you up for surgery tomorrow!” You would run out of his office so fast that it would make his head spin, yet this is exactly the approach that many salespeople use every day. Instead of asking questions to uncover the customer’s needs before proposing a solution, they open the call by pitching their product. In medicine and in sales—“TREATMENT BEFORE DIAGNOSIS IS MALPRACTICE.” If we “hold our fire” until we have uncovered a clear problem that we can solve; we will receive many fewer objections and close many more sales.

The “3 R’s” of objection handling

When we do receive an objection, it is necessary to have a clearly defined process for dealing with them. I use the “3 R’s” method. In this context the “3 R’s” refers to:

- Relieve the pressure
- Reveal the problem
- Reframe the conversation
- Relieve the pressure

Most people try to avoid confrontation. They find arguments upsetting. This is why a customer’s objection creates tension between them and the salesperson. They are afraid that their decision will spark an unpleasant discussion. They expect you to dispute their statements and force them to defend their position. When they say, “I don’t think anyone reads your paper” you should not respond directly by showing them documentation of your readership. This information is invaluable later in the process, but at this point using an audit or survey numbers will be seen as a challenge to the customer’s opinion. Human beings hate to admit that they are wrong. Your challenge to their statement will just cause them to dig in their heels and defend their position to the death. A far better strategy is to acknowledge their feelings and their right to speak their mind. To defuse the tension, you can use the classic

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Feel—Felt—Found method; “Mr./Ms. Customer I can understand why you might feel that way, many of my customers have felt that way in the past, but when they looked into the matter a little closer they found...” A direct challenge to a customer tells them “You’re wrong!” A softer approach tells them that you value their opinion and that you respect them as an individual. If you allow the discussion of the objection to devolve into an argument, you may make your point but you will never make the sale.

Reveal the real problem

Psychologists studying human behavior have found that the decision making process is a collaboration between our logical and emotional brains. We make our decisions emotionally and then justify the decision with logic. Prospects will offer the “good” reason for not buying while the “real” reason remains hidden below the surface. They may say, “I’m happy with the results from the daily paper,” but may actually be thinking, “if I advertise in a free paper, my peers will think I’m cheap.” You need to ask good questions to reveal the true objection. In the case above, ask questions about how they “feel” about the two competing products. “How do you feel about your ads in the daily?” Once you determine that the real problem is the perceived image of your paper, you can reassure the customer by showing them current ads from well respected local businesses. If you are unable to reveal the real obstacles to closing a sale, you will not be able to address them.

Reframe the conversation

Reframing is a technique to help a customer see the issue you are discussing from another angle. For example, when a customer is talking about price you need to reframe the discussion to put the focus on value. When a customer says, “Your price sounds too high”, paraphrase and reframe it as “So what you’re saying is that you want to make sure that you’ll get a reasonable return on your investment.” This changes the discussion to something advertising can remedy. You can’t change your price (and still make a fair profit), but you can show the customer how many people they can reach. You can show them that the program will only cost a few pennies per home. The technique reframed the price objection into a discussion of value.

Putting it all together

By using the “3 R’s” in conjunction with one another you can overcome almost any objection. Here is an example:

Prospect: *“I’d love to advertise, but I just don’t have the money.”*

Rep: *“This is a tough time to be in business, it is a real challenge to get enough people coming through the door to shop.” (You’ve agreed with the customers statement and reframed the problem as too few customers)*

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Rep: ***“What are you doing to turn things around and generate cash flow?”***
(This reframes the discussion from acceptance of the situation to proactively seeking a solution)

Prospect: ***“There’s nothing I can do. With the economy the way it is, there just aren’t enough people buying my products.”***

Rep: ***“How many additional customers would you need to attract to make you feel better about the direction of your business?”*** *(This reframes the conversation into the need for customers and gets the customer talking about a solution)*

The “Secret Ingredient”

The most important factor affecting a salesperson’s ability to overcome (and prevent) objections is CONFIDENCE. Their belief in their company, in their products and especially in themselves is the key element influencing the outcome of the call. If the rep does not believe in what they are selling, they will never convince anyone else to believe in them.

Die! Objection! Die!

As I’ve said, I hate objections. They not only cost us money, but they hurt our customers and our readers as well. If an ad doesn’t run, the business loses customers and our readers miss out on the services they can provide. This is why we need to work with our clients to clear up the misunderstandings that hurt all of us. Practice these techniques and you can proudly say, “I am a sales professional, customers love me and objections fear me!”

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

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