

Closing life's sales

It doesn't matter if you're a professional salesperson or not, sooner or later, you're going to have to "close a sale."

The truth is, we're **all** salespeople of one sort or another. When you go after a new job, sell an idea to your boss, ask for a raise, or propose marriage, you're selling something -- and the most important part of sales is **closing** the sale.

Without closing the sale, the remainder of the experience is moot. It's the difference between "just good friends" and "here comes the bride."

So how do you close a sale?

Some years ago, I was out to buy a new car. Having driven a Chevrolet for some years (the car was so old it would leak a quart of oil every 50 miles, and, although it was painted green, was more rust-colored than anything else), I decided to look around for a new Chevy.

I went to the local Chevy dealer, and sat down with a salesperson. It seems to me his name was "Chuck," but if I were him, I'd give out false names, too.

Anyway, "Chuck" proceeded down the path, attempting to get me to commit to a car. He 'wheeled and dealed," and finally got me behind the steering wheel of a "sweet little honey of a car" that had just come into the lot.

The car stunk. It rattled, handled badly, and was just a piece of junk.

"What do I have to do to make you commit to this car today?" said Chuck.

"I'm not going to buy that car," I said.

"No...I'll get all the things fixed. What do I have to do to make you commit to this car today?" Chuck said.

Well, there was no way on heaven or earth that I was ever going to buy that bucket of bolts, but I decided I'd see how far Chuck would go. I launched into my then-standard "You give a little, and I'll give a little" approach to buying a car.

Chuck turned on the push. He swerved, he moved, he mumbled, he begged. But there was one important thing that he didn't do -- and that's the reason I haven't driven a Chevy ever since -- he never listened.

First and foremost, on the road to every sale, you've got to take time to stop and listen.

Chuck was a poor car salesman. I have no doubt that someone who follows his "hard sell" techniques can sell a car; I doubt they'll sell twice to the same person. That's because Chuck didn't hear me when I said "I'm not going to buy this car." He was so intent on his own goals, that he didn't hear mine.

This brings us to rule number one about closing the sale:

Rule number one: Learn to understand the other side

I am indebted to the amazing Herb Cohen's amazing book "You can Negotiate Anything" and the tape series he produced, for this first bit of advice.

In order to sell anything effectively, you need to understand what the other side wants out of the transaction. If you're talking about a marriage contract, a prospective groom needs to understand what his prospective bride wants out of the marriage. Before she says **I do** she wants to know exactly what **He'll do**.

The boyfriend who wishes to become a husband would be wise to listen to his girlfriend, before he pops the question, and like this prospective groom, in order to close the sale, we need to listen.

If Chuck had spent a little bit of time asking me what kind of car I was interested in, he would have had a better chance selling me. If he had listened to my complaints, he would have been able to offer alternatives. If he had read my non-verbal cues (does a scowl count for nothing?) he would have realized that I would have preferred to stay with my rusty car than to spend good money on a piece of junk like he was attempting to sell me.

Chuck didn't listen. He didn't care. As a result, when he pushed into his hard-sell phase, I not only didn't care about him, nor did I listen to him -- I simply walked out.

Chuck called me several times after that. His hard-sell approach was gone; he was in his "whine and beg" phase (my old cocker spaniel used to do that), but no amount of begging would make me come back to him.

When you understand the other side's needs, you are better able to fill them. If you don't understand, you won't be understood.

Rule number two: Explain your benefits clearly.

A former salesperson I worked with did this to me. He came into my office one day, and explained the benefits of a new product he was trying to sell me. He gave me one to try, and I liked it so much that I switched to it.

Later on, the company he worked for was sold, and the product line he once sold went to a different company.

When he came back, attempting to disparage the former product, and sell me something else, he found his earlier sales job had stuck. He had explained the benefits **too** clearly. I haven't gone back to his company yet. I buy the former product from the new source, at a lower price.

Isn't competition wonderful?

At any rate, in order to adequately sell your service, product, or self, you've got to explain why a customer would benefit. Explain it well enough, and your sales job gets infinitely easier.

Any organization has a product to sell, and each of us sell ourselves, no matter what type of organization we are in. We each need to address those elements that adequately express what makes our product unique, even if that product is **us**.

In marketing and advertising, they call this a **USP**, or a **Unique Selling Proposition** (or Position). This is the element that sets you or your product apart from the others. It may be price, availability, technology, uniqueness, or good looks (don't laugh -- you'd be surprised how many times a hairline is a USP, and looks has been selling cars for years). At any rate, if there's nothing different to set your product apart from other similar products, you've just become a commodity. That's why gasoline producers don't stress the gasoline, they stress the additives; breakfast food manufacturers don't stress the corn flakes, they stress the brand. When banana companies started putting little stickers on the bananas, they did it to form a USP.

Pharmaceutical representatives stress "potency," not cost (so do would-be grooms) and "effectiveness" to set their medications apart from other companies' products. Car companies stress good looks, and in a strange twist, most fast food companies stress toys, not food quality, knowing that most buying decisions in the fast food industry are made by five-year-olds.

If you don't differentiate your product or service, the prospective customer will have no reason to buy.

Rule number three: Listen and adapt, explain and expand.

If your USP isn't getting anywhere, it's likely you've ignored Rule one. Now's your chance to learn more what the customer is looking for. Perhaps the car is the wrong color, or your product is the wrong size. Maybe she is worried how your father's hairline is going to be passed down to your children (now's the time to mention that you're adopted).

Use stage three as the last chance to make certain you know what the customer needs. If you don't understand it, ask for clarification. Use your listening techniques ("What do you mean by that? How so? So, tell me if I understand what you're after") to hone exactly what the customer wants. ("So, you think my nose is too big? Is that all? Did I mention that my uncle is a plastic surgeon?")

As a professional, if you see things that the customer should contemplate, now's the time to offer them. If you're selling television sets, and you know the customer's initial choice has a bad warranty record, this is the time to tell them about it, and steer them in another direction. They won't take it when you're just in the initial stages of rule number one -- they don't trust you yet.

I constantly get calls from telemarketers, who, reading off a brain-dead script, never adapt to what I'm saying. Sometimes, I just play along, content to spend my time, just so I can get the satisfaction of wasting theirs. Most of the time I brush them off at the outset ("I'm sorry -- I don't buy anything from telemarketers, and please put me on your do-not-call list."), because if I wanted to talk to someone talking from a prepared script, I'd talk back to the television set. One way or the other, it's the rare telemarketer who gets me to listen; it's the rarer one that gets me to buy -- and inevitably, they have stopped, listened to what I've said, and adapted.

Listening and adapting is integral to communication, and all selling is communication with a purpose.

Rule number four: Ask for the sale

It's odd, but in marriage proposals, as well as professional selling, this is the big sticking point. Many prospective grooms have done the other steps, but never get to this one. It's the sticking point that turns "my girlfriend" into "this woman I used to date." It's the same in selling.

Many salespeople will do everything right, but never ask the customer to buy. Others will ask too early, before the customer is ready to purchase. My friend Chuck asked for the sale -- over and over and over and over again, but because he hadn't set up the necessary groundwork, he didn't get it. In terms of my car, oddly enough, the sale went to a car company that had done a great deal of listening, selling, and adapting. Once I found them, I stuck with them, through three different salespeople, and five different model years. All the salespeople I dealt with have at least pretended to care, and they've listened ten times more than Chuck ever did.

The customer likely knows you've got something you want to push. They're expecting the "getting to know you phase," the "sweetheart" phase, the "courting" phase, and they know the next phase is the "proposal" phase.

It doesn't hurt to ask. At least when you're selling a product, your prospective partner isn't going to slap you on the face, and run crying into the night.

I wish I knew the man who said it -- I remember reading it from the Wall Street Journal -- but although I don't remember the source, I remember the steps to proper selling:

Believe in yourself

Believe in your product

*Meet lots of people
Ask all to buy*

Without the last step, no selling is done. Without the initial steps, selling is done only rarely.

When you understand your customer, emphasize your selling points, listen and adapt, and then ask for the sale, you turn mere communication into communication with a purpose.

Rule number five: Follow through

The best salespeople I've ever have the privilege of being sold by (that's a bad sentence structure, but a good sentiment) have followed up, even when the sale was not made. Sometimes they have turned a "no sale" into many future sales.

Herb Cohen, speaking about negotiation, stressed that the end step of a negotiation is the beginning of the next one. Like that, the end of each sale is the beginning of the next sale. "Sell to sell again" isn't just a motto on the sales manager's wall. It's a way of life. If it's a big purchase, check back with the customer after a few days. Drug salespeople can check to see how a particular medication is working. Car salespeople can check on customer satisfaction. Husbands can verify that their wives are happy.

Closing the sale is a process, but it's a process that can yield vast and important results, if done correctly. Correctly followed, it can give companies needed information about their customer base. It can extend relationships beyond a single sale. It can turn a mediocre "never closer" into a successful district manager.

No matter what our business, or what our life may hold, we're all salespeople. Let's make certain we get the most from our efforts, by closing the sale effectively.

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