Winning the end game

Traditional closing is dead – think now of end game strategy

Two firms recently asked me to look at how their sales teams can improve their "closing" ability. In both cases, as nearly always, closing was not the issue. In one case it was a lack of building value, and in the other a lack of good qualification, particularly in relationships at the decision-making level. Much of my recent work has focused on late sales cycle issues and has re-affirmed observations from a number of colleagues that there is a growing shift from closing to "managing the end game".

Don't misunderstand me. Gaining commitments at the end of sales calls and at appropriate points in the sales campaign are important, but the concept of closing – meaning to get someone to commit to an order – is old-fashioned and counter-productive.

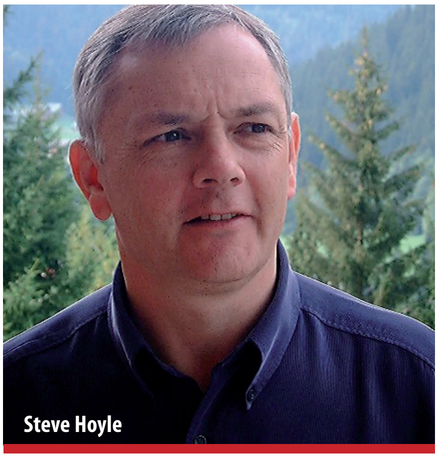
Just as selling has moved from a "push" to a "pull" approach, so closing has changed to agreeing mutual commitments. The distinction is very important. Closing involves the buyer giving up control to the provider, which anyone would like to avoid. Agreeing something mutually, on the other hand, is simply a next step in a process of solving a business issue.

Case in point

The difference was brought home to me recently when examining sales methods used by a large systems integrator and comparing them with a major rival. Getting accurate information in these circumstances is difficult, but customers, ex-prospects and past employees can be great sources, in addition to published materials. In many cases we discovered that, increasingly, big decisions were not being taken formally but business was placed as a constantly flowing process.

An example involves a major insurance company looking to implement a new contact centre. One potential supplier did a good job of interpreting the original request for information, proving capability through executive level briefings, introducing unique, potentially deal-moving applications, and building relationships high and wide. But at the end of the campaign, all they could do was maintain relationships and "close" – which was always resisted as the prospect wanted to "look into a few other issues".

BY STEVE HOYLE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The major competing supplier took a very different strategy of identifying some pivotal individuals in the business, and quietly working with them to develop a more detailed statement of requirements, then developing a return on investment case with them. Towards the end of this exercise this supplier brought in some high level consultants who were engaged on the basis that they could provide expert guidance on use of the models. Naturally, although the initial consulting engagement was free of charge, the potential client wanted more advice, which they were willing to pay for.

This was a relatively low cost but very strategic point, as now this particular vendor was on the inside track. From there the situation progressed with jointly developed implementation plans, pilot studies and pilot implementations. Within a short time the competitive vendor had been forgotten, the project morphed out of recognition from the original request, and very significant business was placed without a head-to-head battle and decision point. Although it looks like a classic fragmentation approach it was successful because it linked various elements in a seamless manner.

So traditional closing is being replaced by "action commitment gains", which are best thought of as the actions that come out of a meeting. For senior executives, in particular, a good meeting for them is one where there is some action resulting. It is well understood in solution or consultative selling that a key indicator for a successful sales call is for the prospect to agree to do something, and action commitment gains are a simple extension of this.

In turn this feeds into the importance of having defined end-game strategies. In a world of more complex and often inter-related decisions, the end game, which we define as the point after which technical evaluations are over, is increasingly critical, as new people get involved (or re-involved) in the decision making group, new priorities become apparent, competitors make desperate last-minute attempts to gain advantage, and business drivers for the project are re-examined.

The greatest danger is in not anticipating the end game, as planning and positioning beforehand is a huge determinant of success. Typical activities prior to the end game are establishing or renewing relationships with key people, arranging access to them and groups during what will be a silent period, building in "wiggle room" to allow access to changes to offers, as well as orchestrating other seemingly unrelated events, possibly involving other projects or activities, so that conversations can coincide with the new project.

Having prepared for the end game, the second danger is in being too rigid. This is going to a very dynamic time, and you will need to re-qualify continuously, re-evaluating and adapting your approach to rapidly changing situations.

Finally, although our work suggests that closing in the traditional sense is counter-productive, you still have to seek a major commitment when the time is right. We still come across a number of salespeople who do not give the prospect the opportunity to buy something.

Key conclusions

- Don't use traditional manipulative closing techniques; at best they are useless, and normally counter-productive.
- Plan and prepare the end-game strategy.
- In particular get relationships and contact points in place early.
- Continually seek agreements for "next step" mutual actions.
- Qualify continuously and be prepared to adapt – the end game is very dynamic.
- Ask for commitment at the right time. SF

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