

Meeting expectations

The top 10 sales meeting mistakes

I recently attended a series of discussions with IT and telecoms sales managers where the topic under consideration was, "What are the biggest mistakes that you see people making during customer meetings?" While some of the answers were to be expected, a great many were very basic mistakes that we would have hoped were not made by competent professional salespeople in the sector. Our follow-up calls clearly indicate that your competitors are probably making some of the mistakes described below.

The top 10 mistakes most commonly identified are as follows.

■ Not understanding your own offerings, their positioning and key propositions

Product knowledge is always a given, although it is surprising that many salespeople do not have a basic grasp of what it is that they are trying to sell. Less surprising is that many salespeople are unable to articulate clearly what customer issues the solution addresses, how it is positioned against competitive offers, and what is the compelling value proposition.

■ Lack of research preparation and planning, and no clear objectives

Everyone knows that this is critical, yet so many salespeople simply do not do it and then risk the customer perceiving them to be either unprofessional or stupid.

■ Too little/too much social conversation

We often refer to the first few minutes as the preliminaries, where everyone goes through pleasantries, breaks the ice, observes style and starts to build rapport. This is a critical time, setting the tone for the rest of the meeting. How long it takes needs judgement. The key is to understand your customer's style, adapt accordingly and if necessary encourage them to get down to business.

■ Not making it relevant and appropriate to the person

We particularly observe this during our sales simulations, which often show that you have to deal with the person in front of you - their issues and desires. Too often we see people talking about benefits to "the company" rather than making them specific to the situation that the person faces. An excellent example is summed up



by one of our clients who sells outsourcing, where the sales director is continually reminding salespeople that "turkeys don't vote for Christmas" (ie don't try to sell outsourcing to a low level technical manager).

■ Not extending issues/challenging the individual

Particularly evident in higher value solution selling is the ability to shape demand by discussing business pain. As we know from training workshops the theory of how to do this is straightforward, but many sales managers report that salespeople continue to struggle with this aspect of the conversation.

■ Advocating too early and too technical (feature dump), not making real benefits relevant and not quantifying

By advocating we mean making the argument for your particular offering. Our own research has discovered that this is probably the biggest single failing with most salespeople, and it's backed up by the latest discussion, which also pointed out that many do not make the advocacy relevant to the customer, and where they do, often fail to fully quantify benefits.

■ Giving concessions too early

This is particularly true of less experienced salespeople who do not anticipate any final negotiation stage of a sale, and weaken their starting negotiation position by giving concessions far too early rather than waiting until the end game, where concessions can be traded.

■ Setting expectations too high

While giving concessions too early affects junior salespeople more, even experienced people are often guilty of setting expectations that will be difficult to meet or exceed. The old adage "any fool can sell anything by promising the Earth" still holds true, and part of the art of selling is to set expectations high enough that you get the business, but low enough that you can implement the solution at a good level of margin.

■ No confirmed action outcome (agreed next steps)

Best practice is that any meeting will conclude with agreed next steps. Great salespeople will always seek to ensure that the customer is left with actions as well as the selling team.

■ Lack of empathy

I have left this to the end, because as well as being a point in its own right, it summarises many of the points above. Once we are beyond basic product/transactional selling, our research, backed up by the vast majority of other serious sales improvement groups, is that the key ability is to be able to put yourself in the shoes of the customer. During meetings it is by demonstrating empathy that we connect with customers, yet there are many salespeople who have not yet fully understood this.

While the above are the top 10 mistakes, others that are worthy of mention include:

- Being late (or worse, not communicating with the customer)
- Lack of personal preparation (rushed and flustered)
- Not checking/agreeing available time
- Arguing with customers
- Discussing politics, religion etc. during a business call
- Knocking the competition
- Telling lies, or exaggerating
- Note taking (too little/too much)
- Talking too much/little active listening
- Not summarising.

SF

Steve Hoyle is chairman of ProAct Business Development, specialising in turning theory into practice with sales behavioural change programmes. For more information www.proactbd.com