

Presentation review

A timely review of what goes wrong with presentations

I was involved in a fascinating study recently. While I have often been involved in performing independent lost sales analysis, this time I was asked by a major telecoms player to look at why it appeared to be losing out at the point of getting on the shortlist.

We discovered that one of the main reasons why their salespeople tended to fall at this hurdle was their presentation skills (or lack of). I was reminded of the article for *Salesforce* that generated the most feedback last year, which was about mistakes made in meetings. We found that salespeople fail at the presentation stage because they failed in some basic way and didn't even do an average job.

While the presentation will rarely win you business, lack of basic sales best practice at the shortlist stage will lose you good prospects. Talking to other clients and colleagues it is evident that this is the case in many organisations, and that far too much business is lost before getting to the serious competition through making common, basic mistakes.

The typical comments that customers gave were:

"It was a standard set of slides – no relevance to what we wanted to achieve."

"I could see nothing different in them as a supplier."

"It was just another boring set of graphs that go upwards, plus network diagrams that appear over-complex."

"They just weren't prepared or professional – I have to assume that this reflects their company service."

"They explained their corporate history and their product range, but didn't help me figure out what they could add to our situation."

Observing and reviewing the presentations led us to conclude that in the majority of cases, the major pitfalls were basic issues such as:

- Lack of a clear structure: the presentation is an unfolding experience for the audience, which needs a clear path. Very few salespeople had bothered to properly plan or storyboard the presentation.
- Trying to do too much: closely allied to not having a clear objective. Very few of the potential customers said that there was too little content to the presentations – the greatest danger is in trying to cover



'Salespeople fail by not even doing an average job'

– STEVE HOYLE

too much, and then timing out or being diverted from the central objective.

- Informing rather than selling: the audience is not interested in how clever you are, or how wonderful your offering is; they are interested in what it could do for them.

- Using standard slides only: many companies have some great slideware produced by marketing or sales support but without modification it will be far too general. Our conclusion is that at least half of the slides should be customised for the customer.

- Lack of presentation basics: everyone knows what they are (and the box reminds us) but a large number of salespeople do not follow them.

- Not involving the audience: except in the case of a very large audience, the presentation should involve and engage the audience. When reviewing a number of competing suppliers, prospects do not want to sit passively and hear what they could easily have read in a document.

- Lack of passion: even people who give presentations every day need to have true passion about their subject – it transmits itself to the audience.

- No conclusions: either at the end of the formal presentation, or more importantly at the end of any discussion.

- Not asking for commitment: the sales presentation is about getting commitment for some pre-defined next step. Interestingly, while some potential customers are resistant to giving

commitments at the time of the presentation, practically all want to know exactly what the next steps should be.

- When you've got commitment – close. Don't be tempted to continue just because you have more slides, or another person to speak. We found a small but significant number of cases where salespeople had effectively talked themselves out of a commitment because they had not concluded following the prospect's agreement.

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THE BASICS

We could make a very long list but here are some basics:

- Have a clear objective
- Understand the audience objectives
- Tell them what you're going to tell them
- Tell them
- Tell them what you have told them
- Eye contact – be a lighthouse
- Project voice to the back of the room
- Use clear, succinct visuals that aid rather than being the presentation
- Have a call to action

POWERPOINT OR NOT

An interesting debate arose over the use of Powerpoint. Everyone agrees that slides are overused, and that in a stand-up presentation those with bulleted text lines, which are then read out, are simply dreadful.

In small group sessions, customers prefer to have a small number of slides that give models, diagrams or pictures together with a 'whiteboard discussion', although they often then want a back-up slide deck as a means of communicating with their colleagues. For larger group sessions, or where you are presenting to people who do not have your language as their first language, then text-based slides are more acceptable.

The overwhelming conclusion from customers (as it is from internal debates in most companies) is to cut down the Powerpoint and "talk to me".