

Planning the Presentation: Five Ways To a Better Sell

Selling--a product, a service, a concept--is the backbone of every business. After careful background work, such as prospecting for and qualifying buyers, comes the big moment: the sales presentation. Although most independent business people know the importance of presentation in successful selling, day-to-day operational demands can dull even the sharpest technique. To keep your selling talents well-honed, check the essentials in these five guidelines:

1. Put Your Best Foot Forward . . . In this era of "Casual Friday" dressing, it never hurts to remember the obvious: dress for success. Even if you know your prospect will be wearing jeans and a sweatshirt--you'll make your sales presentation in a suit or as close to a suit as you can get. (For men, a sport coat could be substituted for the suit coat; for women, the suit could be replaced by a dark, simple dress.) Check that your briefcase is well-organized--before you open it with a flourish, the prospect looking on!

2. Start With a Light Touch . . . Today's consumers are not impressed by blockbuster tactics. In addition to the right product or service, they are looking for the human angle: honesty, dependability, and--very important to the first moments of the presentation--a common bond. If you are making your sales presentation at the prospect's place of business, look around and find something to comment on. (If the prospect has come to you, revise accordingly.) Photographs and diplomas on walls are good bets, but avoid the too-personal ("Those your beautiful wife and kids?"). Aim for something to indicate you are a kindred spirit ("I see you're a Purdue graduate . . . how are those Boilermakers doing this year?"). The caution here: don't talk too long in this vein and don't lose sight of its main purpose: to relax the prospect--and yourself.

3. Ask the Right Questions . . . You may have thought you had the prospect pegged before the sales call, but now you are in a position to find out more. Don't be afraid to ask the right--and sometimes hard--questions. To avoid wasting time and effort on both sides, there are at least two issues you need to get on the table right away: money and authority.

First, the money: does the prospect have the financial resources available to pay for your product/service? Of course, your question will be couched more in these terms: "What area are we dealing with here, dollarwise?" or (more formally) "Let's talk about the budget you have in mind for this type of project." Anyone who is seriously interested in buying will not be offended by the mention of money. The truly worthwhile prospect will be expecting such a discussion, in fact.

Next, comes the question about authority: is this prospect the person with decision-making power? You might put this more delicately as follows: "It's good of you to give me this chance to talk about our product [service]. Would you like anyone else to be in on this, or--assuming you like what you see--can you yourself make the decision to go with us?" If there are other parties needed, tactfully request another meeting (being sure to include this prospect out of courtesy) and begin to wind the sales call down.

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Answers to either or both of these questions might be evasive. Don't get road-blocked by vague answers and promises. If, for example, the vague answer is: "Let us think about it," you might answer: "What specifically will you be focusing on?" If an answer is "This is very impressive," you could ask (with a certain amount of humor): "Impressed enough for me to take that order right now?"

4. Shine the Light on Benefits . . . Why does anybody buy anything? Because they want something that will do something for them. A benefit. You may be in love with the buttons and switches, the colors and patterns of your product, but the consumer is going to be more interested in the benefits. This doesn't mean you skip the facts--just be sure to connect them directly to what the consumer will gain.

After pointing out benefits, you should be prepared to back up your "claims." If your product lends itself to demonstration, do so. If a sample of your product will help sell it, offer the sample (or a free trial period of a service). Do you have a convincing roster of satisfied customers? Have on hand their testimonials--better still (with prior permission), invite the prospect to go with you to visit a satisfied customer and see the results for him/herself.

5. Call for Action and Final Words . . . All right. You've impressed the prospect with your congeniality, your qualifying savvy and general professional approach. You've shown and proven benefits. The prospect is definitely interested but not exactly perched on the edge of the chair. You must now arouse a sense of urgency, a need to heed your "call for action." Your message must be to act now, for any of these reasons: the supply is limited or seasonal or a special of some kind; the best price is the one on offer today and maybe never again; the service desired must be scheduled at this moment because of other commitments that might get in the way. No matter how pleasant it turns out to be, a presentation is not a social call. It means business, and good business--if you do it right.