

Getting Better at Selling - It's about Persuading Not Informing

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LEVEL FIVE SELLING

Way back when, I had the pleasure of starting my sales training career with Neil Rackham the founder of Huthwaite and the creator of SPIN Selling. The opportunity was a great learning experience.

One of the more important walkaways was a foundational insight about getting better at selling. It's about persuading not informing. This is why SPIN was a questioning model not a presentation model.

Since those early days I have had the opportunity to work with some great companies and some outstanding salespeople. The notion about persuading being a core skill for achieving top performance has been reinforced again and again.

With all this in mind, let's take a look at what one might learn and do to join the ranks of those that have mastered the art and science of persuasion.

1. It's not about gaining agreement – it's about internalizing value. Persuasion is not about getting others to agree with your message about the characteristics of your product – it is about helping them to internalize your message because the product is of value to them.

This was one of the more elegant aspects of the SPIN model. The "I" questions (Implication Questions) helped customers to see the importance of the problem and "N" questions (Need-Payoff Questions) help the customer to gain insights about the value of how your solution might solve the problem.

2. Stop jumping in too soon and talking too much. If you are a sales manager, try this out.

On your next coaching call with one of your reps, try keeping track of the following. How soon does the salesperson stop asking questions and start informing the customer about your products? History says: too soon, too often and too much is a common finding.

When this happens the customer often fails to see the urgency of the problem, so you present a solution that is a bad fit because you have an incomplete picture of the problem.

You simply miss the mark and thereafter in the call you are in a backtracking mode with the customer.

Answer – ask, listen, then talk. Most salespeople would be better off if they did more of the first two and less of the third.

3. Develop a shared vision of the consequences of inaction. In major accounts two sales are going on simultaneously. One sale is about whether you can persuade the customer that you are better than your competition. The other sale is about the customer arriving at the conclusion that the problem is worth solving. If the customer is persuaded about the competition but not persuaded about whether the problem is worth solving, you may lose the sale to – no decision.

One step for addressing this latter issue is to help the customer see the consequences of inaction. When you are dealing with very complex problems in dynamic business environments, it is the rare customer that has a comprehensive and quantified sense of the consequences of retaining the status quo. This is a big deal and the lack of doing it is often why big deals are lost.

Summary. Looking back through the history of sales, there has been an over abundance of myths, magic tricks and other forms of ancient folklore that have dominated the landscape.

Unfortunately some of this misinformation has escaped into the present. Perhaps one of the more insidious ideas is this notion about the central importance of the product pitch. Even today some salespeople spend endless hours memorizing product features and rehearsing their product pitch.

Must you have an in-depth understanding of your product – of course? But, a simple truth from the psychology of persuasion: statements inform people but only questions can persuade people.

So if you are an engineer and you want another engineer to understand the characteristics of a product, then “informing” is what you want to do. On the other hand, if you are a salesperson and want a buyer to buy from you rather than your competition then that interaction is about “persuasion.”

It is the ability of the sales rep uncovering problems and showing how to solve those problems that is the magic in selling not the product in and of itself.