

Traditional sales techniques for an on-line world

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In former days when many sales were negotiated by “travellers” the value of fundamental sales skills was truly appreciated, at least by the major marketers. In the largely impersonal on-line world, many of these techniques have been forgotten, or merely dismissed as irrelevant, often for all the wrong reasons, because many continue to have a valuable role in the selling process.

Observing and listening – the most critical of all sales skills

Many sellers of today seem not to have heard of this simple but essential basis for sales communication. The mind numbing “can I help you” favoured by retail staff implies that no notice whatever has been taken of the potential customer’s character or interests and mostly deserves a “no” response. How much extra thought would it take to make a quick assessment, then adjust the greeting content and tone of voice to suit the circumstances? “I saw you looking at those widgets. May I explain the special deal we have on them this week” or “would you like to browse, or is there something particular you have in mind”? The differences are subtle, but can convey genuine interest in the customer’s state of mind and needs.

On line, the assumption might seem that the prospect would not be on the site unless there was something of interest. The prospect certainly has a reason to visit the site, either via keyword search, a referral or link, but that does not imply he found the required solution. In this scenario, the equivalent to observing and listening is to structure the information-selection to reflect the likely characteristics and needs of each of the prospect groups.

Structuring the sales information

This and similar articles by this author are mainly directed towards business-to-business techniques and even here, the scenario will change depending on the context. However, if that preliminary identification of the customer characteristics and needs have been broadly identified, it makes sense to lead with whatever seems most important to the customer, not what most concerns the seller. Far too many sellers lead with the items they want to push, getting into excessive detail like price deals way before the credentials of the seller and the benefits of learning more about the product or service have been established and whether it suits the buyer’s requirements.

In a website situation, one of the best ways of achieving this is to follow the “drill down” method, progressing from the general, meaning what benefits are offered and the reasons why the seller has the appropriate credentials, moving to selection criteria and only then to specific detail via clear and concise navigation. If the prospect wants greater detail, an effective website will deliver the information in an appropriate manner that is tailored to the needs of that prospect. It will not be thrown onto the home page where it may be of little interest to other customer-types and in interfering with the flow of more general information described above

Overcoming objections

One of the oldest sales principles is that *any* sensible objection is actually a buying signal. However, even professional sales persons seem to have trouble understanding that the simplest and most effective way of overcoming an objection is not by arguing the point, but by turning the answer into a question. Although this requires skill, it is extremely effective because the question can be phrased to cover virtually any aspect of the sale. An objection about price for example, may be turned into a question of whether a long warranty, maintenance terms, free installation or whatever might be more important than a few dollars off the purchase price.

In the online situation, a well-crafted FAQ (Frequently asked questions) can go a long way to pre-empting reasonable objections. The prospect is effectively walked through most of the typical issues that might adversely affect a sale, or reinforce a positive intention.

Asking for the order

A professional sales person will always ask for the order. The same should apply to a website, a promotional flyer or other sales communication. The method might be an enquiry form, a survey, a mailing list subscription, an online order, or some combination of all of these. Without the "close" the sales technique has not been completed.

In summary, dismissal of old-fashioned sales techniques is misguided. They merely require translation into modern trading conditions.