
Recognizing A Great Salesperson

by JEFF THULL

To understand what makes a great salesperson, it is important to put yourself in the shoes of your customers. Only then will you truly understand how to distinguish between a great salesperson who can have a significant impact on the customer's bottom line, and the conventional "commission seekers."

Begin by asking yourself, as a business-to-business customer, what do you expect from the sales professionals who are asking for your time? This is a question you may not have considered. If pressed, you'd likely say, "Well, I expect them to answer my questions, sell me the product or service I need, charge a fair price, deliver on time, and follow through on promises." This sounds reasonable for the most part, but as you know, in today's complex world, the rules of selling have changed. The salesperson whose role once centered on polished presentations and glossy brochures (often self-serving propaganda) must now

function as a valued and trusted advisor, and be a source of competitive advantage. If they're not, you will likely see your margins eroding as even your most complex products and services are treated as simple commodities.

There are many companies that claim to offer the products and services your customers need. Yet, all too often, the strategy of the sales force is to battle the competition on capabilities

and pricing in order to capture the customer's business. The reality is, succeeding in today's marketplace is not about price. It's not even about products. Instead, success means being able to understand the very real, very complex problems customers face and sort through all the available alternatives. The right salesperson should be able to help customers do so, and to create a solution the customers would not have been able to come up with on their own.

It is this characteristic — the ability to collaborate with customers, stimulate their thinking, and create revenue-building solutions they don't have the time or the wherewithal to create for themselves — that the customer should look for in the sales professionals they want to work with. This kind of salesperson is able to provide a competitive advantage for the customer's company. They don't sit across the desk from the customer, spewing information and hoping for a commission. They actually become an integral part of the customer's business, making their life easier and contributing to their measurable success. It is the savvy salesperson who knows that the sales process is not done "to the customer," but "with the customer."

So how do you distinguish top professionals from the traditional sellers? Your ability to spot the top professional is more and more critical to your, your company's, and your customers' success. Look for the following clues on how to spot great sales professionals.

They diagnose the customer's problem

When a sales professional launches into a descrip-

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tion of his “solution” without first establishing a clear understanding of the customer’s situation, be wary. A great salesperson never assumes that he, or even the customer, understands the very real, very complex problems the customer faces. Instead, like a good psychologist, he methodically questions and diagnoses until he uncovers the problems and expands the customer’s awareness. Once they both clearly understand the problem, and the customer is informed of all the ramifications of that problem, then the salesperson is justified in making recommendations. After all, if the customer is not feeling any pain, why would he want to change? Diagnosis takes time and hard work. A credible salesperson proves that he is willing to provide both.

They ask questions rather than tell stories

Conventional salespeople tell stories about their solutions, not to mention proclaiming the superiority of their company’s brand, history and reputation. Prospective customers expect to hear these stories and rarely take them seriously. (Think about it: Do you?) Chances are your customers will take salespeople seriously when they display concern for the problems they may have and the expertise to solve them. This is demonstrated by asking questions, questions that customers would not have thought to ask themselves. The true professional’s activity is additive to the customers’ knowledge as well as his or her own. How else could a sales professional acquire the raw information needed to make an accurate diagnosis and design an efficient solution?

They let the customer set the pace

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them. The last thing he will want to do is create mistrust or a confrontational atmosphere. Therefore, he will let the customer discover, understand the impact of, and take ownership of problems before he discusses solution options. This will take a while. Your customers will know they have a great salesperson if they find themselves feeling emotionally comfortable and communicating openly. This state of being is the only way to do mutually-beneficial business.

They help the customer calculate the cost of their problem

It’s not enough for a salesperson to say, “You have a problem and it’s costing you money.” He must say, “We need to determine how much this is costing you and see if it makes sense to pursue a solution.” Vagueness is a red flag. If a salesperson shies away from establishing an accurate cost, it’s either because he doesn’t know the cost (or is too lazy to do the work to find out), or he’s afraid the cost will be too low to justify the solution he’s offering.

Generally, the second reason is the most likely one, and maybe the customer’s problem isn’t significant enough to justify the expense. A great salesperson will suggest that and respect that outcome. As a manager, isn’t that what you want — salespeople who are focused on accounts where real need exists?

They don’t let the customer fall into the “creeping elegance” trap

Let’s say the customer becomes enthusiastic about the potential value of the solution that a salesperson is offering, and they drop into the “as long as we’re going to do this we might as well also do that” mode of thinking. A conventional salesperson might let the customer run up your wish list, all the time counting up the extra commissions in his head. A great salesperson will ensure that the customer doesn’t expand

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beyond reasonable financial parameters. He knows that because complex sales, by their very nature, involve more than one decision-maker, if the customer unnecessarily expands the scope of a solution, one of his or her colleagues could shoot the whole project

down. The result could be losing all of the business, and the customer loses the benefit of the solution.

A truly good sales professional is worth his or her weight in gold. He will function as a consultant for the customer, a strategic partner, and even an advocate. He will give the customer the competitive advantage. Having salespeople of this caliber will shift your company's relationship with its customers. Instead of customers reluctantly dealing with a high-pressure adversary, they will find themselves forming a partnership based on mutual trust and respect — a partnership that is long-lasting and beneficial to both businesses.

As your sales force begins to apply this approach, the difference will become apparent. Your salespeople will focus efforts where true need exists. They will form trusting, yet impenetrable customer relationships; and their close ratios will increase. To your advantage, managing their efforts will be more effective; forecasts will be more predictable; and fewer midstream challenges will occur. □



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