
Changing The Way You Sell

When Rick Farrell spoke to a MANA local networking chapter earlier this year, he brought with him a message urging manufacturers' representatives to adopt what he calls a "CEO mentality" — if they want to enjoy continued success.



Rick Farrell

According to Farrell, Selling Dynamics, LLC, Arlington Heights, Illinois, "It's incumbent upon reps to view their territory/account list as a separate company that they run with profit and loss responsibility. In running this company, they will have to protect five vital assets in order to ensure maximum leverage and return on assets."

In order, the vital assets that he refers to are:

- **Time** — Farrell readily admits that the rep's time is his most valuable asset. "As a result, reps have to guard and protect their time by making an effort to ensure their leads are qualified and exhibit a high likelihood of moving forward. This process requires a strict discipline of always qualifying opportunities by asking the tough questions so they don't squander their time."
- **Information** — Too many, 80 percent of salespeople, according to Farrell, spend their time willingly giving out information, so much so that they are frequently reduced to operating as "free consultants." To avoid this trap, the consultant advises allocating this valuable asset by offering their information and expertise only on an as-needed basis.
- **Resources** — If reps should carefully part with their business/market/territorial information, so too should they keep an eye on how they allocate their business resources. "Most salespeople," maintains Farrell, "squander company resources by endless quoting, proposing and follow-up activities with unqualified opportunities where one loses leverage and control. Instead, company resources need to be allocated judiciously and in a timely fashion in order to protect one's effort, time and money that ought to be invested in building new business opportunities."
- **Relationships** — Farrell is quick to agree that building, nurturing and maintaining relationships is

key to all that the rep does. But having said that, "salespeople need to be discriminatory as to which relationships will yield them the greatest return on the investment they've made in relationship building. The key to building relationships today is knowing that people not only buy from those they like or respect, but more importantly they buy from those that understand their unique situations. As a result, what is required is an understanding on the part of the rep of the customer's business, their challenges and problems, with a high emphasis on probing, questioning and listening skills."

Changing Relationships

Continuing with a discussion of the importance of relationships, Farrell emphasizes how the dynamics of relationships have changed for reps over the years. "In the past, the strength of your relationships might have been measured by the frequency of contacts, common interests, personality and likeability. That often was more than enough to carry the day. Today things have changed. Now relationships are built on

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trust, and the only way a salesperson can effectively build a relationship on trust is by understanding what the prospect's problems are and knowing the consequences of those problems. In addition, the rep must understand the priority of those problems in relation to all the other challenges that customers face. To perform their jobs properly, reps must become change agents as they meet the needs of their customers."

- **Self Concept** — Farrell maintains that reps put their "self-concept" at risk

with their customers that "use them, waste their time, stall them, mislead them and squander their resources. Salespeople must recognize what they have to do in order to minimize these negative outcomes of the typical sales call."

An important part of minimizing these negative outcomes, according to the consultant, occurs when you are able to "get no's from the customer." To get to that point, to get the customer to actually say "no," is important because "it's not the rep's job to sell, convince or persuade. His job is to identify problems and help the customer make decisions. Your job is not to get them (i.e., the customer) to agree to buy a product or service from you. It is to put your prospect into a position to make either a 'yes' or a 'no' decision. When you put too much pressure on them, then you get a conditional 'yes' from them. When that happens, they're wasting your time."

Setting the Customer Straight

To get to that point, Farrell advises the rep to be right up front with the customer. "Here's an approach I'd recommend," he says. "Tell the customer 'I'm not sure we can really help you at this point, but let me ask you a few questions about your business. At the end, perhaps you'll have some questions about what I can do for you and then perhaps we'll be able to move ahead. If not, I'll simply get out of your hair.' That's an approach that makes sense, and it leaves open the door to the possibility the prospect will say 'no.' But that's okay, because it frees the rep to go on

to the next prospect — where there may be a real change for some business — instead of investing his time where it makes no sense."

Once the rep has taken the steps to protect what Farrell calls his "vital assets," it's important for him to realize it's time to change from the time-honored feature/benefit method of selling products and services. According to Farrell, "the feature/benefit style of selling that has served companies so well in the past simply no longer works. What companies work so hard in trying to prevent (commoditization), they actually create. They invalidate and denigrate their value proposition by instead touting the exact value proposition that their competitors tout: quality, service, reliability, expertise, value and performance. This style of selling is the quickest path to commoditization and lower margins. Instead of a differentiator, it is a 'great equalizer' that reduces your message to a common denominator. This makes it difficult to penetrate new accounts at high levels and to maintain pricing integrity."

Changing the Sales Methodology

He continues that the major reason companies get "commoditized" is that the salesperson's sales methodology defaults to the prospect's buying system. "The way clients buy and select suppliers is more sophisticated than the salesperson's ability to sell and differentiate products and services. In order for salespeople to enhance their selling position, they must understand the methodology of how people buy. Then they must come up with a sales process that levels the playing field and neutralizes the buyer's inherent advantages."

Farrell notes that the client's buying system is to "gather all of the rep's information (features and benefits), price, terms, conditions, creative ideas, and ultimately the proposal. They want it up-front and early on. They want to give salespeople as little information in return as they can. They maximize their time and waste the salesperson's time. They stall them.

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They play their cards very close to the vest. They want to get as much information as possible so they will be able to leverage their position and be a savvy and informed buyer of what you sell. Then they can beat you up on price, pit you one against the other and always leave you hanging as to what they are going to do next.

“Unfortunately, the way salespeople sell encourages this process. Salespeople have educated and conditioned customers to treat them like this.”

Farrell emphasizes that the rep should design and

implement a sales process/methodology that levels the field and provides them with more leverage. “The way this is accomplished is through a disciplined sales process that encourages salespeople to size up opportunities based solely on motivation to change and the underlying pain that drives it.”

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