
Salespeople: Position Yourselves With Power

by DAVE KAHLE

His eyes were narrow and bloodshot from staying out late and partying too heavily the previous night. A two-day-old stubble framed his face. He was wearing a dark-colored tee shirt he hadn't tucked in, a pair of jeans, and scuffed loafers that had probably never seen shoe polish. It was the second day of my *Sales Academy* seminar, and this participant in the program was complaining to the group that his customers were only interested in low price.

I didn't say this, because I didn't want to embarrass him in front of the group, but I thought it nonetheless:

- "Do you think your appearance and demeanor have anything to do with your customers' reaction?"
- Do you think that you may give them the idea that you are the lowest rung on the pricing scale?
- Is it possible that you have inadvertently positioned yourself as the Wal-Mart of the industry?"

I remember as a child having a salesperson call on my family. He had an appointment to discuss a correspondence course for one of us. He drove a big Lincoln, dressed richly, spoke articulately, and carried himself with confidence. It wasn't a coincidence that we bought his program without quibbling about the price.

Influencing Attitudes

These two scenarios illustrate a powerful and frequently overlooked best practice in the world of sales: Whether you intend to or not, you always create a position in the minds of your customers, and that position influences the customer's attitudes toward you as well as the buying decisions that follow. In other words, if you look like you're the low price, your customers will expect you to be the low price.

It follows, then, that if we are going to be an effective, professional salesperson, we ought to give thoughtful consideration to how we position ourselves in the minds of our customers.

Let's begin by understanding the idea of positioning a little

deeper. Positioning has long been a term bandied about by advertising mavens and marketing gurus. They define it as the place that your brand or product has carved out in the mind of the customer. It's the pictures that enter the customers' mind when they think of your product, the feelings that your product evokes, the attitudes they associate with you, and the thoughts that they have of you.

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Chances are, for example, that the words “Volkswagen Beetle” evoke a set of responses from you that are different than “Chevrolet Corvette.” You expect a certain degree of quality, price and service when you enter a Wal-Mart that is not the same as your expectations upon stepping inside a Saks Fifth Avenue store.

Billions of dollars are spent every year on carefully crafted impressions by businesses anxious to carve out a valuable position in the minds of their customers.

Alas, if only the same thing could be said of many salespeople.

Just like the carefully designed impressions by advertising mediums inexorably chisel a spot into our psyches, so do the repeated visits by a salesperson embed a set of expectations, pictures and emotions into the minds of our customers. The position you, as a salesperson, occupy is a complex intertwining of the perception of your company, your solutions, and yourself. The most effective salespeople and sales organizations understand

that, and consciously work to create a positive position in the minds of their customers.

Creating Your Position

Let’s begin at the end. A good starting point is to think deeply and with some detail about what sort of position you want to create. What, exactly, do you want your customers to think of you? Let me suggest two possibilities: the minimum acceptable position, and the ideal position.

At a minimum, I believe your customer should view you as a competent, trustworthy person who brings value to the customer. They believe that you generally know your products and their strengths and weaknesses, that you generally know the customer’s issues, and that you can be reliably counted on to do what you say you will do. That’s the least acceptable position to which you should work toward. If your customers don’t think of you at least in this way, you probably should not be in sales.

History With the Customer

At the other end of the spectrum is the ideal position. This builds on the minimum, but adds a specific understanding on the part of the customer of your unique combination of strengths and attributes. It evolves as you have history with the customer until you occupy a position that

is totally and uniquely yours and that carries with it the expectation that your strengths in some specific and unique way add value to the time the customer spends with you. The ultimate test of the power of your position is the customer’s willingness to see you and the resulting preference for doing business with you.

Here’s an illustration. If you were shopping for an automobile, a low-mileage late model Taurus would probably provide you with competent, reliable transportation. So, when you think of that specific automobile, it would evoke a set of ideas in your mind all revolving around competent and reliable transportation. Now, think of a brand new Lamborghini and you would understand it to be transportation, but with a unique flair — something above and beyond just reliable transportation. That flair would be a result of the unique strengths of that particular automobile conveyed in a graphic way to your mind.

So it is with salespeople. You want to position yourself in your customer’s mind as the equivalent of the Taurus. But if you really want to carve out a unique, memorable position in your customer’s mind, you’d want them to think of you as a Lamborghini.

The question then is, how do you want your customers to think of you? Once you articulate a specific picture, you can then start to build that position. Here are four essential steps to help you convey a positive position to your customers.

1. Soberly assess yourself.

What sort of position are you currently occupying in the customer’s mind? Be as objective as possible as you think through

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each of the issues listed below, and compare yourself to your competitors. How do you stand on your:

- Appearance.
- Product knowledge.
- Understanding of company policies and procedures.
- Competence with basic sales skills.
- Understanding of the customer.
- Bearing and demeanor?

If you find that you rank below your competitors on any of these issues, then you need to spiff them up so that you are thought of, at least, as a Taurus. Then you can begin to move toward the Lamborghini position.

2. Start on the inside.

In my book, *10 Secrets of Time Management for Salespeople*, I propose that you “get grounded.” That advice is based on the observation that it is difficult to sustain a false position. It is all a whole lot easier if you portray yourself to be who you are. Integrity, meaning consistency between who you are and who you present yourself to be, is a foundation to a positive position.

In order to do that, you must clearly understand who you are. That means that you crystallize, in a written document, these three issues:

- **Your purpose.** This really speaks to your spiritual orientation. Why are you here? What is your purpose in life and in this job? Why are you doing this anyway?
- **Your vision.** What would you like to become? What do you see as possible and ideal in your job, your career, and in your life?
- **Your values.** What are the highest priority items in your life

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and in your job? What are the people, ideas, behaviors and qualities of character that are most important to you?

Once you have thought deeply about these internal issues, you'll find it much easier to live them. The process of articulating them and putting them on paper keeps you focused and attentive to the deeper issues.

3. Do a sober assessment of your strengths.

If you are going to position yourself in the eyes of the customer as having some combination of uniqueness, you first have to identify what those unique strengths are. What are your personal unique attributes, experiences and passions as it relates this job? Do you have some special experience? Do you have some unique capabilities? Do you have some unique relationships?

Do you have some unusual

characteristics? Identify those strengths on a piece of paper, and then add a line or two on how each of those can bring value to the customer.

At this point, you will have done the necessary homework to make the job of building a unique position much easier. You now know who you are and what strengths you can bring to your customers. Now comes the fun.

4. Continually seek opportunities to convey your brand.

Act in a way that is consistent with your statements of strengths. For example, if you say that you are good with high-tech, don't take notes on a scratch pad. Put them into a PDA. If you say you are personally attractive, don't forget to shave before you make a sales call. Be consistent — act like the person you claim to be.

Find ways to utilize your strengths and emphasize your

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uniqueness. In one of my sales positions, for example, recognizing that I had some unique talents in speaking to groups, I consistently found ways to organize seminars and workshops for my customers in which I presented to the group. I could have made individual sales calls to six customers, but I found that when I brought all six together in a group, I was more effective. It was just me utilizing my strengths.

Develop a reputation by intention. Decide what you want to be known for, and then work to consistently make that happen. One salesperson makes sure, for ex-

ample, that he doesn't call on a customer unless he has something to share with that customer which he believes that customer will find valuable. As a result, he has no problem getting time with his customers. He's developed the reputation of always bringing something of value.

If you want to be known as the most responsive salesperson, set up a system that allows you to respond to every phone call within an hour or two. If you want to be known as the fountain of product knowledge, make sure that you study every price list and piece of literature on every product you

sell. If you want to be known as the specialist in some application, make sure that you know it inside and out.

Consider everything that you do. Question every single aspect of your interaction with the customer, and gradually shape everything to match the position you want to gain. If you want your customer to think of you as confident and competent, don't drive a dirty, 10-year-old car. If you want your customer to think of you as worth an extra couple percentage points in price, then don't come in wearing wrinkled Dockers and a dirty tee shirt. If you want to be known as intelligent and articulate, don't use slang.

Your position in the mind of the customer is a powerful and subtle component of an effective salesperson's approach. Consistently working at building a positive position will pay dividends for years.

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