
When Did “Closing” Become A Bad Word?

by JOE GUERTIN



Closing a sale is nothing more than leading the process to a conclusion. It's laying all the groundwork and asking the prospective customer to proceed with the action plan. But if it sounds that easy, why is it so tough to accomplish?

NASCAR driver Kurt Busch says, “What it takes to win a championship is to have your preparation meet the opportunities, whether it's out on the racetrack or behind the scenes.” In sales, winning starts at the beginning. Do the right things throughout the process, and you'll be better positioned for success. The steps can vary, but in talking to hundreds of successful salespeople about the pitfalls of closing sales, some very specific disciplines are regularly mentioned:

- We don't ask.
- We're asking the wrong person.
- The prospective customer is not yet sold.

Let's look at some strategies for each of them.

We may not ask because of the “feel good” advice we've heard in recent years that “good salespeople don't close the sale, they let it happen!” Make your presentation, stop talking, and the sale will close itself! Unfortunately, that advice is like telling a pilot not to worry about landing because the plane will get to the ground one way or another. Even the best businessperson can be indecisive. If I make a terrific presentation, then just wait for them to say “yes,” I'll likely never hear it, and ultimately lose a once-promising sale. Why? Because I haven't asked them to make a decision. Plus, my lack of action could plant a subconscious seed of doubt in the prospect's mind.

If I want to avoid rejection, not asking for the business is the way to go. Early in my sales career, a

senior co-worker told me to “go out and get as many no's as you can.” It didn't sink in right away, but it wasn't long before I understood what he meant. Ask for the order often.

Ask the Right Person

The second discipline is to make sure you're asking the right person. Have you heard the phrase “don't take 'no' from someone who can't say 'yes'?” It's great advice. Unfortunately, it doesn't always fit real life. Often, we find ourselves boxed into a scenario where our primary contact is not a final decision-maker, and that's the way the company works. The ‘buyer’ deals with suppliers, gathers information and prices, but the ultimate decision is made by committee or in budget meetings.

One solution is to make connections at the top. Call the company president first and set up a meeting. It's absolutely amazing how easily executives open doors to outside salespeople who show a genuine in-

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terest in meeting them. Once the connection is made, continue to follow up with them. Thank-you notes, even summaries of proposals can be passed along, keeping that door open and keeping you top-of-mind.

In addition, give your direct contact everything they need to sell the proposal internally. A company I consult for was considering new software packages. I sat in on the meeting where the IT manager tossed copies of three proposals on the table, asking everyone to take a look and, in effect, choose one. Effective questioning would have helped one of those vendors to see the IT manager didn't want to decide alone, and could have offered to attend that meeting and give the group an overview of their proposal.

While most of this appears to apply only to large companies with deep management structures, the same rules apply to small businesses, too, or even in-home selling, where the presence and commitment of a spouse will spell the difference between closing the sale and closing the door.

Finally, make sure that the prospect is convinced. This might have a ring of Sales 101, but it is often the greatest roadblock we face! Our fast-paced business climate forces us to conserve our time and theirs, so it's not unusual for a sales call to consist of a phone call, invitation to visit a web site and a price quote by e-mail. I, myself, am a huge user of tech tools, and have to continually remind myself that efficiency in time is not always efficiency in selling.

You can boost your closing ratio right away by ask-

ing yourself these questions:

- Does the customer have a burning need, or are they just mildly interested?

I've always been good at selling "meetings," convincing people to give me a piece of their time. I figured that we'd talk, they'd see the need to act, and I'd have a sale. I was wrong. When a prospect didn't see me as a solution to something, my chances of making a sale were nil. And their burning needs aren't always obvious. A retailer might want to draw more store traffic, but if their deeper need is to position themselves against bigger, discount retailers, they might see spending more money as throwing good money after bad.

- Is this a fast-track decision, or future exploration?

You'll want to know in advance if they plan to make a decision soon, or are looking at pricing for future consideration. Sometimes we add a prospect to our pending list without knowing that prospect's timetable or intent.

- What is their status with other suppliers?

Comfort levels make us do strange things. If that buyer has a good relationship with someone else, he might be indicating yes to you, but finds it more reassuring to go with the other.

- Have I presented my case based on their needs and goals?

One-size-fits-all presentations have far less effect than one that is tailored to the customer's exact needs. For instance, if I sell accounting software and learn that the company's office manager dislikes long learning curves that bog down productivity, my proposal will include a strategy for getting their staff trained and acclimated within a specified timeframe. That might not be a feature of the software, but my presentation will be more customer-centered, and that increases my probability of closing.

The final step in any sale, and the part that has really become a lost art, is asking for the sale. Sounds simple, and it is. Asking for the sale can be in the form of a single question or statement, like "should we go ahead and get started?" or "Let's get the paperwork done and we can start shipping next week." The absolute worst thing that can happen is the prospect might not be ready and will tell you why.

Closing is never a bad word in professional selling. Our job is to take the time to understand customer needs, demonstrate a sincere desire to be of service, and then confidently lead the sales process to a mutually beneficial conclusion. That's closing. It's also where real customer relationships begin. □



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