
Selling Isn't What You Might Think It Is

by LENANN MCGOOKEY GARDNER

Doug Jones was excited. Today was the big day — his chance to meet with a prospective client he'd wanted to know for years!

The prospect had agreed to a conversation over lunch. Doug drove to the restaurant with his hopes high, and then made one of the biggest mistakes of his professional life.

He began with "I."

"I just wanted to make you aware of the new regulation."

"Our new service...."

"The new product...."

"The new division of our company...."

"Our approach to client service...."

Doug thought he'd put his best foot forward, that he'd begun a relationship. In reality, he had just set himself up for what happened next — his prospective client eating and seeming to listen, and Doug talking about himself and his firm. And that was the end of it. Doug never saw the guy again, and his phone messages went unanswered.

Out-of-Date Selling Methods Kill Business Development

If you're in the professions,

chances are you realize that relationship development should be ongoing. That your financial well-being is a function of a consistent flow of new clients to join your existing client base, making up for natural attrition, and allowing you to achieve your firm's growth goals. But successful rainmaking isn't what it is in the movies, and outdated approaches to business development can undermine your best efforts to expand.

"Timeless Truths" in Selling

Do you believe that there are a few "sales principles" that should always be used in attracting new clients? Think again. There have been more studies about what's really working in sales, and it's probably not what you expect. If you haven't learned these new selling principles, your rainmaking efforts are undoubtedly less successful than they might otherwise be.

Fix this problem by learning what's working now. Here are three outdated sales practices

and how to move them into the 21st century.

- **Overcoming Objections** — It used to be a fundamental principle of selling: You must overcome your prospect's objections to get their work. No more!

Studies show that prospective clients hate fighting — they don't want you arguing and working to overcome their concerns; they want you to listen to their problems, understand the impact of those issues, and then offer to help, if you are able. That's a world away from the combative old-style approach to selling!

Today, when we hear an objection, we state the problem in different words, simply to let the prospective client know that we heard and understand it. For example, "Ms. Jones, you're concerned that you are already working with someone in my profession, and you would prefer not to have to disappoint that person and let them know that you have selected another advisor, if I understand you properly."

If we don't understand why

something they've stated is a problem, we ask about that. "Mr. Smith, you've said that you're concerned that I'm located two states away; may I ask why that is a problem?"

When we fully understand the objection and the pain that underlies it, then and only then can we offer to be of help. "Ms. Jones, perhaps this does not involve dismissing your current advisor. I'm concerned particularly with the X issue; might I be of service to you just in that area?" or "Mr. Smith, I understand that you're concerned that I be accessible to you, available when you need me. Now if I heard you correctly, that means that your phone calls get returned promptly, the same day, not so much that we must be located down the road from one another. Is that correct?"

• **Arguing on Behalf of Your Firm** — For years, professional service providers have taken the approach that new client development will require making an argument for using their firms. Sales research, however, shows that such an approach is doomed, probably because it involves too much talking on your part. Today's successful rainmakers follow "The 90-10-90 Rule." This says that, ideally, in a conversation with a prospective client, that prospective client is speaking 90 percent of the time. Concerning the 10 percent of the time that you, the professional service provider, are speaking, you should spend 90 percent of that 10 percent asking questions!

Let that sink in: The prospective client should be speaking 90 percent of the time, and when you're speaking, you should mostly

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be asking questions, not talking about yourself or your firm.

There's a big exception to The 90-10-90 Rule: you can talk as much as you like if you're answering your prospective client's questions. But if he or she isn't asking, you shouldn't be talking, you should be asking.

• **Waiting for Your Phone to Ring** — The people who call you are often "price shoppers" and not your best prospects. People who are your best prospects aren't calling, because your competitors are calling on them. To attract the most desirable and most profitable business, most professional service providers need a program of outreach to the prospective clients they could best serve. Such a program needs to be discreet and tasteful, and it needs to generate interest in your firm.

The cornerstone of such a program is positioning. You need to develop a positioning statement that contains the most powerful, provocative messages about your firm that you could hope to get into the minds of your best prospects. There are typically four to six messages in a positioning statement, and the entire thing should fit on half a sheet of paper. If you haven't worked to hone those four to six messages, and if you and your colleagues don't agree on what your messages are, you're probably all saying different things and thus making no

impact. In fact, you're likely saying pretty much what your competitors are saying, so there's no competitive differentiation. Undertake a strategy session to hone the messages and deliver them consistently!

Cultivate your curiosity about what's really working now in business development. Learn the new skills, and challenge yourself to abandon out-of-date approaches that move your best prospects further away from you, rather than closer. And reap the rewards! □



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lenann Gardner is a sales consultant and author of the upcoming book, *Got Sales? The Complete Guide to Today's Proven Methods for Selling Services*. A Harvard MBA, she was the number-one sales representative worldwide at a unit of Xerox Corporation, and achieved unprecedented results as a marketing executive at Mattel and in leadership roles at Blue Cross Blue Shield. She is a winner of the American Marketing Association's Professional Services "Marketer of the Year" award. For more information, please contact her at Lenann@YouCanSell.com or at (505) 828-1788.