
How Sales Professionals Screw Up Sales Meetings

by PAM HOLLOWAY

Can you relate to this? You're looking across your desk into the face of a customer who would be perfect for you. You know what you can provide is perfect for them and you're 99 percent sure they will accept your proposal. Then something goes wrong. They walk, and you don't know why. Sound familiar?

We've all been there, some of us more often than others. Worse, many salespeople will continue to face that situation and not understand what continues to go wrong. The good news is, as disappointing as those situations are, they serve as outstanding learning experiences. They also provide rare opportunities to examine and improve the way we connect with our prospects and customers. Over the past eight years, we've analyzed this exact, specific point in the sales process. We now understand how professionals screw up sales meetings — and how to fix it.

We believe that you can't fix something until you know it's broken, so let's begin with the ways we screw up sales meetings and see how to fix them.

Focusing on Yourself

You, your product and your company are only valuable to the customer to the extent you can offer a solution for his problem or supply him what he wants. The client doesn't want to hear your presentation of who you are, where you come from, what you value

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and what you do. All of that is completely irrelevant to the client outside the context of his specific needs and wants. Those are what the client wants to talk about. Get to them quickly. There really is one hard and fast rule: It's never about you — it's always about the client!

Talking Too Much

Nearly every sales professional falls into this trap. You'll be on a roll and realize that you've been talking for a long time. Unfortunately, when you're talking, you're not doing the most important thing critical to the sale — focusing on the client! The safe rule of thumb for the ratio of listening to talking is 80-20. If you're in a meeting and find yourself talking more than 20 percent of the time, just switch to a question and be quiet. In general, you might want to examine your selling process and look for ways to improve it. Remember, the key to selling (actually any situation involving influence or motivation) is to ask questions and help people come to conclusions on their own.

Not Asking Questions

Questions are the heart of an effective selling situation. They serve two purposes: 1) The primary purpose is to involve the client and help him come to his own conclusions. Often, that's the conclusion you would have presented. The difference is, if the client comes up with it, he believes it, but if you present it, the client doesn't necessarily believe it. 2) The other role of questions is to elicit information that will help you frame your product or service inside the client's criteria and values.

Customers give you clues as to what excites them or angers them.

Asking the Wrong Questions

Some salespeople ask way too many questions, or they ask irrelevant questions. The client must perceive the questions as valuable and relevant. The client must believe that your questions are important, and that his answers will enable you to create a better result for him.

Confusing Them

Our research indicates that the most common way for salespeople to screw up customer conversations is by confusing the customer. Here's how this happens: you deliver too much information, use terms and references that aren't familiar to the customer, or you do a "data dive." Remember this: a confused mind will always say **no**. Confusion is uncomfortable and people don't say "yes" when they're uncomfortable. Furthermore, most people go into an analytical mind-set when they're talking with someone who is a professional in something they're unfamiliar with. The analytical mind-set always says **no** until it has gathered enough information to make an informed decision.

Excluding the Real Decision-Maker

When you see more than one person across the desk from you, it is your responsibility to connect with each one. At the very least you must identify the primary decision-maker and address them. Never assume you know who the primary decision-maker is. Too often, the salesperson will assume one of two people is the primary decision-maker. Big mistake. Give equal attention to each person.

Claiming Credibility Rather Than Demonstrating It

Saying you know X or have Y credentials isn't relevant to the customer, unless you are able to show how those things help the customer. The best thing you can do is provide proof.

How can you gain credibility before you get to demonstrate it? Simple. Use the Law of Other Messengers. People believe what others say about you more than what you say about yourself. For example, provide a book of endorsements.

Not Speaking "the Language"

We honor our clients by presenting information in a way that matches their mental preferences and personality. If I am a visual person, it is your responsibility to recognize that and explain your product or service in visual language. If I prefer structure and a process, then it is your responsibility to provide the structure or step-by-step process. To be successful at this, it is vital for you to become proficient at reading your clients.

Making it Difficult to Work With You

Companies and individuals lose sales because the process of doing business is too difficult. If you ask me to fill out forms, provide scads of data or answer lots of questions, the value of the end result will be reduced proportionately by the hassle of my involvement. And, if you collect lots of information, you'd darn well better use it. Recognize that my time and energy are valuable to me. Anything you can do to make the process easy and painless increases your chances that I will initiate and complete the process.

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Not Recognizing "Hot Buttons"

Customers give you clues as to what excites them or angers them. Good salespeople recognize both the negative and the positive "hot buttons" and respond accordingly. For example, if you're paying attention to me, you will quickly see that one of my hot buttons is someone telling me they know what's best for me. If you do this before asking appropriate questions or getting to know me, I'll walk away, and you'll have an adversary. The key to recognizing this is simply to pay attention and read the client.

Not Showing Respect

Once again, we go back to the hard and fast rule: It's never about you — it's always about the customer! If you act as though I'm an idiot, you'll lose me as a client and gain me as an adversary.

Being Needy

We've all been needy at some point in our lives. We know what it feels like, and we've seen how other people retreat from us. We've done some fascinating research on the ability to read another person's emotional state. Neediness is a powerful emotional state that is easily and quickly perceived by other people. When they feel it, they get suspicious of your intentions. Needy people do not focus on the best interests of the client. They focus on themselves and satisfying their needs.

In Conclusion

You can't get to where you want to go until you know where you are. You can't fix a problem until you know what the problem is. What you've just read are the descriptions of the most common problems made in selling situations. The good news is, the solutions are simple, and when you implement them, you become a higher quality professional, attracting higher quality clients. □

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