



Rx FOR SUCCESS

Self-Sabotage — the Cause and the Cure

EDITORIAL | JEFF THULL

No sales professional in their right mind would sabotage their own sales *intentionally*. Nevertheless, self-sabotage — the act of undermining one's own credibility and alienating the very customers and prospects we count on for our livelihoods — occurs with dismaying frequency.



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The many ways in which salespeople sabotage their own efforts range from obvious mistakes, such as blaming customers when their own products and services do not deliver as promised, to very subtle insults hidden in the things that we say to customers. On the self-sabotage spectrum, it's easy to recognize the obvious "I should have known better" mistakes that damage relationships with customers. The far more common and harmful situations occur when our words and actions insidiously erode the customer's trust and personal credibility that we work so hard to establish. In this article, I'll focus on **how to solve two sources of self-sabotage that cause salespeople to shoot themselves in the foot**: "dangling insults," and the "old brain."

The Dangling Insult

We would never insult a customer by suggesting he is incompetent or imply to an executive that she is negligent. The very idea is inconceivable, yet it's a common occurrence and salespeople unknowingly insult prospects and customers every day.

Here is a typical example. A salesperson introduces their solution by saying, "We save companies like yours from wasting hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost..." It sounds innocuous on the surface. Statements like this are standard sales-speak and are often true, but they also contain dangling insults. After all, if you tell a customer that she is wasting hundreds of thousands of dollars, aren't you also suggesting that she hasn't been doing her job very well?

Dangling insults are unintentional. Salespeople are unaware of the negative impact because they are built into their mindsets and the conventional sales training they may have received. The salesperson thinks he is delivering a compelling message and connecting to the customer's pain. But to the customer, it can sound like the salesperson is interjecting or ending sentences with, "...you idiot, sir."

At times, you can tell when customers hear a dangling insult because they react physically. They lean back in their chairs, cross their arms, and scowl. They often react verbally, by saying something like: "We're not losing anywhere near that much money."

Most of the time the reaction isn't that obvious and most salespeople don't realize that they have insulted their customer. As a result, they misinterpret the customer's reactions and can't properly address them. In fact, salespeople's natural response patterns often make matters worse.



The Old Brain

The manner in which salespeople react to their customers' responses can either pave the path to open and honest communication, or become a primary instrument of self-sabotage.

There are two parts of the brain that are particularly problematic in sales situations: the brain stem and the limbic system, which scientists define as the "old brain." The brain stem or "reptilian brain" controls our involuntary actions while the limbic system generates basic emotions, such as fear and aggression. The old brain is not big on interpretation and analysis. It reacts to situations with lightning speed in six ways: attack, submit, flee, reproduce, nurture, or be nurtured.

So how does the old brain affect sales conversations? Continuing the example above, when a customer says, "We're not losing anywhere near that much money," a salesperson might counter with, "I'm sorry, but I think you misunderstood..." This implies it is the customer who just doesn't get it and often triggers an even more irritated retort. The salesperson is unconsciously engaged in self-protection

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at the expense of the customer, who will often protect their self-esteem and strike back in turn.

I've often seen salespeople unwittingly play the critical parent with customers. Very early in a customer meeting and in the intent of "creating interest," the salesperson will say something like, "You probably don't realize how much time and money the many IT-related activities cost companies like yours each year." What do customers hear? Many of them hear a parent or superior insinuating that they don't know their own business.

Stopping Self-Sabotage

How can we stop sabotaging our efforts? The first step is awareness. We cannot solve a problem until we recognize it. The second step is to stop behaving like a salesperson and begin to behave more like someone keeping our customer's best interest in mind.

A good example would be that of a doctor diagnosing a patient's health. During a "diagnostic conversation" the full extent of the patient's problem is explored, measured, evaluated, and communicated. Likewise, if you examine your customer's situation, the focus should be on the physical symptoms of the problems they are experiencing, which is their reality. The goal is to raise your customers' awareness and understanding of the problems they are experiencing and what it is costing them to currently manage the services you would provide. Then they will more easily make connection to the value of your solution.

The doctor will use established diagnostic processes that direct the order of questions and measurements. Their questions are about observations of physical indicators or symptoms that tie the diagnosis to their patient's reality. It helps their patients get comfortable with the recommendation. The same communication style helps customers more clearly understand their problem, gives them a way to process critical information.

When we are in the diagnostic mode, we are dealing directly with our customers' reality. That is, we are working with situations they have experienced in the past, are currently experiencing, or those they believe they will be exposed to in the future. In fact, our customers may not be aware that

these elements or symptoms could represent significant problems that should be addressed. Through diagnosis we can help bring clarity to problems and a way to make quality business decisions.

The challenge for businesses today is to equip sales professionals to be more diagnostic in their conversations. There are three primary objectives to keep in mind during "diagnostic conversations":

- ✦ Uncover the reality of the customer's situation (Do these symptoms exist?)
- ✦ Quantify the impact of the problem (How bad is it?)
- ✦ Create the "Incentive to Change" (Is it serious enough to take action?)

To increase your diagnostic capabilities through support materials, consider these steps:

- ✦ Include diagnostic tools in your marketing communications to help your customer develop clarity around the issues you address. Consider a "Seven Early Warning Signals" brochure to help customers recognize the absence of the value your solution can provide.
- ✦ To create more qualified prospects through your web site, guide your customer through an initial diagnosis that will help them recognize the inefficiencies of their current approach.
- ✦ Make sure product training teaches your salespeople the symptoms of problems your solution is meant to solve and how to quantify the impact of those problems on your customer's business.

Like a doctor, a quality diagnosis builds exceptional levels of trust and credibility and a patient who is ready to take action. In business it means greater differentiation and clarity, customers that respect and trust us, and more sales with profitable results.

I'm not suggesting that all of this is easily accomplished. Success will come as a result of awareness, application, and practice. Of course, it will all be much easier if we stop sabotaging our own efforts first. 