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the Sweet Smell of Yes

Making a Connection With the Buyer

EDITORIAL | JOE TAKASH

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Ten-year old Billy Johnson just got home from school. He's been thinking about an ice cream bar all day. He wants it badly. Unfortunately, the only person at the Johnson house is his teenage sister, Susie. As Billy approaches her, she quickly anticipates his agenda and cuts him off. "Billy, you can't have an ice cream bar. It's too close to dinner and it will ruin your appetite."

It's over. Billy's cooked without a chance to negotiate or be heard? Why? He didn't reach the ultimate decision-maker. But wait, who's that walking in the house in good spirits and a bounce in his step? It's Dad! Billy rushes to the big guy with a hug and says, "Hey Dad, can I have an ice cream bar?" Dad's golden response: "Sure, Sport, and I'll tell you what, get me one too."

Yee-haw, sale closed!

Think of all the time you have put in and the energy you've exhausted on attempts to cajole client contacts who love to say "no" but can't really say "yes." It can be a frustrating, morale-beating process. It also happens to be bad for your business' bottom line.

Making a connection with the buyer, the individual who can say "yes," isn't always easy, but the first question I challenge you with is, "Who are you asking for an ice cream bar from?" Aim low or aim high and, well, you know what you get.

The following tips are both necessary and instrumental for getting bigger deals in less time, from the people who have the authority to say "yes!"

See Yourself as a Peer

Before we get into this approach, answer this: Are you confident enough to dialogue on equal ground with the big wheels who run the show? You would be shocked at the number of grown adults who will answer this with a "yes" to others, but say "no" to themselves in subtle, counterproductive ways.

Trigger Tip: To view yourself as a peer, use positive self-talk and manage that internal cynic. Remember, how you present yourself is stronger than any service or product you offer. A strong handshake, a confident personality and voice, and the right mental attitude can make a huge difference.

Do Your Homework

A lack of preparation may be the biggest deal killer there is. When it comes to connecting with buyers, you must know three areas — and know them well. This includes: Their company. Their competition. Your product or service. Do these seem like no-brainers? You'd be surprised how many service providers don't know when a company was founded, what their mission statement says, who their biggest clients are or how they fare against the competition. As far as knowing your own product and service, read on.

Trigger Tip: If you haven't made Google your best buddy, start today. It will swiftly allow you to collect information about the companies you target, and often the professional résumés and personal interests of your buyers.

Speak in Sound Bites

When you have the chance to speak to the buyer, get to the point and remember that less is more. Too many service providers ramble on aimlessly about what they're selling and can kill their credibility because of the confusion they create about their product or service. Decision-makers want you to be brief. Granted, when you get those few moments to audition, it can feel like a pressure cooker. So, prepare *only* information that demonstrates how buyers will benefit and what their return on investment will be. If you don't have this ready to be delivered in 15 seconds or less, practice.

Trigger Tip: For every piece of information about your service or company you prepare, ask the questions that your buyer would ask, such as: "So what? or "What's in it for me?" These force you to always speak in benefit-focused, buyer-friendly language.

Ask Great Questions

Conventional sales jargon used to be "ABC" which stood for "Always Be Closing." People are more perceptive than

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ever, and most folks know when they're being manipulated. Today's world of collaborative, relationship selling, especially with high-level buyers, should be more about "ABO," or "Always Be Opening." The accurate diagnostic you make on a buyer's needs is always a reflection of the quality of data you can learn from them. Questions are the golden nuggets that lead you down the path to "yes!"

Trigger Tip: Be sure your questions are open-ended (which allows buyers to elaborate), that they tie directly into the buyer's objectives, and that they demonstrate how the buyer will know when successful results are realized.

Saying "No" Can Get the "Yes!"

When trying to impress a buyer, it's easy to try too hard. We've all done it, but it's crucial to be yourself. If you disagree with something he or she says, tactfully push back and challenge them. Authentic candor has elevated many salespeople from 'yes-(wo)man status' (who don't get the business) to 'peer status' — who get the "yes" simply by serving as counsel that a buyer can trust and respect.

Trigger Tip: Don't try to be too enthused or eager right away. Think about how turned off you get when a telemarketer tries to impress you with glib, cheesy-speak. You want to run the other way. Be genuine and be honest at all times.

High-level buyers are usually a tougher sale than the case of Billy Johnson asking his dad for an ice cream bar. They require an eclectic approach consisting of preparation, self-talk and smart behaviors. But the common ground with you and Billy is reached when you are able to make that connection and get the right answer from the person in charge — when *yes* means **yes**! asm

tips+tools

exercising your 'wow' factor

You can find real value in being the fly on the wall. That was the case earlier this year at the **AIM/R Annual Conference** when the following question was presented to manufacturers: "What has a rep done for you recently that really wowed you?"

One of the answers seemed so easy, it's a wonder it's not done more often. According to the manufacturer, "Prior to spending a week on the road with one of my reps, he sent me a pre-call planning folder. In the folder, he listed all of the calls I had asked that we make and some others he felt were important. The pre-call details included:

+ Bullets on all the issues that the particular customer was involved with.
+ Our past history and performance with the customer.
+ The rep's take on what their future needs would be.
+ Names, titles and a bit of personal information on all the people we were going to meet with. (That personal information contained some of their personal interests such as golf, favorite pro football team, etc. It was more than enough to serve as a conversation opener.)

"To say that this left me with the impression that they were really working the territory and knew what was going on was an understatement."

A couple of other answers to that wow-factor question included:

+ Investment some reps had made in customer training facilities.
+ The existence of a written succession plan — "They asked my advice about that."
+ "A distinct lack of negativity on the part of the rep in the face of a challenging business climate."