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FINE-TUNE YOUR
BALANCING ACT

TO WEATHER THE STORMY CLIMATE

EDITORIAL | JOHN GRAHAM



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Good economic times make it easy to sell. It isn't just that the money is flowing freely. That's part of it, of course. Mostly, however, it's the buyers' upbeat, positive, "we're invincible" attitude that gets the orders. In a word, they are ready to buy! But that was then. **What about now? The clouds are dark. Customers are going inside and closing the drapes.** They're hunkering down, and are anything but interested in seeing salespeople.

Because of all this, it's easy to fall victim to the prevailing mood and decide we should "do something" to generate more business.

It's then that we often begin a quest for the "silver bullet," the quick fix and the instant answer. It's time to stop hoping that there's a "solution" out there somewhere that will produce a slew of new sales. It's in times like these when those offering sure-fire gimmicks prey upon us with their promises of easy success.

In the spring of 2008, Harvard economics professor Larry Summers summarized the current economic situation in a few words, "More distress lies ahead." He was right. Yet, far too many naïve salespeople continue to look for quick fixes and "silver bullets" to help them be successful in today's economy. Without even knowing it, they are playing Russian roulette.

There's simply too much at stake to follow a path that leads to disaster. So that we're all on the same page, here's a three-point reality check for anyone in sales:

Stop hoping that "things will change for the better." They will, of course. But no one knows when. Waiting it out is only a plan for greater pain — yours.

Forget about relying on relationships with "influencers" to bail you out. They're so preoccupied with their own concerns, they don't have time to listen to your story, no matter how much money you claim you can save them.

Stay away from anyone who tells you what you want to hear. They will only get your hopes up, cost you money and waste your time. You'll be worse off than when you started!

This picture may seem unnecessarily discouraging and negative. It's not; it's just realistic. But it's also filled with op-

portunities. Here are realistic recommendations for ramping up your sales:

- **Be sure you're branded.** In times like this, it's more important than ever since every prospect is valuable. This means paying very careful attention to understanding what our customers think about when they think about us. Good or bad, right or wrong, accurate or inaccurate, that's our brand.

This is important, as we often see ourselves quite differently from the way others view us. We see ourselves in the most favorable light. For example, a producer had just finished a presentation to a prospective client. "How did it go?" an associate asked. "Just great!" the salesperson replied, "Just great!"

A few weeks later, he found out that he lost the sale. "Your presentation left a lot to be desired," reported the prospective client. We tune out anything that might challenge how we like to think of ourselves.

If what we say and do isn't consistent with the picture the customer has of us, we're done. Inconsistency always makes people feel uncomfortable and doubtful about us. On the other hand, when sincerity, the desire to be helpful, patience and competence come through, there's a positive connection with the client. That's the type of branding that's worth working on.

- **Share everything you know.** There are no blank-book customers today. They all bring some level of knowledge to the buying situation. Even though their information may be limited and even faulty, it empowers them to take charge of the sale, the result of spending time on the internet.

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If there was ever a time to practice a consultative approach, it's now. Persuasion is out; it only drives customers away. Even with limited knowledge, customers want to be collaborative and the wise salesperson takes the role of coach instead of closer.

All this makes an important point: customers are far more serious than they were even a couple of years ago, more demanding and less forgiving. At the same time, they're more willing to listen to those who take time, share their knowledge and don't lapse into a "sales mode." This creates an unusual opportunity for salespeople to educate, inform and demonstrate their competence.

- ✦ **Sell security.** The customer's caution flag is flying! Growth is always good, but today the focus is on avoiding loss. To some extent, there's a resurgence of the Depression-era safety mentality epitomized by the pass-book savings account.

Customers are scared. With a depressed housing market in most parts of the nation, a gyrating stock market, the threat of being laid off and the escalating cost of living, security has taken on new significance.

In this environment, it's the fear of loss that's creating a high level of customer angst. In a time like this, dreams give way to having to worry about having enough money to put gas in the tank. Buyers want safety, and they look for guarantees above all else.

- ✦ **Don't attempt to shorten the sales cycle.** In a shaky economy, buying decisions may take longer than ever, since no one wants to make a mistake. Customers want to be sure that they're making the right buying decisions.

If they feel they're being "pushed," the sale will be lost. They want to take their time so they can feel comfortable

with what they are buying. Just because you may think they've had more than enough time, don't write them off. They will buy when they get ready. This is when it's important to stay close to encourage questions and be ready to provide helpful information.

Most sales are lost because salespeople assume that the customer isn't going to buy and then they're totally surprised six months or a year later to discover that they bought from someone else. Most sales are lost because the salesperson quit too soon.

- ✦ **Market aggressively.** While many customers are hunkering down, don't make the mistake of doing it yourself. Because your competitors are lying low, use this as the right time to raise your visibility by being more assertive in your marketing.

When times get tough, most companies are far from ready to do battle. They have nowhere to turn because they failed at prospecting. Ask them about their prospect database and it doesn't exist. Ask them if they stay in touch regularly with all their prospects and customers, and you'll get a blank stare. Ask them if they can send an eBulletin to everyone in their database, you'll get the same response. Ask them if they actively help their customers reduce operating costs, and they don't have a clue what you're talking about.

In a word, these salespeople and their companies are unprepared to meet the challenges of a challenging economy.

Taken together, these guidelines form a powerful script for marketing a salesperson's services in difficult economic times. They require some work, but they are far more successful than looking for a quick fix or playing Russian roulette with a "silver bullet." ❧

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