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The First Fifteen Minutes

Was it a comedy? A tragedy? A monologue or a documentary? A hit? Or was the show cancelled? We are not talking about the latest effort from Hollywood or New York, but your last sales presentation.

There are three ways to evaluate the success of any sales presentation. Let's continue for a moment with our movie example. Before the script finds its way to your local movie theater, there have been hours of planning and organization, preparation, and execution; the actual filming. In every profession there are these same three steps, whether it is a doctor preparing for surgery, a builder building a house or a parent planning the next meal. There is always some degree of planning, preparation and then execution. The success of the outcome or finished product depends on the effectiveness of all three. The sales process is no exception.

The planning or organizing is the pre-call research, investigation and general information gathering. The organization, is deciding the strategy for the call, not planning the information that will be delivered, but the sequence of events. The execution is the what you say and do once in the prospects domain. The focus of this article is on the execution. However, it is necessary to cover some of the necessary key points that should have been addressed in the first two steps, if the actual presentation strategy, dynamics and outcome are to be understood and successful.

The sales process is a series of relationships not just personal relationships, but the relationship between the elements of the process. The first element are your attitudes about, perceptions of, beliefs on, values and judgments and their impact on every aspect of the process itself. This element more than any other will determine your success and/or failure in selling. The next element is prospecting, that's where you get information, next is the sales presentation, where you give information and answer sales resistance, then comes the close and finally, servicing the client for repeat and/or referral business. The success of the sales presentation is a function of your effectiveness of managing your attitudes and the timeliness and accuracy of the information you receive.

Have you ever had a prospect say to you, you have fifteen minutes to convince me that I should give you any more of my valuable time." Well if they don't say it you can bet they are thinking it.

We are going to assume that you have what you believe is a good prospect, and you are now in the prospects office ready to begin. It's show time. The goals or objectives of the first fifteen minutes are:

- To build a positive rapport.
- To establish an atmosphere of trust and respect.
- To gain control of the sales process.
- To fill in the gaps of specific prospect information that you have not learned to this point.
- To confirm the accuracy of previous information gained.
- To uncover prospect prejudices, needs, desires, attitudes, opinions, problems and potential resistance.
- To discover the dominant emotional buying motive.
- To determine the urgency and their willingness to proceed now.
- To determine whether you are in the presence of the decision maker or to discover who the additional people are that should be involved.
- To sell them on the need for additional time to deliver the balance of your presentation.

A lot in just fifteen minutes, yes, but there is one selling skill than can accomplish all of these in the time allotted. The ability to ask the right questions in the right way at the right time.

There are two basic types of questions that you want to use in the early stages of the sales process. They are open and closed ended questions. Closed ended questions are used to verify specific attitudes, get answers to specific information requests. For example, "What equipment are you currently using. Who is your present supplier." Open ended questions are used to query the prospects feelings, attitudes, opinions, prejudices and judgments. For example, "how do you feel about the service you are getting from your current supplier. What has been your experience with our type of product or service. Remember, closed ended questions cut off dialogue and open ended questions encourage dialogue. Information is power. Questions help you prevent lost sales by getting you important information about your prospect before you "deliver" your sales message. They will help you to focus on only those features that are of interest or concern to the buyer.

Generally speaking, you want to use more open ended question in the early portion of the sales process. If you use a closed ended question early, follow it immediately with an open ended question. You want to get the prospect talking and you want to keep them talking. An opening that I have used for over twenty years is, "I don't know how I can best be of service to you or your organization, the best way for me to determine that is if I can ask you a few questions, is that ok?"

This strategy accomplishes three critical things in the early part of the presentation. First it gets you control of the sales process and second it gives you permission to get as much information as you can and need early. Keep in mind, the person who asks the questions, controls the conversation and the person who talks the most dominates it. In a sales presentation which do you think will be the most effective strategy?

Remember, your prospect is constantly asking themselves, "Why should I give you more time?" Questions keep their focus on their needs, problems, concerns and off of your products, features and selling style. Second, it shows the prospect you are more interested in them, than you are in just selling something, anything to them. This is one of the best ways to build trust and rapport in any relationship, by being more interested in them than yourself.

Third, it helps get and maintain their attention by breaking through their preoccupation with the many other issues that they have on their plate. There are a few concepts that you should consider, however before you continue with your presentation. Never cover price until you have had an opportunity to build value. Price will always seem high, if value is perceived as low. The way you build value is to relate the features and benefits of your product and/or service to the specific needs, desires or problems of the prospect. The time for building value is after you know what these are. If you introduce price too soon you will end up in a price alone battle. An early request for a price is a signal that you have a poor prospect or one that will buy on price alone. The way to disarm a price request too early is to say something like, "I am sure price is a concern to you. Are you only interested in price, or is service, quality, reputation etc. also important to you?"

I would rather leave early in the process with a no, than go through the entire process and get a maybe. With a no, I know where I stand. With a maybe, I have only false hope. And after over 30 years in selling my experience is that most maybes end up no's. If you terminate an interview, be sure and leave a prospect and not an enemy behind. One way to accomplish this is to say, "Mr. prospect, your answers to my questions have indicated that this is not a good time to be discussing our product or service. Permit me to get back to you in six months to see how your circumstances have changed."

Timing is everything in selling. Remember, people buy when they are ready to buy, not when you need to sell. Attempting to force a prospect to buy when you need to sell is what we commonly call, the hard sell. Back to the presentation.

Your opening question, and your follow-up questions will determine how much more time your prospect will allow you.

Poor questions, and you'll be out of there. Good questions and you can stay as long as you need to determine whether you have a prospect that is worth more of your time. The critical thing to remember is that you are not selling your product or service in this early stage. You are earning the right to take more of their time later.

Let's relate this entire scenario to that of visiting your doctor for stomach problems. If the doctor prescribed a prescription right after your informing them of your symptoms, I doubt if you would take his/her advice. They need information, and they get it from a patient history, exam, x rays and so on. Once they feel confident they see the big picture, the doctor is ready to give a diagnosis and you will be more receptive to it. What if after you were in their office they said you have fifteen minutes for us to decide on your medical fate! I would bet you would find another doctor. What if the doctor spent the entire time telling you about their education, experience, successes, personal philosophies etc.? That is not why you are there. That is not why you are in the prospects office. You are there to get information, not give it. There will be time for that in the second segment of the sales process.

Let's summarize with a few basic sales rules.

- *Your prospect will tell you what you need to tell them to sell them.*
- *The information you don't get soon enough will hurt you later in the process.*
- *Just because the prospect will see you doesn't mean they are a good prospect now.*
- *People buy from people they trust, not people they like.*
- *Your role is to sell the prospect, then educate your customer, not educate prospects and sell customers.*
- *You will never close a sale on a poor prospect with a good product, good sales presentation or tricky close, however a well qualified prospect will help you sell them.*

The first fifteen minutes are like building the foundation of a house. Get the foundation right and the rest of the construction will be successful

Too many people overvalue what they are not and undervalue what they are.

- Malcolm Forbes -