



How to Sell Technical Equipment and Services

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1

KNOW THE PRODUCTS

Superior product knowledge is one of the strongest weapons in a salesperson's arsenal. The technical competence of a salesperson rates first with customers—nothing opens a customer's doors more quickly or keeps them open longer. Since superior product knowledge is fundamental, it almost seems redundant to mention that a salesperson should know the products well. However, many salespeople actually enter customers' offices selling products they know very little about.



In pursuing this information, a salesperson should not forget other noncompetitive salespeople who also call on these customers. The successful among them may know the customer well. It will help if the salesperson determines which other salespeople have been the most successful and ask them who exerts the most influence on purchasing decisions. The responses may be surprising. Ex-employees or retired employees are also good sources of information on who has influence in the company. Acquiring all of this information is not a waste of time. It will actually save the salesperson an enormous amount of time over the long run as he services these accounts.

The information-gathering process may extend over several months, allowing time to collect and sift facts and make more contacts. A salesperson should be inspired as he goes about this. There are many uninspired salespeople who get nowhere because they do not know their customers.

It may also be helpful for a salesperson to learn other details, such as the following:

- working hours
- restrictions on calls from salespeople
- whether or not appointments are necessary

Concerning the last point, I would never make a sales call without an appointment. I have read numerous call reports indicating that buyers would not see salespeople without an appointment. This should clearly have been established ahead of time.

Once a salesperson finds a good prospect, he should not stop there. The next step is to determine what products the customer makes and how the salesperson's products fit into the overall production picture.

Empathy is one of the two fundamental requirements of an outstanding salesperson. In chapter 5, I point out how important it is for a salesperson to be able to see events and situations as the customer sees them. The more a salesperson knows about the buyer and his company, the more successful he will be in practicing empathy.

For example, Allen Mebane, retired chairman of Unifi, Inc. (a textile giant), said he must know his customer's business and problems at least as well as he knows his own. "I have to show him how much I can help him—not vice versa." (*Wall Street Journal* August 29, 1983)



By following these suggestions, a salesperson can create a favorable impression on his prospect. This will encourage the prospect to feel better toward the salesperson and to be more willing to open up and to talk about himself. The more the prospect talks, the more the salesperson will learn about him, his problems, his likes, his dislikes, and his needs. As a result, the salesperson will be able to more accurately empathize with the prospect and be able to see, feel, hear, and evaluate things and events as the prospect does.

Too many salespeople are busy talking to their customers about their own agenda, their own products, and their own objectives. They fail to slow down and try to determine what the customer is thinking about and to discover his feelings and his needs.

Sometimes a salesperson makes a statement about his products, and then he makes another and another, without stopping to think, ask questions, and give the customer a chance to respond. Soon the customer just sits back and pretends to listen but does not really hear, because he long ago tuned out the salesperson's monologue. By allowing the salesperson to ramble on, the customer misleads him into thinking he agrees with and subscribes to everything the salesperson has said. After making a comment or two about his company or his products, the salesperson should pause and give the customer time to say something. If the customer does not respond, the salesperson should ask him if what he considers to be product advantages are indeed advantages to the customer on this project or order. Then he should listen to what the customer has to say.

Central then to a salesperson's success is the ability to project himself across the customer's desk, to sit in his chair, to walk in his shoes, and to observe the situation as his customer will. A salesperson who can do this will obtain an enormous amount of feedback, which is necessary if he is to obtain orders. In order to accomplish this, the salesperson should not sit in his chair and continue to think as a salesperson with his own firm. He must see things from the customer's viewpoint, not his own. He must imagine himself in the decision maker's shoes and ask himself questions that the decision maker must consider:

- How can I be certain I am buying the safest, most reliable products and, hence, be least likely to make a mistake?
- What benefits and features should I look for in the products about to be purchased?
- What should I expect from the successful vendor?
- What do my superiors and colleagues expect?



SUMMARY

1. A salesperson must send the right signals out to his customers and associates starting with his initial encounters or dealings with them.
2. These signals must be sincere.
3. Customers as well as associates will quickly see through a false front.
4. Having good relations with customers will enable a salesperson not only to obtain more orders that are close, but also to more easily settle disputes or misunderstandings.
5. The bonds of trust are built up slowly but can be broken or destroyed quickly.
6. Salespeople who send out the right signals obtain a greater share of orders.
7. Very often when buying decisions are close, customers buy from the salesperson they have the best impression of and like the best.
8. Customers buy expectations, not things. The better impression buyers have of a salesperson, the more likely they are to believe his promises of these expectations.
9. A salesperson's most precious business asset is his good relations with his customers.
10. A salesperson must have good relations with his customers if he is to sell successfully over a long period of time.
11. A salesperson should not wear his feelings on his sleeve and should practice forgiveness.
12. A salesperson must not engage in petty grievances.
13. Employees in general fail to advance in their careers not because they are not technically competent, but because of their inability to get along with people. They fail to send the right signals out.
14. A salesperson who sends the right signals out will get the right signals back in the form of good relations with customers and colleagues and will receive more than his share of orders.



The replies to these queries will give the salesperson valuable insight on how to best deal with this person. He will know more about the customer's personal and professional interests. This will give the salesperson clues as to minor gifts or presents that he could consider sending the customer. For example, if the salesperson learns that the customer has a certain technical interest, he could send him published articles or a book on the subject.

One unusual question to ask a senior person is, "What achievement in your career gave you the greatest satisfaction?" It is astonishing what a customer will tell a salesperson in response to this question. Many times he has never been asked that question before, and the response can be very interesting. It should not be a question that the salesperson asks every senior person he meets in the customer's company, as it would lose its originality and importance. Because people vary, the salesperson should judge when this is an appropriate question.

A few years ago, I asked a senior executive with a major U.S. engineering company what achievement or what activity in his career gave him the most satisfaction. He replied that shortly after the end of the Korean War, his company had a contract to assist in the rehabilitation of the South Korean industry. He headed the project, and every Monday morning met for several hours with the president of South Korea. My friend then talked for several minutes about some of the meetings that he obviously had enjoyed very much. I could tell that he enjoyed talking about this experience and had not had a chance to do so in a very long time.

The point is that people like to talk, and if a salesperson gives them the chance, they will enjoy doing so, and they will feel good about being with him. The salesperson will have created a favorable impression by sending out the right signals.

It is important, however, that a salesperson never ask overly familiar questions. This is especially easy to do in the early stages of a business relationship. Sometimes a person who knows the prospect very well will introduce the salesperson or refer the salesperson to the customer. The salesperson should be careful not to assume this warm and special relationship can immediately be transferred to him. It is not that easy. All too often a salesperson will place too much emphasis on this introduction. He should never attempt to trade on these long-standing relationships or take anything for granted. He must be prepared to earn his own spurs, build his own reputation, and establish his own rapport with this prospect. This will take time and effort on the salesperson's part.



The salesperson should be sincere and should behave the same way at all times. This is so vital that it cannot be overemphasized. As a famous industrialist said, “No matter who you are dealing with, reveal your own true nature. Do not cover up who or what you really are.” Customers are intelligent, sophisticated people. Virtually all can spot a phony a mile away, and they see many of them every day.

The salesperson should never disparage his company, competitors, or other people. If he talks unfavorably about a company or a person, it will eventually be discovered. Word gets around. Furthermore, most people conclude that if a salesperson is always saying unkind things about others, he will say unpleasant things about them when they are out of sight.

When a salesperson repeatedly disparages a company or an individual to others, it inhibits his ability to deal objectively with that person or that firm. This will create a residual resentment that will influence a salesperson’s attitude or action when dealing with this customer or this individual, even though he may be unaware of it. I have cautioned salespeople about making unkind or unfavorable comments about a customer or a person. The reply is usually, “Oh, but I wouldn’t let that influence my dealings with him.” But it will.

A good salesperson will not get involved in his customer’s internal politics. He should stay aloof and should not take sides and try to predict who will win. This does not mean that the salesperson should not stay alert as to who the bright, promising, and advancing people are. He should know this, but he should be objective.

Most big purchasing decisions are close races, decided sometimes on extremely minor points. In a close contest, the salesperson wants other customers to be able to tell the prospective customer good things about him. It could cost him the order if they say, “Watch him,” “He is shifty,” or “Make him put everything in writing.” Being two-faced will destroy his reputation. He should not tell one company one thing and another company something else. He should always be honest and consistent.

Customers are intelligent, sophisticated people. Virtually all can spot a phony a mile away, and they see many of them every day.



In making appointments, especially with busy customers, the salesperson should find out something about their work habits. Some busy people start to work very early. If the salesperson learns that the customer starts at 7:00 AM, he should ask for an appointment at 7:30 AM. Often these people will agree to see a salesperson early. This can enable the salesperson to see a person who would otherwise always be too busy. It will establish the salesperson as one who also starts early and will help to develop a good rapport with this individual.

SALES EXAMPLES

EXAMPLE 1

One of my superiors was dealing with a customer whose executive vice president was the key decision maker and someone who commenced work at 7:00 AM. My superior always scheduled his appointments with this person shortly after 7:00 AM. My superior would fly into town the night before so he could be on time for these early meetings. Over several years, he obtained many very large orders from this individual, mostly due to these early-morning talks. The competition apparently never learned the secret and lost orders consistently.

EXAMPLE 2

On another occasion, one of my colleagues always lost orders to a customer in New York City. He reported that he could never get in to see the most important person. This important person later traveled to my location, and I was able to visit with him socially. During our dinner, I learned that he, too, always started to work at 7:00 AM. No doubt if my New York City colleague had known this much earlier, he could have arranged to see this gentleman early in the morning. He might well have converted his lost orders into purchase orders.