

HR & Professional Training

Key steps to success: the 'science' behind selling

by Dr Chahid Fourali



**Can selling be taught?
Selling, like many other initiatives in life, require preparation.**

We hear about 'natural sellers' who can easily sell some of the most hard to sell products (in this article we will use the word 'product' to represent anything that can be sold, including services or 'ideas'), and from their first selling assignment, feel naturally at ease and take to it like a duck takes to water. Nevertheless it is difficult to imagine somebody being successful in selling without some necessary basic skills, irrespective whether these skills have been developed consciously or unconsciously ('naturally'). In fact an over-confident sales person who would like to believe that they are 'a natural' can be a 'recipe for disaster' as they may not have the humility to consider that they may not be as 'perfect' as they may like to believe and, consequently, may miss opportunities to improve.

Assuming the right 'product' is being sold, in line with market needs, there still remains a number of standard steps that a savvy sales person needs to undertake before getting to the stage of signing a transaction or, as is known in selling quarters, 'closing the sale'. Let's briefly enumerate these steps:

- Prospecting
- Planning and pre-approach
- Approaching and delivering a presentation
- Trial close, determining and addressing objections and closing
- Follow-up and relationship development

The above are known as the 'sales cycle' and although different sales professionals may identify some different variations of these steps, or call them differently, they generally cover similar steps in the right order. The order is reflected in the chronology of these steps as each step is pre-requisite to those that follow and affect the chances of successfully completing the sale and going beyond (developing a fruitful long-term relationship). If there is a 'science' to selling then this should be it.

So let's review these steps to ensure that the reader is aware of the purpose and the requirement for each step.

Prospecting

This is a necessary step for selling. If we cannot find buyers we cannot sell. Perhaps the best position to be in when prospecting is that of being the happy target of many referrals (delighted customers referring others to you). This is why it is very important to aim to serve our clients as best as we can. Apart from ethical reasons for this there are clear business reasons. Let's consider a metaphor that has just been created for this purpose. "If prospecting is like looking for gold in a running spring, as done in the 'old wild west', referrals are as if the gold is looking for you".

Planning and pre-approach

Once some potential 'sales leads', that seem to have 'ticked all the boxes', have been identified in terms of match to the product being sold, thereby transforming the lead into a prospect, the next stage is to prepare for our eventual encounter with this prospect. As with all important testing situations in life, the best way of maximizing the chance of success is to prepare for the test. And the best way to prepare is to develop a plan that identifies at least three dimensions: developing a good understanding of the prospects (the profile), developing a good understanding of the types of benefits that would be attractive to them and, finally, developing clear and reasonable (SMART) objectives to aim for. Armed with this plan and information, the sales person may consider a number of options for establishing contact with the prospect and winning the opportunity to present their product (this is no easy challenge as there are many 'gate keepers' to prevent access to the right prospects).

Approaching and delivering a presentation

How to approach a presentation will depend on a number of characteristics. These will include type of product being sold, type of industry, size of company, size of audience, experience of the company with the product etc. Hence if the product is simple and well established in the market and the meeting/presentation involves just one person (eg a director) the sales person may decide to opt for a well structured, memorised presentation that can be delivered very quickly. If however, the presentation involves a complex product and an audience of say five or more people, the sales person may consider an 'unstructured, need satisfaction presentation'.

Once chosen, the presentation will need to determine its purpose. Does it simply aim to raise awareness or inform about a product, stimulate a desire for buying or convince the audience about the relevance (necessity?) of the product to their business. In any case all presentations should aim to demonstrate how the product would enhance the business of the prospect.

Trial close, determining and addressing objections – and closing

The ultimate aim of any sales presentation is to sell. Hence after each presentation and whenever the right signs are there, the sales person will check the readiness to buy either indirectly (eg 'so, are you interested?') or directly (eg 'So how many would you like?'). In most cases the audience will have some objections or reservations about the product which should be brought to the fore by the salesperson. The reluctance to buy could be due to technical (e.g. being unclear about the adequacy or effectiveness of the product to the business), managerial (eg not having the power of decision to buy) or personal reasons (loyalty to other suppliers). A skilful sales person should aim to elicit the reason behind the reluctance of a client to buy and consider objections as opportunities to demonstrate the relevance of their product to the success of the client's business. Ideally, if the sales person has done his/her preparations very well, including understanding the needs of the prospects, the characteristics of the products that may represent a USP (Unique Selling Point) as well as predicting possible objections and best way of addressing them, then there should be no surprise at the presentation stage. In fact with the right preparation the sales person not only maximises the chances of success but actually will enjoy better the meeting and presentation with the prospect. Indeed if the sales person starts from the perspective that their aim is 'to serve a need' then they would be less likely to fail.

Follow-up and relationship development

The successful delivery of the sales presentation does not signal the end of the work of the sales person. In many ways this signals the beginning of a, hopefully, successful long relationship. The sales person should never take for granted the clients they won but, rather, he/she should aim as best as possible to continuously ensure that the client remains satisfied with the product and the post-delivery 'service provided'. Even more importantly, the sales person should consider new opportunities provided by the new clients such as opportunities for cross-selling (selling other products to the same clients) and seeking new referrals through their network, thereby attracting more clients. These last two opportunities may never be considered if existing clients feel unsatisfied with the deal and service they received.

Concluding thoughts

I hope the 'undecided reader' is convinced by now that selling can be taught. Of course there will always remain areas that may rely on the 'artist touch' as is the case with all disciplines. For instance although medicine is seen as a science, some doctors are more successful than others partly because of their very well rehearsed, developed and sensitive communication skills.

If well understood, the above sales cycle may become a good reference to routinely help diagnose any weaknesses in the sales workforce and help them systematically identify areas of improvements and act on them.

Obviously this presentation is a very broad summary of the sales cycle given the space allowed for it. Hence we really just browsed over a number of issues rather than have taken the time to address several issues in adequate details. For example we did not consider the characteristics of a good sales prospect, including, for example, the decision power and the resources to buy. Neither did we consider the 'presentation mix' which advises on what most effective selling presentations should include. I would be happy to consider any query that a reader may direct to me (see email below) to provide more clarifications about these aspects and others.

Perhaps an important point that should be stressed here is the fact that the adoption of the above steps can only help develop a long term and fruitful relationship if underpinned by ethical values that inspire trust and ensure mutual benefits are derived by all parts involved in the transactions. In fact the ethical dimension should not be a 'bolt-on' dimension, that is added after everything else has been taken into account. Rather it is a dimension of such importance that it should underpin all the selling cycle and associated activities of the sales person. In a way it is the foundation ground of the selling cycle.

Note:
Dr Fourali is a senior lecturer at the Guildhall University in the UK. He was a founding member of PMSA and, previously, he led the setting up of the UK-wide Marketing and Sales Standards Setting Body, which was supported by the UK Government, and run it for many years.

If you have any query about any of the points above, or are interested in any further advice please contact Dr Fourali at: chahidfourali@learning4good.co.uk

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