

* SALES

The *Art* of the Close

BY A. CHARLOTTE RILEY



The sales presentation has been made. Questions asked and answered. Now what? It's time to move on to the next step in the sales process—the close. However, according to statistics based on research conducted by The Sales Board, 62 per cent of salespeople fail to ask for a commitment from the prospective client. In other words, they do not close the deal properly.

“The art of selling is to have customers explain, at length, what their situation is, and what they want to do about it,” asserts Nicki Weiss, president of Toronto-based sales training and coaching firm SalesWise. “So, in effect, the close starts at the very beginning, by asking client-focused questions and getting assurances along the way.”

A RELATIONSHIP BASED ON TRUST

By asking open-ended questions like, “What are you looking for?” and “How will you determine which solutions will fit your criteria?”, Weiss states that salespeople start to build a relationship based on trust as well as set the groundwork for successful close. Getting the client to clearly articulate their needs and then matching one of your products or services to that need is the crux of any final sale. When the focus is on the client's needs and objectives, the prospects may even instigate the closing process on their own.

She says that salespeople need to have a clear objective before walking into a call. For example, ask yourself what you want the buyer to agree to do at the end of the presentation, and work toward that goal. It may be to sign on the dotted line, but it may be to see a demo or agree to a free trial of your product. For complex sales cycles (non-transactional, requiring multiple conversations and steps), the focus should be on moving the sale forward with next steps. Next steps are always to be considered closes. The final next step is the order.

Weiss says that not listening or asking enough customer-focused questions is the Number 1 mistake in sales. Other blunders that can kill a deal include launching in to sell your products or services before establishing the customer's need and putting pressure on the client to close the sale.

“When you talk about your products and services at the wrong time, you are pushing the prospect. It raises defence barriers,” says Weiss. “Instead, you want people to have client needs at the heart of the conversation, not your products or services. The point of selling is to collaborate with the client on the solution. They know what they want; they know the business issues they want to address. It's the salesperson's job to find that out, and then co-create what the solution looks like.”

Making a sale, she says, should not be seen as the be-all and end-all. It is merely a marker in your ongoing relationship with the client. Sometimes it makes sense for them to buy; sometimes it doesn't. Good salespeople recognize this distinction, because they are committed to customer needs, not to making a sale.

So, if the salesperson has done a good job, the presentation has gone well and the prospect seems to be sending buying signals, what are some of the steps to take to help clinch the contract?

REVIEW THE BENEFITS

Connect the client's needs with the benefits associated with your company's unique products or services. If the prospective buyer has a problem or a “pain point” that your product or service solves, make sure the relationship between the buyer's problem and your solution is crystal clear. Helping the client focus on the benefits and agree that the product or service suits their needs is a vital step in obtaining assurances along the way and subsequently closing the sale.

SUGGEST THE NEXT STEP

Especially in complex, multi-call sales, the client needs to be comfortable with the next phase of the sales close process. Weiss advises asking questions like, “What are the next steps?” She says that this shows that they respect the prospect has a buying cycle and knows what they need to do. When suggesting the next steps, outline what actions are to be taken by both parties. For example, “Let me send you the products collaterals. Please read them, marking down what will work for you, and what won't work for you. Then we can begin to create a comprehensive solution that will meet your needs. What do you think?” Or, if there is a strong buying signal, the salesperson can adopt a more direct approach, such as, “The next step would be for you to place an order for 20 widgets. Once you do that, we can ship them to you by next Monday. Would that work?”

CHECK FOR ACCEPTANCE

In addition to suggesting the next steps, always ask the buyer, “Is that okay?” or “Does this work for you?” and ensure the client agrees to the next steps. It may sound like a common sense, but it's an often overlooked step. By asking these types of closing questions the only possible answers are “yes”, “no” or “perhaps”. The “yes” and “no” are part-and-parcel of the sales world, but Weiss notes that a sales person should never let a “perhaps”, “maybe”, or “I'll call you next week” go by without getting to the root of the hesitation.

A good close starts by opening up the relationship, and building bonds based on mutual respect and professionalism. Following these few pointers, helps increase your sales conversion rate. Although salespeople sometimes see closing as difficult, as Weiss points out: “Probing for needs and matching solutions to needs, thereby establishing value for your products or services—that's the difficult part. If you can do this well, closing is a no-brainer.” **E**

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