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Want to Sell More? Try Listening More

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Want to sell more? Try listening more

The classic sales text “Conceptual Selling” begins with a description of a sales encounter in which four companies have been asked to make a “sales” presentation to a large manufacturing company.

The manufacturer had been experiencing problems with the food service company managing its dozens of employee cafeterias and was ready to make a change.

As you would expect with such a sizable opportunity, the first three companies gave their best “dog and pony” show describing the wonderful job they could do running the cafeterias.

The final salesperson, however, took an unusual approach. Instead of a canned presentation laced with beautiful PowerPoint slides, he simply asked what problems the prospect had been experiencing in food service operations.

During the next hour, the salesperson said little as the prospect pinpointed the most significant problems. You can probably guess the rest of the story: The salesperson offered solutions and got the business.

When I teach selling, I find most students (with or without sales experience) tend to talk more than they listen. They seem to believe that if they say enough of the right words, they can convince the prospect to buy.

It reminds me of a strategy often used in answering discussion test questions; simply write all you know on the subject and, hopefully, you will stumble onto the correct answer. Even worse, I sometimes see sales students resort to what they must deem to be “magic words” in selling.

Much like Ali Baba using the magic phrase “open sesame” to open the cave door, many of my students seem to believe that certain stock phrases such as, “you can trust me,” “this product is selling like hotcakes” or “this product will fly off your shelves” will magically close the sale.

Why do students resort to trying to talk people into buying by using trite selling phrases? Unfortunately, they tend to believe that’s how salespeople are supposed to act. After all, that’s how salespeople are usually depicted in the media — remember Herb Tarlek of WKRP in Cincinnati fame? — and that’s what they often see with salespeople in the real world.

In fact, one of my biggest challenges is encouraging students to forget their preconceived notion of how a salesperson is supposed to act and talk. I stress that I don’t want my students to “sound like a salesperson.”

Focus on the prospect’s needs

Instead, I want them to simply have a conversation with the prospect about their needs. I encourage them to ask good questions that allow the prospect to do the majority of the talking and then provide information the prospect needs to make an informed decision.

While shifting from a focus on talking and selling to a focus on listening and helping may seem simple, it’s really a significant paradigm shift. To successfully make this transition, salespeople must stop focusing inward on their own needs (selling a product) and begin focusing on the prospect’s needs.

How would I recommend you or your sales force begin this paradigm shift?

First, begin thinking of the prospect as someone you want to help, not someone you want to sell. You may find reading “Conceptual Selling” (Miller, Heiman and Tuleja) and “The New Strategic Selling” (Heiman, Sanchez and Tuleja) helpful with this shift.

Next, to help learn how to ask good questions, try reading “SPIN Selling” by Neil Rackham. Finally, next time you are talking to a prospect, stop talking and listen.

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C. David Shepherd

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