



Sales Technique Obsolescence

Your foundational assumptions may be wrong

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I recently spoke at a small meeting of CEOs and a member of the group came up to me with an interesting question. First, he showed me a review that was recently posted about his tech services company that said, in part: “The most dishonest salesman I’ve ever dealt with. He lied and then tried to walk it back. I told him I was trying to buy tech support, not a cheap used car. Avoid!” I was shocked and the CEO said: “Let me explain.”



As it turns out, the salesman was executing a technique he had been trained on called “negative reverse selling.” The (dumb) idea behind this technique — a cornerstone of a fairly popular training system — is that the salesman pretends to not see a match between his product and the customer’s needs, saying something like: “You know, I’ll be honest. I really don’t see a fit here, but it looks like you do. Can you tell me why you’re so excited?” The idea is twofold. First, you’re trying to manipulate the customer into “proving” that he (or she) is worthy of the product by convincing you of the sale. Second, this gets the customer to tell you his buying reasons.

As it happens, the salesman asked the negative reverse question and the customer responded by saying: “Well, if you don’t see a fit, I guess we’re done here. You’re the expert.” At this point, the salesman attempted to walk it back, telling the customer that he really did see a fit. Then the customer said: “So you just lied to me. Now we’re really done.” Sales call over. Negative review posted. This customer would have been one of the company’s top five customers had the salesman won the business.

You see, the salesman thought he was just executing an old sales technique and that the customer understood this. The customer — one of those younger buyers I keep talking about — felt that it was a lie, not a technique. The problem here is not just that the technique is bad (it is), but that the foundational assumption on which it is built is no longer true. The assumption is that the customer will not hold a little white lie against the salesperson. That was true in the days when customers expected this behavior from salespeople, but the younger generations do not expect this, which leads to my point: Many of the foundational assumptions upon which common sales techniques have been built are no longer true.

The reasons why they are no longer true are generational,

cultural and technological. Today’s buyers are more informed, more empowered and more knowledgeable than ever — and they cut less slack. This is not only true of the under-40 cohort; more senior buyers are learning from the younger buyers. Let’s take a look at some foundational assumptions that are becoming obsolete.

■ **Buyers expect salespeople to fudge a bit.** This foundational assumption has led to a number of sales techniques, such as the one mentioned above,

where salespeople play a little fast and loose with the truth and they do so because buyers expect it and let them. However, younger buyers do not have the same cultural expectation. What past generations perceived as “fudging a bit,” they perceive as lying — and they have a zero-tolerance policy for lying.

■ **People buy from people they like.** Seems elementary, doesn’t it? They have to like you before they buy, right? Not so much anymore. I have written about this before, but younger buyers form relationships in the inverse way that older buyers do. Older buyers had to like you, then they would move to business issues. Younger buyers are business-first, and if you can help them solve their business needs, then you get an opportunity to form personal relationships with them. In fact, many younger buyers see salespeople opening by asking about their personal lives not only as phony (it is), but even a bit creepy. So, stop looking for the fish on the wall and focus on business.

■ **You can keep your pricing, contract terms, etc., a secret.** A few years ago, I was working with a client who mentioned his top competitor and said: “Boy, I sure wish I could find out what their contract terms are.” So, I Googled and sure enough, one of their customers had scanned the competitor’s contract and posted it. He smiled — for a second. Then he said: “Wait, is ours out there?”

Sure enough, 30 seconds later, his own contract was on the screen. Here is the funny part: His terms were way friendlier than his competitor’s. I told him that he should post his contract on his own website and lean into it. He did not, but the lesson is still valid.

I do not care how “secret” you think your key business terms are. They are out there and someone skilled with Google or artificial intelligence (AI) search tools can find them. Lean into it. Embrace transparency before it is forced on you.

■ **Do something good for someone and they will tell one person; do something bad to someone and they will tell 10 people.** As my example at the beginning of this article showed, people now have the capability to tell the entire world what you have done — good or bad. I should point out that the tech company actually had a number of excellent reviews of its service, so the one-star review for the salesperson stuck out like a sore thumb.

■ **Start by offering a high price, because you can always go down when the customer cuts your price, but you cannot go back up.** One interesting aspect of the Millennial and Z generations is this: Not only do many of them not want to negotiate (actually, most people of all generations don't), they do not know how to negotiate. In fact, many younger buyers will simply hear your offer of a price, make a decision about whether it represents a good value or not, and either buy or not buy. And, if you are hitting them with an artificially high price, they will not try to cut you — they will just move on and buy elsewhere. More than ever, this is making negotiation itself an

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obsolete strategy. You are better off quoting a fair but profitable price and standing on it rather than inviting (or demanding) negotiation with an artificially high offer.

These are not the only foundational assumptions that have changed, but for now they are the most important and impactful ones. This has great implications for salespeople steeped in old techniques that are built upon these assumptions. My advice? Update. Get in tune with what today's buyers really want. Selling today demands new

techniques built on the new realities. ■

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