Commit to Memory
How to create presentations on the spot

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At the end of my most recent article, "Creating Better Salespeople," which appeared in the January issue of Office Technology, I made a promise — that in my next article, I would share a technique for training your team members to be better presenters. There is a reason for the sequence of articles; truly great presentations are based on the needs uncovered in questioning. So, if you have not read the January article, do it now. Without great questioning that uncovers customer needs, you are just doing what I call "spraying and praying" with your presentations.

When it comes to presentations, customers care about their needs and how well you can solve them. Period. What the customer wants is to be made better than he (or she) was when you first contacted him. If you can show him in your presentation how you can do that, great. If you cannot — or if your presentation is a canned, one-size-fits-all monologue that does not address his needs — goodbye and have a great day.

This means your salespeople need to be mentally agile enough to create and deliver presentations tailored to customer needs on the spot and in their heads. Why? Because today's customer expects it. Salespeople can no longer do a discovery and then go back to the "bat cave" to develop a presentation. Even if a formal presentation is required at times, your salespeople need to be prepared to deliver at least a "1,000-foot-view" presentation on the spot — or they might not get the opportunity to do a full, formal presentation. This means you need to engage them in some serious presentation training centered on your products and/or services.

At your next sales meeting, tell your salespeople to create a list of the top 10 issues/needs your customers express. This should be easy enough that it does not have to be homework; have them do it in the meeting. If they struggle to come up with 10, they probably are not asking enough — or good enough — questions. If that is the case, reread my last article. Once your salespeople have made their lists, compile them and have them vote on the team's top 10. Now you have a "most common needs" list.

Take the top need and assign your salespeople some homework. Have them list the three best ways that your product(s) and/or service(s) solve that need. They will need to present, in concise fashion, those three solutions the next week. After each salesperson presents, vote on your top three solutions and then create solution statements for each. Do not ask your salespeople to memorize word for word, but memorize the ideas involved. Repeat this exercise for each of the top 10 needs.

Then, on an ongoing basis, drill your salespeople at random times on the solutions to the needs. For example: "Jim, how do we solve customer need X?" The idea is that Jim has committed the solutions to memory well enough that he can simply feed them back to you. If Jim cannot do that, he needs to practice until he can. If he cannot present the solutions to you, he cannot present them to the customer. Along with that, use this technique in role-plays during sales meetings (you do those, right?) and live sales calls when you ride along with your salespeople (ditto).

What you are doing here is creating a "modular presentation" — a mental Rolodex of solutions that your salespeople can use to present to your customers on the spot. The salesperson who can do this is the salesperson who is mentally agile enough to be a true resource for customers rather than a product peddler. Customers are much more ready to give appointments to resources than product peddlers.

Let's talk for a moment about "The Rule of Three." The Rule of Three is based on a simple psychological principle defined as: Three is the smallest number that can create a pattern in the human mind. One is an exception, two is coincidence and three is a pattern. In other words, if you show a customer three advantages to your product or three great reasons to buy, your customer's mind will establish a pattern and buy into it.

So, why not four? If three is good, four is better, right? Not so much. At four, the details and issues can get lost. You have made your point at three; if you go on to four, you can lose your customer's attention.

What if you cannot come up with three advantages or three ways you solve a need? My first piece of advice would be to think harder and find three. That is not always possible, so if you can only come up with one or two, they should be very good, very powerful and buttressed by customer testimonials (and if you can come up with three great testimonials, so much the better).

What all of this requires from your salespeople is mental agility. For many years, I have been presenting a session at conferences called "Smart Sales Hiring." That title has always meant that you should be smart (using your head) when hiring salespeople. Now it means more. It also means that you absolutely must hire smart salespeople. Ed who goes and talks

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football for half an hour and picks up the weekly order is obsolete. Today's customers want salespeople who not only provide value through the products and services they sell, but also through the conversations they have.

Basically, in today's sales environment, you must hire smart salespeople and then constantly train and develop them. This exercise is a great way to make your salespeople the best presenters in your market. ■

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