



# Customer Relationships

## Increasing the number that are based on loyalty

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We often hear salespeople tout themselves as “relationship salespeople.” It’s a term that should carry significant weight in the world of selling but, unfortunately, it has been watered down through excessive use and misinterpretation. When we dig deeper into what these salespeople mean by “relationship sales,” we find that the majority simply equate it to being liked by their customers, like Stuart Smalley’s affirmation on Saturday Night Live: “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and gosh darn it, my customers like me!” While being liked is undoubtedly valuable, true relationship selling involves much more than that.

To truly succeed in relationship selling, we need to consider several essential elements. At its core, relationship selling revolves around answering two key questions:

**(1) Can you monetize the relationship?** Ultimately, selling is about driving revenue and growing your business. Being liked by customers is essential, but it must translate into tangible results such as increased sales, higher profitability and customer loyalty. If we cannot turn the positive relationships we build into financial gains, then we aren’t truly engaged in effective relationship selling.

**(2) Are you getting everything you could?** Building strong relationships is not just about closing a single deal, but also about cultivating long-term partnerships. To be successful, we must ensure that we fully capitalize on the potential opportunities with our customers. If our customers are purchasing from our competitors what they could be getting from us, then we are not maximizing our relationships with them. For me, the worst thing a customer can say is, “Wow, I had no idea you did that!” — after he (or she) has bought from a competitor.

In essence, there are three distinct levels of customer relationships and most salespeople will have customers in each of these categories:

**(1) The Loyal Customer** — The Holy Grail of customer relationships, the Loyal Customer, represents the top of the mountain in relationship selling. These customers not only prefer to buy from us, but they actively resist competitors’ attempts to win their business. We have established strong connections at various levels within their organizations, maintain healthy profit margins and benefit from their positive, word-of-mouth referrals. Ideally, we should strive to convert all customers to this level of loyalty.

**(2) The Habitual Buyer** — Habitual Buyers can be deceptive, as they might initially appear to be Loyal Customers. However,



they lack the same level of loyalty and flexibility. A slight misstep or a competitor’s strategic move can quickly shift their allegiance. They grant us little leeway and might prevent us from establishing multiple contact points within their organizations. It’s crucial not to confuse Habitual Buyers with Loyal Customers, as we could be blindsided by competitors if we do.

**(3) The Occasional Buyer** — Occasional Buyers are transient and lack any consistent pattern in their purchases. They do not feel any particular affinity toward us or our competitors; we are merely a source to obtain what they need. Price often plays a significant role in their decisions. In many cases, Occasional Buyers are the result of dealing solely with purchasing agents, which highlights the drawbacks of limiting interactions to this level.

Our aim should be to have a greater number of Loyal Customers than our competitors. Moreover, we need to devise strategies to elevate Habitual Buyers to the status of Loyal Customers and convert Occasional Buyers into Habitual Buyers. Achieving this objective requires diligent effort, thorough preparation and a focused approach to the selling process. However, it also demands a level of honesty that can be uncomfortable for ego-driven salespeople (and, let’s face it, most of us are). Acknowledging that not all customers are Loyal Customers is tough, but essential for growth.

In today’s business landscape, buyers are more empowered and knowledgeable than ever before. With the abundance of information available online, customers conduct extensive research before making purchasing decisions. They are well-informed about various products and services, and they seek genuine value and solutions that align with their needs. This

heightened level of empowerment places an even greater emphasis on building meaningful and authentic relationships with customers.

To cater to this informed customer base, we need to move beyond the cliché “relationship salesperson” persona and focus on becoming true partners and trusted advisors to our clients. Here are some key strategies to achieve this:

**(1) Deepen Our Understanding** — Invest time in understanding your customers’ unique challenges, objectives and pain points. Ask insightful questions and actively listen to their responses. Tailor your solutions to address their specific needs, showcasing your expertise and commitment to their success.

**(2) Educate and Add Value** — Position yourself as a valuable resource by sharing relevant industry insights, trends and best practices with your customers. Providing valuable information not only builds trust, but also positions you as an authority in your field.

**(3) Proactive Communication** — Regularly engage with your customers beyond sales-related interactions. Keep them updated on relevant industry news, upcoming events and new opportunities that might benefit their businesses. Proactive communication reinforces your commitment to their success and fosters a stronger bond.

**(4) Customer Success Stories** — Share success stories and testimonials from other satisfied customers. Demonstrating

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your track record of delivering results and solving problems will boost confidence in your capabilities.

**(5) Continuous Improvement** — Be open to feedback and continuously strive to improve your products, services and customer experience. Act on customer suggestions and demonstrate your dedication to meeting and exceeding their expectations.

In conclusion, successful relationship selling goes beyond merely being liked by customers. It involves monetizing the

quality of the relationship, maximizing business opportunities and moving customers from Occasional Buyers to Loyal Customers. Embrace the empowered and knowledgeable customer of today by becoming a genuine partner and trusted advisor. By employing these strategies, you can forge lasting and profitable relationships that will elevate your business to new heights. Your dedication to building strong customer relationships will be rewarded with increased loyalty, higher revenues and continued success. ■

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