



Building Sales Skills

The inverse relationship between price & selling

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Sometimes I become concerned about the state of the great profession of sales. Specifically, I worry that the average salesperson is less invested in his (or her) profession and less skilled than the average salesperson from a couple of decades ago. Why? More and more, I see “cheap price” substituted for “selling skills.”

I started my sales career in 1990, selling new cars in Topeka, Kansas. As you would expect, I was not very good at first. But although the environment was pretty cutthroat, I worked hard to develop my skills. I listened to a set of tapes that the dealership had (lousy). I went to a car sales training school (not much better). Then I started reading sales books. Some of those were car-oriented (“Customers for Life,” by Carl Sewell, is still on my bookshelf and is one of the best sales books I have ever read) and some were not. What was interesting was this: I was surrounded by salespeople who did the same. We bought sales books. We read sales books. We traded sales books. And we worked hard at getting better at our profession.

I have been interviewing candidates for a client of mine. The position is highly paid and is attracting mid- and senior-level candidates. A question I often ask is: “What’s the last sales book you read?” Normally, the answer I get is either a blank stare or an honest, “I don’t read sales books.”

“OK,” I say. “How do you develop your skills?” Again, I get blank stares. I find this both concerning and disappointing, and it ties to the most frequent question I get when I speak at conventions.

The most commonly asked questions I get are how to deal with price. More specifically, it is along these lines: “Troy, I constantly have a problem with customers taking my (lower) price and using it to get their current suppliers to drop their prices. Then I don’t get the sale. How can I protect myself from that?”

Pardon me while I sigh and roll my eyes for a minute. OK, here’s my answer. There is a little secret in sales and here it is: Customers buy from who they want to buy from. If that is not you, your price does not matter. If it is you, your price might matter, but it is far from the only thing that does. If low prices are your only sales tactic, you are not a salesperson. Period.

“But Troy, all that my customers care about is a low price,” salespeople wail. Utter nonsense. If everyone was paying the absolute lowest price possible for everything, there would only be one provider of any given service in any given market. Before you think about allowing a salesperson to offer “the cheapest price,” ask yourself these questions:



- Has your salesperson asked and understood the customer’s definition of success for the purchase?
- Has your salesperson shown the customer how he can solve the customer’s needs and achieve this success?
- Has the customer agreed that your salesperson can achieve this success?
- Has your salesperson gotten the customer to explain how he sees an advantage in buying from him?

If your salesperson is not doing these things, he is not positioning himself to truly “win” sales. He is cranking out quotes and hoping they are good enough. And then he is probably complaining that the customer took his price to the supplier he wanted to buy from all along, since the salesperson did not persuade him that he would achieve a better result by buying from him instead.

Entirely too many salespeople ask a few rote questions, trying to find a common problem in their industry, and then fire off a proposal assuming this will make the sale. Most of the time it does not. It is lazy and unskilled selling.

So, how does this tie back to my original point about sales books? It is simple. The salespeople who take the time to invest in themselves, their skills and their careers are seldom the ones who ask me price-based questions. That is because they understand how to ask great questions, how to make great presentations and position themselves to truly win sales. If your people are getting wrapped around the axle about price all the time (or even if they are not), maybe it is time for them to get serious about this great profession of ours.

Have your salespeople read books and articles, and watch

videos. Get them to be serious about the art, science and skill of selling. Then, based on what they have learned, try one new skill per week. Maybe it is coming up with a new question. Maybe it is presenting in a different way. Your customers will tell you — quickly — what works and what does not.

You can drive this as a manager. Here are some easy ways to do it:

■ **Assign reading and reporting. Or, better yet, assign training.** Pick a salesperson every week and have him find a sales article that speaks to an issue he is dealing with. Then have him present it to the team and train on the key concept in the article. This can be even better than you driving the team's training.

■ **Have salespeople come up with one new question to ask customers each meeting.** Try them out in actual sales calls and report on the results the following week. You will end up with a great master list of questions.

■ **When salespeople come to you asking for a price discount, make them give you two specific reasons the customer said he would prefer to buy from your company.** If your salespeople cannot do that, do not give a discount.

Say no to bad deals. Period. Even if the salesperson comes in with a signed contract, if the deal is bad, make him go back and get more money.

■ **This might be the most important point. Say no to bad deals. Period.** Even if the salesperson comes in with a signed contract, if the deal is bad, make him go back and get more money. This is a painful experience for a salesperson and he will not want to repeat it. If you say “no” to a bad deal twice, the salesperson will train himself to get better pricing.

As I stated in the beginning, if your team members are not skilled, you will have to use giveaway pricing to get business. Why not build their skills instead? Create a culture of sales skill improvement and your job will be more profitable and more fun. ■

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