

Changing your approach to sales

Maybe the prospect isn't to blame

By Ian Hochberg

**I was giving
away my time,
my ideas and
my knowledge.**

How many of you can identify with this true story? The new manager at a car dealership—a loyal customer—called for a quote on several large banners. My first reaction was to jump at what seemed like a sure sale.

When I called in the estimate, I was told, “Thank you”. Several hours passed, then panic set in. Did I ask too much?

In anxiety, I refigured the job and called back with a lower quote. A day passed. Terror.

This was a good customer, and a good job for me. I refigured again, called once more and went lower still, fearful of losing a great opportunity.

Do you think I got the job? No.

I had given control of the sales process to the prospect. I had no idea how to sell, and it was evident. The manager probably thought I had little integrity and was at his mercy. (Years later I actually did some other work for

him, but it was in no way due to my selling ability).

After thirty years in our sign industry, I recently understood that although I am talented and industrious regarding my profession, I have much to learn about selling my skills to the marketplace.

My Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in graphic design included no training in business management or sales. I'm not a born businessman and had learned that part the hard way—on my own.

How I used to sell My old sales approach was based on being ready to produce a wide variety of signs at a moment's notice. I offered all of the free advice a prospect wanted and I was willing to spend valuable time surveying sites, providing layouts, showing samples and giving quotes—all in the hope that I might sell a sign.

If a prospect was unhappy with a quote,

I felt they were accusing me of trying to take advantage of them. I allowed myself to be manipulated into lowering my estimate.

Prospects loved my eagerness. They received valuable information, often with no intention of giving me the job. I also gave them prices or ideas to take to another sign shop to get a better deal or product.

I would discuss money and its terms in a veiled manner. This seemed like a delicate subject to be approached as discreetly as possible. As a result, my selling cycles stretched into weeks or even months. I didn't know how to close a sale. My sales approach wasn't based on any technique. At best, I was imitating what I had seen other sales people do.

Time for a change Over the years I met those who could sell just about any kind of sign to anyone. I heard about others who simply opened a sign shop, and work and wealth seemed to just flow in. What was I doing that wasn't working?

Something had to change. NOW.

I needed help developing my sales abilities. I contacted the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in Baltimore, a government agency that counsels small businesses on start up and growth. I was fortunate to have been assigned to Anthony Ruiz, a senior consultant with the SBDC. He has become an invaluable advisor and mentor.

Anthony directed me to the Sandler Sales Institute, an internationally known sales training center. (Interestingly, years earlier I produced the exterior signage for the Sandler corporate headquarters located in Baltimore. I never thought that I might become a client of theirs one day, and a believer in their methods.) He put me in touch with Don and Margie Anne Bonnett, a father/daughter team who own a local Sandler franchise in my area.

Before going on, I don't mean to say that the Sandler Sales Institute is the last word in sales training, but it is an exceptional program for me. There are others, too. The point is to

get help to make your sales approach more effective.

Sandler training begins with a personality analysis to help determine one's ability to use their sales methods. I tested out as having an "analytical" personality, meaning I need an explanation for everything, and I question concepts. Personalities such as mine tend to sometimes be rigid and inflexible. The Bonnetts were concerned, because the basic premise for success in the selling arena is to learn new behaviors. Learning these new techniques requires the willingness to not question, but to trust both the trainer and the merit of what is being taught. Then, to just go out and do it.

I'm always willing to admit when I am beaten and have a need to seek counsel. This was one of those times. I was skeptical about the idea of sales training, but ready to change my approach.

A mentor is like a coach. I would tell Don and Margie Anne about a sales challenge and they would advise me on what to do, and I tried to do it. As I started to get good results, I felt better about myself and more in control of the sales process.

A crucial aspect of this was to be accountable for my mistakes on sales calls, honestly evaluating what I did wrong, then trying to get it right the next time. It's easier to blame others for my shortcomings. However, there are no bad prospects, only bad salespeople.

I soon found I had been forcing myself on suspicious prospects, at times appearing desperate, immediately presenting all of my ideas and experience, then trying to beat them over the head to buy the sign. It's something salespeople do. Consumers have grown wary of this approach and mistrust salespeople.

The fundamentals of a new approach I've learned a new approach to sales, which puts me in control of the sales process, and leaves the prospect feeling respected and free to make choices. Every aspect of the sales

process is crystal clear. There are no hidden traps. Here's an overview that may give you some new ideas about your own approach:

■ **Encourage the prospect to say “No”.**

I explain at the outset that if they feel uncomfortable with me or if there's anything that doesn't make sense to them, they're free to say “No”. I want to earn the prospect's trust, and this helps. When was the last time a salesperson told you that if you were uncomfortable, you could just walk away from the sale?

Sound risky? The last thing I want a prospect to do is say no, right? But by encouraging them to say no, the customer knows I am not out to take advantage of them. My focus is not solely on maximizing my income—because I can take the job or leave

it. Either way it is a win-win proposition. The key to sales success is to not create a sense of pressure on the prospect. The result is the opposite of what you might think: more sales rather than less.

■ **Help the prospect realize their pain, or the emotional impact** they experience by having their signage concerns left unresolved. Rather than giving my ideas and knowledge away, I start by discussing the problems caused by not having an effective sign. Are they missing out on business? Are customers having problems finding them? Is their plain white delivery van not generating any advertising? As we discuss this, they allow me to “put them in touch with their pain”. Then I must determine if they are in enough pain to want fix their problem.

Two examples of this sales approach in action

I have had several recent successes as a result of applying these new sales techniques. One was with a wine merchant in need of establishing a unified directional signage system for the aisles in his store. He wanted to direct customers through the store in a manner that would make the shopping experience both more efficient and enjoyable.

Initially, I met with the owner and his management team. Each subsequent meeting was with the management team only, to go over details. The owner was unable to attend, in spite of my respectful requests.

The selling cycle was unresolved and stretched on for months. I phoned the owner one day, but I noticed that he sounded annoyed. I called Don, my Sandler sales counselor, for coaching, then used one of the Sandler sales techniques: I called the owner right back and told him that I sensed that he was upset with me. The basic concept I used was “If I feel something, say it, but say it nicely.” The owner replied that he was not angry, but still sounded upset. Once more, the conversation ended without resolution.

Don advised me to leave the situation alone and move on. The customer seemed not to be interested in proceeding.

A week later I received an e-mail from the owner. He was ready to go ahead if I was still interested and he apologized for the delay. Later he shared that I was very observant—he was annoyed that day, but not at me. He was frustrated that he was needed to move the process forward, rather than leaving it to his staff. I'm

producing the signs right now.

In this next case, the outcome was very different, but just as rewarding. A woman who managed a local business wanted a quote for a neon sign, similar in size to one that she had ordered some time ago. She didn't give much information regarding specs and sounded rushed. I had the sense that she was shopping for the lowest price. She then said she was from New York, and could have the sign made cheaper there.

My new sales training kicked in. In an attempt to root out her pain, I asked why she wasn't going to New York to get the sign made. Her reply came across as a half-hearted excuse. I realized I had no way of getting this job—she was going to find the lowest price, no matter what. In the past, I wasted countless hours and effort following dead leads like this. I responded with another sales technique. I explained that I am never the lowest bidder and that she might be best to find someone else to make her sign. I ended by thanking her for the opportunity, all the same.

It was rewarding to save myself all the aggravation of chasing a dead end. I told her, while reinforcing it to myself, that I am a sign professional who would take no pride in being known as the lowest bidder. Rather, I operate a sign shop known for producing a quality product with courteous, responsive service—and my quotes reflected that. —IH

■ **Get money out of the way early in the process.** I attempt to determine, in the most non-threatening manner possible, what their budget may be. I can ask, “In round numbers, would you mind sharing with me what you’d like to spend on this project?” “Round numbers” and “sharing” are softening words that can take the pressure off. Money is one of the first issues to overcome. If there is no money, why pursue it?

I’ve learned a lot I’d like to believe that there is a way to conduct business in a manner that is affirming to both myself and the customer, where trust—rather than suspicion—is encouraged. I have learned that it is best to put my efforts where they will be fruitful. It’s sometimes wiser to walk away than waste my time pursuing a dead end.

- Do I see a change in myself and my circumstances since I have begun to adopt a new means of selling? Yes.
- Do I always get the sales call right? No.
- Do the old habits live on? Yes.
- Do I make mistakes? Yes.
- Do the mistakes kill me? No.
- Do I learn from my mistakes? Yes.
- Does it take time to change? Yes.
- Do I have successes? Definitely.
- Is the effort worth it? Absolutely.
- Are things getting better? YES!

If we’ll adjust our perception we can realize we are all winners. Thanks to my sales training, I have a growing belief that if I don’t get the sale, I will gain something just as valuable from the experience: a lesson learned. That’s what counts. I ask myself, “What did I do wrong? What can I adjust for the next opportunity?”

For years I have said that the most important lessons I’ve learned in business were the ones that hurt the most. Life itself proves to be the best teacher. •❧



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