

Partnership Selling – Tips for Effective Selling

To win customers you want to “raise the bar” on your competition.

To do this you need a mindset of continuous preparation and learning. Selling is very basic to the human condition. It is a matter of problem solving that guides others to a conclusion. Thus, it has a definable process and, as those of you in sales already know, it can be both tremendously rewarding as well as frustrating at times. I encourage you to focus on trust building. Far too many sellers let-the-customer-down in small and not so small ways. When you make promises, keep them. When you offer assurances, live up to them. If you are unable to keep promises, contact your customers early and inform them. Generally, be honest, poised, exude positive expectations, and be a good listener.

Good listening is crucial to growing relationships, whether with customers or with our personal lives.

At least three important things happen when you listen: (1) The customer better understands his/her own needs and so do you; (2) Intelligent listening is more persuasive than talking; (3) You are demonstrating (by listening) that you are genuinely interested in his/her problems.

Consider the implications of these points - effective listening shows concern - and it grows trust. You need to develop skills to be a good listener. These include verbal and nonverbal actions on your part. Also, you will never be an effective listener until you take some action steps, then practice until you internalize new skills. Purposeful probing is ultimately more effective when the customer knows you are genuinely interested in THEM!

- Never answer your own queries
- Don't be afraid of silence
- Enjoy your own queries
- Dig for reasons and personal feelings behind statements
- Enjoy hearing their responses

Develop habits which will put you in top physical and mental health so you are ready to listen. Become an active listener: take notes and appropriately ask pertinent questions. I have found that one of the most valuable skills is to be an active, empathetic listener, where your customers truly know that you are keenly interested in them.

The best listeners-as-salespeople engage conversations and probing questions with great knowledge of their own company relative to competition:

- What makes you special in the marketplace?
- What do you have to offer that your competitors do not or can not provide?
- What's special about your product design?
- How or why is your delivery any faster?
- What is it about your service that sets you apart from the competition?

If you hope to win customers, you need to be able to answer this question from the customer's perspective:

Why should anyone buy from you, rather than from the other suppliers in the marketplace?

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED: Take a few minutes and write out what makes your company a unique force in the marketplace. This knowledge can mean the difference between mere survival and outstanding success. Most salespeople talk about "better quality" or "faster service" or "quick turn-around time" or "better designs" - without actually identifying their unique competitive advantage in specific terms. I recommend that sales teams should meet to discuss the unique benefits offered by your brand, putting everyone on the same page in terms of the unique advantages only your company offers.

As a partnership seller, you should always have a purpose for visiting customers.

This means that you must have a good understanding of the needs and expectations of your customers. You also need to have a clear understanding of the status of your relationship with your customers, along with up-to-date knowledge of the status of projects, pending delivery dates, etc.

An astonishing amount of time is wasted in visiting customers – both customer time and salesperson time. Do not be one of the ever-so-typical route covering salespeople.

Always have a clear objective for visits – you should not be there to simply “touch base”. Too many salespeople (and their companies) are forgettable because they simply have salespeople following a route, making visits for the sake of numbers-of-calls rather than for purposefully building relationships. Purposeful customer visits include follow-ups to see if everything is OK. For instance, Was it delivered on time?; Is it working as expected?; Are they happy with it? Are they pleased with the service?; Do they have any ideas or suggestions on how we might serve them better?

At the end of each visit, make a summary note and include promises made. Make certain that your customer has a shared understanding of what was accomplished and next steps. Then, setting up the next meeting becomes a purposeful part of the process. After all, you have set the stage for advancing the relationship.

As this suggests, have a continual account review process for each customer. As strategists, partnership sellers develop a keen awareness of customers and the relationship status for each customer. So, more effective, strategic-minded, sellers are able to answer such customer-centric questions as: Where have we been? Where are we now? Where are we going? What do we need to do to get there?

Partnership sellers seek opportunities to assess satisfaction and opportunities for improvement. This is powerful!

I urge partnership sellers to make a habit of periodically asking: *How are we doing? What could we do better?*

You must assume that if you don't have answers to these questions, your competition will. It is always better to self-expose your weaknesses than to have competitors capture customers from you. This gives you a fighting chance of making the improvements needed to keep competition from getting a foot in the door. Of course, by exposing yourself to how customers truly feel about you, you need to be prepared to LISTEN – fight the temptation to just defend yourself and your company and truly LISTEN when customers voice concerns.

Partnership sellers remain customer attentive.

Always maintain the same high level of interest and energy towards existing customers as you had before the orders started rolling in. More customers are lost due to feeling that there is little attention given to them by their vendors than for almost any other reason. When salespeople are rewarded more for capturing new business than for protecting old business, this is a common occurrence. This is a mistake of epic proportions! It is much more costly to capture new business than to keep existing business. Don't fall into this trap – after all, your competitors are giving those very same customers a lot of attention!

When you well-serve customers and they truly see you as a partnership seller, you are able to turn your customers into goodwill ambassadors. Partnership sellers are able to comfortably ask customers for testimonial letters or if they may use them as a future reference with other customers.

A final encouragement for effective partnership selling (and for life):

Demand excellence in everything you do.