

Building Strong Customer Relationships through Partnership Selling

Top salespeople understand that to compete successfully in today's markets you don't just sell to your customers...you work with your partners. Importantly, this perspective is relevant to everyone in your organization. In fact, all members of your firm should live with the understanding that their role, their very purpose, is to help your company build relationships that lead to partnerships. When conducting workshops I try to drive this importance home by giving a simple 3 question quiz. Question 1, *What is your name?*; 2, *Who is your boss?*; and 3, *Who pays your salary?* Nearly everyone gets the first question right! But, the other two? Well, you may have guessed it - the customer is my sought after answer.

This realization can be the turning point for gaining buy-in for a more united effort in winning and keeping customers. Everyone, from the janitor to the CEO is builds value for the customer. For instance, does your janitorial crew understand their key role in impression management? Does your grounds crew? Do those who answer the phone or who greet visitors to your offices? After all, first impressions leave a lasting impression of your firm. In your efforts to grow stronger more lasting relationships, you need everyone to be on the same page - with everyone striving to build value.

As this suggests, developing capabilities that enables your firm to build partnerships is everyone's job. Still, it is paramount that your sales team understands what partnership selling implies. Ultimately, your sales team needs to create a climate of trust between you and your customers, identify the real needs of your customers, and genuinely guide them to solutions that will make their business more successful. Only then will you differentiate yourself from the competition and come to be relied upon as a consultant to your customers.

The fact is... selling is hard work - but partnering demands much more.

One of the most effective ways to assess your effectiveness in building relationships is via the question: "If you were the customer, would you buy from yourself?" This requires introspection as to whether customers see you and your sales team as having many subtle yet apparent qualities including honesty, sincerity, reliability, and expertise. Importantly, do you think customers believe you have their personal welfare and well-being at heart? Yes, this suggests that in order for you to succeed, your customer should believe that you really want them to succeed. The fact is, the only way that you can know whether you are helping them succeed is by an intimate understanding of they provide their customers. You demonstrate your value by growing their value with their customers!

Becoming a partner clearly requires a lot of yourself and your people. It is not simply a matter of sending a message to the sales team that they should begin partnering. As with other skills in life, it requires ongoing training and coaching - and lots of hard work. Just

like professionals in sports, you practice throughout the year, and you continuously learn from “game days”.

Professional salespeople manage the sales process well, from initial impressions through ample preparation, to effective questioning and powerful use of listening, to consultative positioning, and through to gaining commitment. The message is that your sales team must always be in a frame of mind that is driven to advancing the relationship. Note, I did not say that the purpose of every call is to close a sale - plan your approach more strategically than that! Your goal is to develop profitable relationships through time.

Always remember, anyone can be a typical salesperson. Becoming a partner takes more.

In my next partnership selling note, I provide specific tips for more effective partnership selling.