



SELLING POINTS

ACCORDING TO STRATEGIC SALES EXPERT AND AUTHOR THOMAS FREESE, YOU MAY BE GOING ABOUT SALES ALL WRONG. HE REVEALS HIS METHOD FOR SELLING IN TODAY'S ENVIRONMENT.

BY KAREN LELAND

You're sitting down to dinner when the phone rings. It's a salesperson from your auto insurance company calling to let you know that, due to your excellent driving record, a new money-saving and easy-to-use plan is yours for the taking. Despite the promise of fewer hassles and more money, your first reaction is not likely to be, "Oh, great! Let me pass on the pasta and sign up pronto."

We live in a world where salespeople are viewed as time wasters, not problem solvers. "Over the past five years, customers have become less open and receptive and more cautious and reserved," says Thomas Freese, president of Atlanta-based QBS Research Inc. and the best-selling author of *Secrets of Question Based Selling: How the Most Powerful Tool in Business Can Double Your Sales Results*.

“PEOPLE ARE GOING TO BUY FROM THE PERSON THEY TAKE ADVICE FROM, AND WHO THEY TAKE ADVICE FROM IS SOMEONE THEY TRUST, AND WHO THEY TRUST IS SOMEONE WHO IS A THOUGHT LEADER.”

To fight the flow of consumer defensiveness and open the way for dialogue, Freese offers his approach to transforming the sales process for challenging times.

HOW DOES THE WAY WE TRADITIONALLY SELL NEED TO CHANGE GIVEN THE CURRENT ECONOMY?

“Most salespeople have been using the same methods for 30 years—they sell with an elevator pitch that characterizes their company, product and solution. In short, they follow the SPA method: S for solutions, P for problems and A for alternatives. The problem is that this way is upside-down from how customers naturally buy.”

IN WHAT WAY? “What is most important to the customer is not S, the solutions, but P, their problems. For example: At a product marketing demo, when a doctor turns to a pharmaceutical representative and says, ‘Tell me about your product,’ nothing that person can say [from their elevator pitch] is vastly different than what his or her competitors say. You need to have your selling process line up with how people make decisions, which is based on their needs, not your pitch.”

WHAT’S THE BEST WAY FOR PEOPLE TO DO THAT IF NOT THROUGH SPA? “I teach PAS. The letters and what they stand for are the same, but the order has changed. You begin by talking about what’s most important to the customers. What are their needs, concerns and problems? SPA is highly natural, but PAS is more logical.”

HOW DOES CHANGING THE ORDER ALTER THE OUTCOME? “The SPA approach answers the typical questions about what your background is and what your company does. As soon as you start talking about their problems, interests and needs—the P—the customers’ curiosity is piqued. As people become more curious, they want to engage.”

AT SOME POINT, HOWEVER, DON’T YOU NEED TO SPECIFICALLY LET THE CUSTOMER KNOW HOW YOU CAN HELP THEM? “The real skill set is gaining traction so that the customers say, ‘Wait a minute. You might be valuable and able to help me.’ The conversation changes when they start helping you to help them—which is the only way salespeople can succeed in their roles today.”

WHAT CAN A SALESPERSON DO TO GET THE CUSTOMER TO ALLOW HIM OR HER TO HELP?

“One way is to manufacture a mini-invitation. For example, saying, ‘I’m happy to tell you what we do. Can I ask you a couple of specifics about your business?’ When you ask, and customers say yes, it changes the dynamic of the conversation.”

THIS IS ONE OF THE TOOLS IN AN APPROACH YOU CALL QUESTION BASED SELLING. CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT THAT MEANS?

“Ironically, Question Based Selling is not about asking questions. It’s easy to teach people to ask questions; the skill set is causing people to want to share with you. If people do not want to share with you, it does not matter what you ask them.”

HOW CAN YOU CAUSE PEOPLE TO WANT TO SHARE WITH YOU?

“Not by trying to uncover their needs, since uncovering customers’ needs is dependent on them sharing with you, but either by them volunteering or you asking a question to uncover it. There is a layer below every issue a customer brings up. One strategy is to show thought leadership, which means bringing up issues, implications and alternatives the customer might not otherwise be focused on. People are going to buy from the person they take advice from, and who they take advice from is someone they trust, and who they trust is someone who is a thought leader.”

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO SHOW THOUGHT LEADERSHIP?

“Everyone says his or her product or company is great, but claims of greatness are frequently discounted. There is no such thing as a product or service that has only pros, no such thing as all advantage. Be willing to discuss the alternatives. Say to your customers, ‘There are two or three things I would encourage you to consider and avoid.’ Ask them, ‘Would it be valuable for me to pull back the curtain and give you the full scoop?’ Most customers’ response when you ask this is, ‘I wish you would.’”

ANY FINAL THOUGHTS ON WHAT SALESPEOPLE MOST NEED TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT SELLING IN TODAY’S MARKET-PLACE?

“Credibility gets earned, not claimed. You earn it by being customer focused. The most important thing to all customers is, ‘Do you understand my world?’ That’s what they assess from the moment the conversation begins.” ❧