

As salespeople, many of us have been conditioned to see things through our own eyes and our sales behaviors are based on these perceptions. Seeing a buy/sell relationship only through our own eyes, however, should be a thing of the past.

Faced with increasing pressure to reduce costs and increase productivity, today's buyers are more sophisticated than they once were. They are more knowledgeable, less loyal and more cautious. Given these changes, buyers will no longer simply allow you to "sell."

Instead, successful salespeople will be those who provide information and recommendations, who anticipate problems and offer solutions, who look at the sales process as long-term and provide guidance along the way. In short, the successful salesperson is the one who gets into the customer's head and applies a customer-focused selling strategy.

Buy-Knowing vs. Buy-Learning

In customer-focused selling, a salesperson sees things from the buyer's perspective and matches the sales process with the steps customers go through when making a buying decision. Instrumental in adopting this approach is understanding the two ways people buy: buy-knowing and buy-learning. Buy-knowing: when buyers believe they already know what they need to know and can make a relatively quick purchase decision, this is buy-knowing. A repeat order is an example of this.

Buy-learning: this method is more complex because it involves acquiring knowledge and weighing alternatives to arrive at the optimum choice. It is certainly the buying process of the '90s. Advances in technology, continued change and a multitude of choices means there is more risk and uncertainty for buyers. Therefore, there's a greater need to learn about the available options.

Buy-learning, as I define it, unfolds in a series of eight predictable steps: change, discontent, research, comparison, fear, commitment, expectations and satisfaction. The effective salesperson understands how to shepherd buyers through each step of the buying process to encourage them to make the purchase.

To make the customer-focused selling process easier to use, I developed a memory aid for these eight roles of selling. In the buying process, each step a buyer takes is firmly based on the preceding step. The more effective you are providing the correct information at each juncture, the better your chances of winning the sale.

The Eight Roles of Selling

1. **The Student.** For the change step in buy-learning, you take the role of a student and study how changes are affecting your prospects and find opportunities where you can add value. To make larger and more profitable sales, you must find bigger and more significant needs. The prospects' potential value to you will determine how much time you devote to learning about them.
2. **The Doctor.** Your role as a doctor is to ask questions that diagnose your customers' discontent and uncover their needs. Discontent occurs with prospects recognize that where they are now is not where they would like to be. A problem or an opportunity can cause discontent, and it is critical to look at both. As a doctor, you diagnose what ails your prospects, and identify the complications that are likely to affect the prospects if they do nothing to resolve their discontent.
3. **The Architect.** Here, your role is to design unique solutions that simplify your customers' research steps while setting the ground rules in your favor. Help them by translating their tangible concepts of what they need into more definite buying criteria.

To move from a general concept to a specific plan, you can use the same four steps an architect uses:

1. Understand the client's intangible concept of need.
 2. Determine the must-have requirements necessary to achieve the concept.
 3. Refine the concept by identifying "nice-to-haves."
 4. Determine the relative importance of each nice-to-have to the client.
4. The Coach. As your prospect compares your offering to that of the competition, your goal is to defeat your opponents without cutting price. A coach gains competitive advantage through analysis and insight, then executes a winning game plan.

The steps that will help lead you to victory include:

1. Analyze your strengths and weaknesses in comparison to those of your competitors.
 2. Develop a game plan to positively position yourself against the competition.
 3. Demonstrate your superiority on the playing field with a great sales proposal and presentation.
5. The Therapist. The therapist draws out fears and helps resolve them. The closer people get to making a major commitment, the more they focus on the future consequences. Be on the lookout for indications that the prospect is getting nervous. To detect fear, you must be sensitive and observant. Take time to review how things are going. Is anything out of the ordinary happening?

Once you have detected fear, you must determine its source. This is not always easy and may require a bit of risk on your part. Raise the issue if you think it is causing fear and help your prospects by weighing options and discussing alternatives.

6. The Negotiator. The goal here is to reach a mutual commitment to open a relationship, not to hammer close the sale. Negotiation is a discussion designed to reach an agreement between parties who share some interests but are at odds on others.

Here are some key points to consider as you negotiate the commitment:

1. Prepare to negotiate by determining what you want from the agreement and by generating a list of high value concessions other than price.
 2. Reach agreement by clearly identifying your customers' interests, determining areas of agreement, and creating win-win solutions to resolve differences.
 3. Ask for commitment in a non-manipulative way.
7. The Teacher. Immediately after the customer buys, the salesperson helps the buyer get a clear understanding of his or her expectations and to know when and if value has been achieved. Salespeople can help on both fronts by adopting the role of a teacher.

First, in customer-focused selling, the objectives agreed upon must be realistic and measurable. Once these goals are set, it is up to you to manage your customers' expectations and teach them how to attain their objectives. The key here is to make sure your customer knows how to use your product or service properly. Test for value to make sure your offer provides what you said it would.

8. The Farmer. The role of the farmer is to cultivate satisfaction and to grow the account. Today, companies striving to be the best have made customer satisfaction and retention their cornerstone business strategy. To survive and thrive, you must get closer to your customer, not just during the sales process, but after it as well. Your customers form a perception of satisfaction based on four factors: value achieved; product quality; service quality; and price.

The challenge to salespeople is that while customers may be satisfied with all or some of these points today, their opinions may change tomorrow. Cultivating a good relationship with customers will pay benefits again and again down the road.

As customers become increasingly sophisticated, successful salespeople will be those who modify their sale strategy accordingly. Customer-focused selling means you must get into your customers' heads, finding out what they are thinking and why, and get your sales process in sync with customers' buying process. That is customer-focused selling. Give it a try, and you'll certainly win more sales and give your competition fits!