

Selling is NOT an Art but a Process

By Roger Bostdorff

We have all met individuals that we or others have labeled “natural born salesman.” Although some personalities have characteristics that may help a person more easily adopt practices of a good salesman, in reality there are no natural born salesman because sales is not an art, but a process. The definition of a process is that it is definable, repeatable, and measurable; can be taught and therefore, can be learned. Many of the so called natural born salesmen are utilizing parts of this process without knowing it. The point is that you don’t have to be born with this gift, but rather can be taught how to be a good salesman. To be a successful salesman you need to understand the six parts of a successful sales cycle and then be able to execute each of these parts successfully. The six parts are as follows...

1. Opening
2. Build Rapport/Relationship
3. Create/Understand the Customer’s Needs
4. Show How Your Solution Meets the Customer’s Needs
5. Close
6. Follow-up

1. Opening-

Long before you ever open a sales call the salesman needs to do his homework. He needs to learn about the Industry of the customer or prospect he is calling on. What are the challenges of this industry? How can you help? He needs to do research on the Company he is about to call on and, if at all possible, on the person he is going to be talking with. What are the issues this person probably is dealing with that you can assist? The internet is a great tool here.

The salesman should have a primary and backup objective for this call. Is the objective to get a follow-up appointment, to collect data, to build the business case? Is the objective to get a commitment for a demonstration? Without a target objective how can we evaluate the success of the call? Secondly, a defined objective insures that we are not wasting our time and even more importantly, the customer’s time. If you do not have an objective for EVERY call then you increase your odds of being unsuccessful and stretching out the sales cycle.

When you make the call start with introducing yourself and what your company does. Sounds pretty simple doesn’t it. Try it aloud and see how you sound. Is it smooth? Or did you stumble? Rehearse this before you make the call. Get very comfortable with this opening. You should have an opening that briefly describes who you are and what you do. Presenting this smoothly conveys confidence. People want to do business with someone that knows what they are talking about, and confidence helps convey that perception.

You then move into why you are there. Are you there to sell something? Nope!! You are there to help your customer. You and the products or services that you sell have helped many others similar to him and you want to insure that he too can have the benefits that you have to offer. Remember that you only get one chance to make a first impression. So make it positive!! Secondly, when you are practicing make sure you are smiling.

For the new salesman, it is natural to be nervous. However, it is not natural to be smiling and be nervous so practice smiling while you are practicing your opening. . Build that confidence as you practice.

For the experienced salesman, practice your opening in front of a mirror or at least out loud. Do you sound enthused? Do you sound confident? Or do you sound monotone and unenthusiastic? Are we just going through the motions or are we driven? Are you excited about what you do? About the product or services you have to offer? About how you can help your customer?? Many times we fall into a rut and not realize it, but customers can tell. Practicing talking aloud will allow us to determine if we still are putting our best foot forward in our calls. Smiling also displays confidence and enthusiasm. The product or service you are offering will help your client. That should make you enthused to be talking to your customer or prospect about what you have to offer. Think about the customers you have helped and how they feel about you. Feels pretty good doesn't it? We should strive to create that feeling for us every time and be excited about that possibility each time we talk with a customer or prospective customer.

2. Building Rapport/Relationship

When I was a Marketing Manager for IBM in Cleveland I had a Salesman who worked for me that was better at this part of the sales cycle than any salesman I have ever seen. I always told him that he could get someone to like him and trust him in 20 minutes. As I write this I am not talking about insincere interest. I am talking about finding out about the customer you are talking with so you can connect and make a friend.

You will need to be paying attention. What is going on in his office? Does he have pictures of the kids, family? Ask questions regarding something he is displaying. He is proud of whatever he has displayed in his office. Take an interest and get to know your customer. Do you know any of the same people? What High School/College did he attend? What does he do for a hobby or outside interest? You are trying to make a connection. Remember that customers or prospects buy from people they like and trust.

What about the salesman in Cleveland? He, with his family, made polish sausage at Christmas and his customers each got a gift of homemade polish sausage for Christmas. He continues to be VERY successful because he cares about his customers and they know it. How are you showing that you care about your customers? Remember that people buy from whom they like and trust, sounds like a description of a friend doesn't it.

3. Create/Understand the Customer's Needs

You walk into the Doctor's office and before you say a word and before he asks any questions the Doctor prescribes surgery. How are you feeling about now? Are you

asking yourself, “How can that Doctor know what’s wrong with me without talking to me or checking me out”? Upset yet? Is selling any different?

How many times have you had a salesman begin selling his product without understanding what you are looking for and why you are looking for it? You need to uncover the issue or challenges that the customer needs help with before you prescribe your solution. How do you do that?

You need to get the customer talking and you do this by asking open ended questions. These are questions that cannot be answered with one word answers, but rather that allows, even begs the customer to describe the status of the situation. Questions such as...

- Mr. Customer, What Issues/Challenges Are Keeping You Up At Night?
- Mr. Customer, What are your 3 biggest challenges? Top priority?
- Mr. Customer, What Are You Trying to Accomplish?

The above questions are ones that can identify the need or issues of the customer. You will need to tailor these questions to the area of the business that you can positively impact. However, zero in on these areas and you are off to a good start relative to understanding the needs of your customer and how you can help.

We move to questions similar to the ones below...

- How Are You Accomplishing The Job/Task Today?
- Why Do You Want To Change?
- What Bad Things Occur If You Do Not Change?
- What Good Things Happen if You Do Make the Change?

These questions not only help create/understand the need but also are gathering data that will help you justify your solution and get the customer to move on your proposal.

Besides understanding what your customer wants to do, you need to gather financial benefits as well. **Please picture a scale with two platforms. The upright part of the scale represents an equal sign in an equation. Remember back to your days of Algebra, what ever happens on the left of the equal sign must happen on the right to solve the equation. You will be delivering a proposal or solution that has the cost on the left hand side of the equation or scale. This cost is in \$\$.** Every salesman does this every time. **Do you have a similar or greater \$\$ amount on the other side of the equation or scale representing the benefits? Most salesmen do not do this. If you don’t, you run the risk of either not getting the business or worse yet, the customer delaying making a decision. Drive for a decision by quantifying whenever possible the benefits in \$\$ to offset the cost. In simple terms, if the benefits are greater than the cost then this is a good business proposition. If not, the customer should not do it. However, if the customer and you have quantified the benefits and they are greater than the cost there should be very few reasons to wait or delay.**

The following questions will further qualify the opportunity.

- How much do you have in your budget?
- When Do You Want to Implement?
- What Is The Timeframe for Your Decision?

- Who Besides Yourself Needs To Be Involved In This Decision Cycle?
- Others??

We want to understand what they have in mind. If your product or service cost is \$100K and they are only willing to spend \$25K then you may be wasting your time and theirs. However, if above we have quantified with the customer that the benefits are greater than \$100K does it really matter that your price is at this level as long as your value cannot be delivered by your competition? Remember that value is not just a similar product but the whole picture including your added value in helping this customer quantify the benefits.

When is the customer going to make this decision? Are they talking about making this decision or implementing the solution now? This will tell you where to put this on your priority list. If they are NOT planning on doing it now, can the justification move your proposition up on the priority list?

Finally, who needs to be involved to make this happen? To reduce your sales cycle you want to deal with the decision maker or as close to that person as possible. You are the salesman, you do this every day. You should know your solution and benefits better than a person working for the decision maker at your prospect or customer. You should be a better salesperson than the person between you and the decision maker. Thus your odds of success increase if you are talking with the decision maker directly.

4. Show How Your Solution Meets the Needs of Your Customer

By now in the sales process you have gathered the needs of the customer and quantified the benefits of your solution. You have even quantified those benefits in \$\$\$. Now you need to convince the customer that your solution can actually deliver results to take care of the customer's needs.

There are many different ways to do this.

a. Reference Sell-There is probably another customer of yours that had similar challenges that were solved via your product or service. If your solution helped this other customer out then that customer should want to not only help you out but also be favorable towards talking about his GOOD decision that he made by doing business with you. I used to work with a salesman that when asked who his competition was he would reply, "no one." The first time he did this with me in the meeting I was thinking that he was awfully brash to make that comment. However, he followed that comment with, "please call Mr. X at the XYZ Company and ask him if I have any competition." This salesman had done such an outstanding job for Mr. X that Mr. X always told the prospective customer that based on the salesman's caring, attention to detail, creativity and follow-up that the salesman was right, he had NO competition."

b. Demonstration-Dependent upon what you are selling, a demonstration may be most applicable. Your prospective buyer gets a chance to see you demonstrate your product. If you can do a really impressive demonstration then you create significant credibility with your prospective customer. I have seen demonstrations bomb because of hardware failure but usually if they bomb it is because the salesman did not collect the requirements of the customer and display/talk to the solution of those requirements in the demonstration.

c. The best way to show that your solution hits the target is to combine a and b. Take your prospective customer to an installed or established customer site and let your installed customer do the demonstration. What normally happens is the customer really does not need to see the demonstration but rather talk to the customer at the customer site. Credibility at it's highest!!

d. For some products or services a favorite approach is do a free trial. If you have a quality product or service a high odds of getting the business approach may be to let the customer try it for a period of time. While President of an Internet Security Company we implemented a strategy that if we can get the customer to try our service they will not want to ever operate without it. We implemented a very strong customer service approach that provided significant hand holding for set up and questions. Our technical team did a great job of having the system quantify the benefits. For example, each day our system quantified the amount of Spam messages that our service captured thus freeing up bandwidth and computer server capacity. This did not even include the most important benefit of added productivity of not having to deal with all of this junk email. Once the customer experienced the service with documented quantifiable benefits it was very difficult for them to not say that we did not deliver the results that we predicted. We confirmed both sides of the scale!! The benefits FAR outweighed the investment or cost.

5. Close

When I first was a salesman I was working harder than any salesman in the office. I did more demonstrations, created more proposals, invested more hours, etc. than any rep around. However, NO ORDERS!! I finally asked the salesman next to me in the bullpen, who was closing many orders his secret. He acknowledged that I was working and doing much more than he, but had I asked the customer for the order? Or, had I asked what I had to do to earn the business. A light bulb went on. I was doing triple summersaults, double back flips, in essence doing all that I could imagine I needed to do to win the business. However, I was NOT asking the customer, after building the business case, what I needed to do to win the business. Think about this, I was doing 22 things when maybe only 3 were critical. Also think about the fact that the 22 I was doing may not have even included the 3 that were most important. This is the biggest reason the sales cycles are many times too long.

This makes too much sense. Why don't salesmen ask for the order? Why don't they ask what it will take to earn your business? The reason is the salesman is afraid that the customer may say, "NO." They may find out that they really are not the decision maker or that this really is not a legitimate opportunity. The salesman does not want to have his prospective customer tell him he is not going to buy!!

Remember that "NO" is the 2nd best answer you can get because now you can ask why not and get to the meat of the situation. Are they real or just kicking tires? If they are real, let's get to the issues. If they are kicking tires, let's politely move on and invest our time on real opportunities.

The sooner in the sales cycle we ask this question, the less time we will need to invest in the sales cycle.

6. Follow-up

I need to have some carpentry work done on my house. I sought two bids on the work. The first person that came out indicated that he would be back to me within 10 days with an estimate. Ten days came and went; I ran into the 1st contractor casually and asked him when I could expect his bid. He told me that this coming weekend he would deliver it. The weekend came and went. I finally called him on Tuesday of the following week and told him I was ready to make a decision. He brought out his bid.

Concurrently, I called a 2nd contractor. The 2nd contractor came out two days later and had a bid in my hands within 3 days after that.

I have not told you yet the price. If the prices are close who would you want to do business with??

Follow-Up and Follow-thru is critical during and after the sale is made. How many times has someone told you he was going to do something and then did not follow thru? How do you then feel about that individual? No longer high on the credibility list? Let's make a friend instead.

This is not what a friend does or they won't be a friend for long. The same thing can be said about a customer or prospective customer. If you tell the customer or prospect that you are going to do something, then get it done and on a timely basis. By the way, when you do this the customer feels obligated, assuming he has a legitimate need, to get the requests that you have made of him, done as well. If they are not doing their part (i.e. gathering the data you need to tailor your solution) then it is another qualifying indicator that this may not be a legitimate opportunity. Trust me when I tell you that this will indeed set you apart from many competitors.

What about after the sale? Within the sales process a salesman makes comments and commitments relative to what your product or service will do. How about putting in a call or stopping in to see if all is going as planned or if they are having any issues during the install or after delivery of the solution? There has been many a follow-up sales call where I dropped in, found out that my customer was having a minor issue in my mind but a major one in theirs. A telephone call solved their problem. The customer felt that I REALLY cared about them, and I did. Yet the effort to do this was minimal. What do you think they said when we asked for a reference? How about them providing you a lead? You want your friends to be successful and so do they!!

Remember that all customers buy, the satisfied ones continue to buy from you and tell others about your good service. The dis-satisfied customers also buy, but from your competition as well as SCREAM to high heavens about how they feel about your poor service.

In summary, remember that Sales is a process. It is definable, repeatable, and measurable. It can be learned as well as taught. If you and/or your sales team execute properly the 6 Steps in a Successful Sales Cycle your Sales will increase, your customer satisfaction will improve and you will have more success as a salesperson. Selling is a very challenging career but also one of the most rewarding careers personally as well as financially.

Good luck and good selling!!

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