

Take the Order, And Run!?

By Roger Bostdorff

Many years ago I was on the Regional Sales Support team for IBM out of Southfield, Michigan. One of the branches that I supported was in Indianapolis. We had a sales representative in that branch that I was working with by the name of Henry. I was the so called “Hot Shot” from the Region that went to Indianapolis to help these mere mortal sales representatives improve.

One day, while I was near Henry’s desk, he received a telephone message that a prospective customer had called in to buy a computer system. We had the company’s name and the name and phone number of the caller. My reaction was, make the call, get the address and see when we can go pick up the order. Let’s get moving!!

Henry had a very different approach. He called the customer and found out that the caller was actually the President of the company, and he indeed wanted to buy a computer. I have by now put my coat on grabbed the contracts and am half way out the door. However, Henry is still talking and by the way, trying my patience. Didn’t he know that we were delaying a sale? What kind of turkey was this guy Henry? The next question really made me think that this guy Henry was losing it. Henry asked the customer why he wanted to buy a computer. Can you believe this, a company wants to spend thousands of dollars with IBM and rather than take the order we want to have the customer think about it longer and potentially change his mind.

I continued to be frustrated as the conversation continued. The customer had an inventory problem he needed to solve. He thought he had too much money invested in inventory but he had no good way to control it. Henry asked him how many \$\$ he had invested in his inventory? Is he nuts? These types of questions could tick off the customer. Let’s just go get the order!! The customer answered the question and went on to answer the question “How many \$\$ could you reduce your inventory investment by if you had better controls? By the time Henry was done we knew not only what model computer system the customer needed but also why he wanted it and what the projected ROI was for this investment. It was then that we grabbed the contracts and went out and got the order. However, the next week the brother and co-owner of this company called a meeting with Henry, the President and I. The brother was concerned about spending this much money. Henry calmly took out his notebook with the notes regarding the inventory issues and the payback and went thru them with the brothers. When Henry was done the two brothers were more excited than ever and wanted to know how soon the computer could be delivered! . The “Hot Shot” was humbled!

What did I learn? I learned that to get an order and keep it we need to understand the business reasons to make the investment, the customer’s pain points. The investment needs to be less than the benefits to make it a good business decision. Had we gone out to get the order without gathering the needs and quantifying those needs we surely would have celebrated one week and lost the order the following week.

By the way, Henry later started his own business, built it up and sold it for approximately \$20 Million. You tell me who the real Hot Shot was?

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