

Building Relationships: Emerging as a Business Adviser

We're all selling something, whether we realize it or not. If you own a remanufacturing business, you are selling more than your toner, cartridges and other equipment. In fact, you're selling an image, a company and, hopefully, a whole lot of service.

The salespeople are also selling more than meets the eye. They are selling the company with each encounter. And even the service techs, much as they may balk at the thought, are selling. The techs, through their demeanor, observations and conversations, are selling future purchases that will keep your business solvent. They are selling longer-term service contracts.

And they, too, are selling a corporate image. Let's not forget the frontline folks; they are also selling. They sell every aspect of the business each time they interact with customers and prospects. So why do so many people want to pretend sales is a dirty word?

Part of the reason people don't want to be thought of as "salespeople" is because of the stereotypical image of the cigar-chewing, polyester-clad, slick-talking salesman of days gone by. No one trusted this character. He was known for his duplicity. He'd say or do anything just to close the deal. He had no scruples — he'd knowingly sell a lemon and pretend to be surprised when the customer complained. But we know he's just a stereotype, a fictitious composite of the absolute worst characteristics — an exaggeration.

Changing the image of sales and the selling process is tough. Cultivating selling skills in employees who don't view themselves



as salespeople requires hard work. However, doing both will help recession-proof your business.

Image Building

Begin with image enhancement. How do you get employees and customers to see the dignity in selling? You do this by returning the dignity to the entire sales process. That means that whether you own the company, manage the sales function or are a sales rep, you have to assume responsibility for conducting yourself in a manner that bespeaks credibility, integrity, commitment and sincerity. This compels you to give customers the straight scoop about products and services. This

means that you, the salesperson, won't make promises the rest of the organization can't keep. And, it also means that your communication will be clear, concise and free of the embellishments that border on untruths.

Returning dignity to the selling process requires more than the aforementioned behavioral changes. It also requires a relational approach to customers and coworkers. This means that you will put their interests and well being at the top of your priority list. Reordering priorities requires you to spend time building bridges with colleagues and clients. "Why bother?" You may say. Well, remember that your colleagues are the ones who deliver on your promises. It behooves you to facilitate smooth relations with those folks. And, here's another thing to consider: Making nice with the service techs can only help you in the long

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run. They will spend more time on-site with customers than you will. That means that they can be on the lookout for more opportunities to sell products, equipment, supplies, etc.

The Business Adviser

There are multiple reasons for taking a relational approach to customers and prospects. First, if you successfully establish yourself as a business adviser, customers will be more apt to call you to discuss their issues, problems and concerns. That gives you the opportunity not only to better understand their business and strategies, but also to make suggestions that will ultimately benefit your company. One unstated component of the adviser role is the ability to ask questions that get at the heart of the customers' needs. Find out what the customers' business issues are, what is going on in their industry, and what the threats are that could render their business obsolete. All of this information will help you be a better adviser.

A relational approach to customers means that you will not encourage them to buy more than they need and that you have thorough knowledge of exactly what those needs happen to be. This relational approach also leans toward education and guidance. In this role, salespeople help customers compare, evaluate and examine their buying options.

This informational function of a relational approach is important not just for the official salespeople, but also for anyone in the company who interacts with customers. Everyone should be able to share information about the full range of products, services and supplies. Each and every employee ought to be able to engage the customers in some level of discussion about different things that the company offers, things that may benefit customers' businesses. This means that everyone from the administrative assistant to the accounting clerk to the service tech should be able to talk about the complete range of products. Everyone in the enterprise is responsible for relationship building.

Employees' efforts at relationship building will be enhanced if they understand the fact that people make purchases considering both the technical aspects of the product

and the emotional aspects of their encounters with the company. Creating the right feel and reputation will give you an edge in the sales process. But, that's not enough. There are three more strategies that you can use to strengthen relationships with clients and prospects:

1) Create opportunities to connect. We often think that the sales call is the primary vehicle for connecting with clients. It isn't. When we focus on building relationships, we realize that there are all sorts of other avenues for building connections. Consider serving on industry task forces or volunteering within your industry association. Prospects will get to see you regularly, respect your commitment to the larger industry and begin to consider you a valuable resource.

2) Share resources about products and services. Consider yourself a vehicle for client education. Learn about related ancillary products and services that would benefit key clients' operations. Educate yourself on any other issues that may impact their bottom-line. Once you've studied these topics, share that information with clients. Send them articles, books, tapes and other sources of useful information. Be sure to send things periodically so that they actually get noticed. Also, be certain that the information you send is both relevant and interesting to the prospect. Unless you are absolutely sure that you share the same sense of humor, don't send cartoons and jokes. This can actually backfire — they can wind up thinking you're a goofball.

3) Acknowledge personal and professional milestones. Celebrate your clients' successes. Be well informed about their corporate and personal milestones. Remember those occasions with cards and small gifts. And, by the same token, let your clients know when you've accomplished something significant, whether it's salesman of the quarter, receipt of a new certification or license, or the birth of a child. Keep them informed of your progress. Focusing on the human element goes a long way in building rapport.

Use the strategies outlined in this article to build strong bridges with clients and prospects. Remember, relationship building is the job of every employee in your company. Everyone plays a part in creating the image that gets you repeat business and referrals. Create that image by being more than just a salesperson — become a business adviser! **R**

Joanne Smikle will teach
"Sales and Service: A Winning
Combination" and "Improve-
ment, Innovation & Ingenuity:
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