

Needs-Based Selling 2011

Selling directly to consumers is tougher than ever. People are uncertain about the future and that makes them uncertain about everything. They buy slowly, and they shop around so every sale takes longer. Add to that the magic of the Internet. Everybody gets 'educated' online. They have access to enough information to be completely confused or really dialed-in. Either way, they want to drive the bus. People under 45 aren't going to sit around the kitchen table while the sales guy goes through his pitch-book like a slideshow of his trip to the county library. Customers can see tons of product information and pricing. But not all information is created equal—some is accurate, some turns out to be more marketing than fact. The same Internet that shows them the Cadillac service of one supplier, offers the budget service of another in a way that makes it hard to recognize the difference. The old sales idea was solid. Sit a potential customer down and educate them on the ins and outs of the business—show them the value in our products so they understand the prices. Still a good idea, but today we have to meet them where *they* are. We talk about what they're interested in or whatever they know (or believe they know).

By Don Akers

agree that when it comes to an important decision where they are not experts, they

do want help *buying*. They want someone they can trust to give them advice so they can make the best decision for themselves. They want you, their salesperson, to spend time on the topics they care about, even if *you* don't think it's important. By being more professional in our planning and approach, we create needs-based selling. We ask better questions so we get better information quicker. We pay attention to the customer and focus on the areas they care about. We have to be crystal clear when we explain our offer. Finally, we have to relax in the knowledge we will win more business by being better professionals and practicing our craft.

A new way to train

I've been teaching these skills to business-to-business salespeople since 1998. Matt Wirth, an expert at growing sales for water dealers with over thirty years experience in water treatment, says the best salespeople follow a needs-based approach, but new rep training is intended to get them selling in just a few days. "They have to focus on features and benefits so they remember what to say. It's only later that the top people figure out how to sell to people like an advisor." In 2008, we created a system specifically for water treatment with input from Wirth, Mike Schaefer, Bryan Bayford, David Grant and other dealers. Needs-based selling teaches salespeople who know their products and customers how to accelerate their results. It teaches sales and service people how to make the customer feel heard and close more sales.

Paul Imhoff of Always Soft Water attended one of our training sessions last summer in Minneapolis, MN. He wrote: "Right after attending your training, I was going to install a unit for a customer. The neighbor met me in the driveway and asked if I could look at his home. After getting permission from my scheduled client, I asked the neighbor the Hi Impact™ questions you taught us. After forty-five minutes, he stopped and said, 'Just give me what my neighbor has. Our houses are the same size, but give me something extra so mine is a little better than his.'" Imhoff never made a recommendation. He never mentioned prices. He never opened his pitch-book. This gentleman decided Imhoff was the right guy because he listened. Needs-based selling is not about smoke and mirrors; it's about establishing trust, asking better questions, communicating clearly, and making it easy for the customer to choose us.

Keys to needs-based selling

Like any important business activity, selling involves a definite process. Every time we interact with a customer, our level of influence is determined by how we are able to execute each of the following keys:

Trust: Establish rapport quickly and systematically build trust. Trust is the grease that makes the gears turn. This is not an abstract concept; people read our body language before they hear our words. How we stand, sit, move and talk in relation to the customer directly affects their level of trust.

Listen: Sure you've heard this before, but this time, really *get it*. Listening is not just understanding what the customer wants but more importantly, making them feel heard and respected.

What doesn't work

Three years ago, I was a water treatment customer; I know firsthand that some salespeople will talk for two hours without ever asking a single question. Someone dropped a card at my house, good for a free dinner with a demonstration and I was in. The sales guy went through his pitch-book one page at a time. He covered company history, products, insurance, pictures of the team, equipment and happy customers smiling with the equipment, even information on the competition. The guy went on for two hours. Near the end, it seemed like a war of attrition. Either I buy, or I fall asleep in my chair. If you've ever had someone cancel a sale the next morning, you might have stayed too long. (We've all done it at some time so 'it never happened to me' is more fallacy than fact.) He was a nice guy and he represented his company well. But the amount of information was exhausting, including things I didn't care about at all. He told me about pending legislation in California, which had no relevance for me. I've had several softeners in different houses. I have a degree in engineering (which makes me particularly self-absorbed), so information on adjusting the recharge cycle to match usage isn't impressive.

But I do want to know about valve repair, warranties and maintenance. But *he* wasn't interested in that; he gave me a brochure to read instead. Eventually he tested the water, shot me a price for the good one and a lower price for the still-good-but-not-as-good one and asked which I wanted to buy. I said, "I'm not ready yet, I'm just starting to look." His response? "Okay. Good-bye."

What does work

I really did want a water softener, but after the long pitch, I had too much information to make a decision. Even worse, I felt like he didn't care about what I needed, since he never asked. I eventually got a softener and RO from a manufacturer in partial payment for sales training.

Here's the truth: our surveys indicate people have a generally negative impression of salespeople. There is 100-percent agreement that no one wants to be *sold* anything. But customers

These are the first and most important steps in building trust. When a customer feels heard, they listen to us.

Let them drive: Each customer is different. Some want lots of information quickly, some not quite as much information and a little slower. Some want to shop; some want to haggle. Once we let go of the need to control the sale and give the customer the information they want, in the order they want it, and at a speed they're comfortable with, they stop feeling pressured and start feeling cared for.

Ask high-impact questions: We don't have time to talk about everything, so our questions must be clear enough to get the information we need and help the customer have a broader understanding of the subject. Asking, "How much do you want to spend," is not nearly as revealing or useful as, "When you buy appliances for your home, what is most important to you?"

Stay on target: Once we know what the customer cares about, we have to be practiced enough to speak to each of their concerns and resist the temptation to talk about what we think is most important. If the customer wants eco-friendly and we think warranties are important, we'll never have their full attention and they'll question if we really have their best interest at heart.

Be crystal clear: When we make our offer it has to be clear, short, and easy to understand. If our offer is what they want but they don't understand it, their confusion will make them question everything we have said. Practice stating your value propositions in no more than two sentences.

Avoid pointless questions: Customers will sometimes ask sideline questions such as, "Does this come in red?" The best answer to a pointless question is a question. For example: "Do you want it in red?" By asking a question about the question before we answer, we find out how much information to give them and avoid getting into a long conversation that leads nowhere.

Close right: The Huthwaite Group reports that every time we try to close before the customer is ready, our chances of closing drop by 25 percent. Mistime your closing four times and statistically you'll never close that customer. Know what the buying signals are and how to close when you see them. Use an assumptive close that leaves the door open if they aren't ready yet.

The market has changed. Customers are demanding to be heard and included in the buying process. The sooner we get up to speed and let the customer drive, the easier it is to get them on board as loyal customers. By keeping their attention on the buyer and what they want, the top one percent of consumer salespeople close more sales at better margins, and they close faster. The good news? *You* can do it.

About the author

◆ *Don Akers, Principal at Water Pro Development, has consulted, coached, trained and spoken for an 'A-list' of America's businesses including Shell Oil, State Farm Insurance, Merrill Lynch, UBS Paine Webber, VAM Drilling and Administaff. Since speaking for Hellenbrand in 2008, his programs have received rave reviews at WQA, EWQA and the South Atlantic Well Drillers Association annual meetings. This month, Akers will speak at WQA Aquatech 2011 in San Antonio, TX. Akers's clients include Hellenbrand, Schaefer Water, The Water Doctor, Culligan of Rockland NY, family-owned businesses, sales teams, CEOs and Olympic athletes. His water-industry-specific, customer-focused sales ideas and professional values-based training have made him a recognized expert on how to influence customers and win more business. Akers can be reached at don@waterprodevelopment.com www.waterprodevelopment.com*