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### Handling Objections: Part One “An Ounce of Prevention”

One of the biggest challenges in writing a monthly column like this for more than a decade is coming up with fresh subjects to cover. Therefore, when I am doing a conference or doing consulting work, I always ask salespeople what they want me to cover. Invariably, the first thing I hear is, “*Objections, we need help handling objections!*” Objections are a fact of life for anyone who makes their living selling anything. If the truth be told, objections are the reason that the world needs sales people. If there were no objections, companies could just send out order forms, sort of a symbiotic relationship with objections, much like lions and gazelles. Individual gazelles hate lions but they need them, if there were no lions the gazelles would soon eat all the grass and disappear. Likewise, the lions wish the gazelles would just stand there and not run away when it was time for the lion’s lunch. The swiftness of the gazelles keep the lions fit and sharp, they must work for every meal they get. Handling objections keeps salespeople sharp, objections provide an opportunity to learn about their prospect’s concerns and how to demonstrate the value offered by their products. In this month’s, Link and Learn, we look at objections, overcoming them and preventing them.

The dictionary defines “objection” as “1) A reason or argument, offered in disagreement, opposition, refusal, or disapproval. 2) A feeling of disapproval, dislike or disagreement.” Anyone who has spent more than twenty minutes as a sales person may have a few more words to add to this definition. Unpacking this definition offers some insights into handling objections. At its core, an objection is a disagreement between two people. The sales person feels that advertising in their paper will produce more than enough revenue to justify the purchase and the prospect is not so sure. Theoretically, countering an objection is a simple matter of providing evidence of your product’s value to convince the prospect to change their mind. This is where we run into the second part of the definition, a “feeling” of disapproval. We like to think of ourselves as a logical thoughtful species, but we are much more like Captain Kirk than Mr. Spock. Psychologists have found that our emotions play a much larger role in the human decision making process than most of us are willing to admit. Our emotions hold veto power over our decisions. This is why customers will still say no when all the facts support a decision to purchase the proposed program. On the flip side, people almost never go against their “gut.” Even when faced with an overwhelming preponderance of data to the contrary, we seldom will make a decision that doesn’t “feel” right to us. We must win both the “hearts” and the “minds” of our prospects if we want them to buy from us.

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A study conducted by Huthwaite Inc. found a direct relationship between the number of objections offered by a prospect and the success of a salesperson calling on them. This is not surprising, but the Huthwaite study also found that the skill of the salesperson in countering the objections had no impact on the outcome of the call. They found that rather than countering customer objections, the most successful salespeople were able to prevent objections during the sales call. The Huthwaite study, which was conducted by observing thousands of sales calls, found that the most effective sales people employed a strategic approach to selling. They used a proactive approach which nipped objections in the bud by addressing the customer's concerns before they came up during the call.

Money may not be the root of all evil, but it is the root of all objections. If we were in the business of giving advertising away, every edition of our papers would all be about a foot thick. Going into a call, a salesperson's goal is to get the prospect to spend their money on an ad and the prospect's goal is to hold on to their hard-won cash. This does not mean that prospects are unwilling to spend their money, it means that they need to believe that it will be well spent. To "believe" means that they not only "know" (in their head) that buying advertising is a good idea, but they also "feel" (in their gut) that they are making the right decision. As salespeople, we are under a lot of pressure to "get it done," to close the sale, to achieve our sales goals. On a call, we are impatient to know if we are going to make the sale. I've observed thousands of sales calls as a manager and sales trainer. The most common mistake I've seen salespeople make is trying to close before the customer was ready to buy. This is a critical error. Once you have thrown out a price and the customer has said, "NO!", it is extremely difficult to get them to change their mind. Clever prospects know this and will set a trap for inexperienced sales people by feigning interest and saying, "*How much is an ad?*" Rookies interpret this as a buying signal and quickly quote a price. Even if the sales person says, "a full page is only three cents," the prospect will say, "*that's too much!*", leaving the sales person with nowhere to go except out the door.

In sales, as in life, timing is everything. In the scenario described above the experienced salesperson will not allow themselves to be boxed into a corner by prematurely quoting a price. They will respond to this trick by saying, "I'm glad to see you're interested in my paper, but I can't possibly give you a quote until I know a little more about your business and your needs. Let me ask you a few questions and I'll be able to propose a program that is right for you." Experienced salespeople know that selling is a sequential process. The first step is to introduce yourself to the customer, the second step is to probe the customer to discover their

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business needs, the third step is to propose a solution to the customer's problems, finally the sales rep can close the sales. A good sales person does not allow themselves to be distracted from following this structured process.

The advantage of following the sales process is that it removes the "flashpoints" where a customer may bring up an objection. Objections occur when the salesperson tries to impose their will on the prospect. They may choose not to talk to us, so objections can crop up during the call opening. (This will be addressed in next month's column) When done properly, there is little risk of getting an objection in the discovery and solution steps. Rather than giving the prospect a "pitch," these two steps engage the prospect in conversation. The goal of the discovery phase of the call is to learn about the customer's individual situation and needs, so they should be doing most of the talking. The salesperson should listen carefully and direct the flow of the conversation with good questions. In addition to gathering the information needed to formulate an advertising program, this process builds rapport with the prospect. Letting the customer talk and listening to them demonstrates your respect for them and your interest in their problems. Everyone likes to talk about themselves and their interests. Letting the customer do most of the talking gives them a positive feeling which will be transferred to the sales rep. Reps who dominate the conversation will be perceived in a negative light.

The "solutions" stage should begin with a recap of the needs uncovered during discovery, *"Mr./Ms. Prospect, thank you for giving me so much information about your business. Just to make sure I understand your situation, please let me review what you told me. You said..."* The phrase, *"You said,"* gives the customer ownership of the problem and will increase their desire to find a solution. This stage could also be described as "selling in principle." Before offering a specific product and quoting a price, the sales rep should secure the prospect's agreement on need for a solution. For example, rather than saying, *"I recommend a quarter page ad with a BOGO coupon for X dollars,"* the rep should say, *"Mr./Ms. Prospect, you said that you are very slow at the beginning of the week, do you think if you offered a discount good Monday through Wednesday that you'd attract more customers?"* If the customer nods in agreement they have been sold on the idea of advertising and all that remains is hashing out the details of the program.

By following the process, you can use the customer's words to close the sale, *"Mr./Ms. Prospect, you said that you've been slow early in the week and that you believe a BOGO offer would help you turn this around. Here's what I would do if I were you, I'd run a quarter page featuring a coupon for buy one dinner, get one, good only Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday."*

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*Our paper reaches thousands of diners right here in Ourtown, so I think this would really bring in a lot of new customers, don't you agree."* Note the number of times this sales rep referenced the customer's remarks. The customer will be much less likely to object to something they have said than something they've heard from a sales person. This statement does not include the price of the recommended program which requires the prospect to ask, "How much would that cost me?" At this point in the call, asking for the price is a genuine buying signal and offers the rep a chance to position the value of their product. *"Mr./Ms. Prospect, you can reach over X thousand homes with your BOGO offer in a big quarter page for only X dollars. That's just pennies per home. Do you want to start your ad next week?"* You may still get an objection at this point, but they are generally easier to address. If the customer has been sold in principle on advertising, objections are more likely to be negotiating points rather than "deal breakers."

We've all heard the old proverb, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." This is especially true when it comes to handling objections. Having the discipline to stick to a structured sales process in the face of internal and external pressures is the mark of a true professional. By following the time proven sales sequential process and resisting the powerful urge to jump ahead to the close, we can greatly reduce the number of objections we receive and increase the number of sales we close. *This article was written by Jim Busch.*

**Next month: Handling Objections: Part Two**

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