

TOP SALES

MAGAZINE



The Keys to Getting More Time With Prospects: Better Prep and Asking Better Questions

By Mike Esterday, CEO of Integrity Solutions



The Keys to Getting More Time With Prospects: Better Prep and Asking Better Questions



Once your sales reps land the meeting with that big prospect or customer, the real work begins. They're going to have to differentiate themselves somehow, or else that first meeting could turn out to be the last. Today's buyers simply don't have time to waste on calls that don't bring them value.

For many salespeople, differentiation means explaining to the prospect how the company and/or its solutions are different. They've been through training on your products and its benefits, and they've learned how to tell the company's "brand story," so when they get on that call, they're fully prepared for that conversation.

All too often, though, the meeting wraps up with the prospect uttering those four dreaded words: "Thanks for stopping by." They might as well say "Don't call us, we'll call you."

If you probed a little deeper, here's what else you'd really hear: "That didn't bring me any value."

The salespeople who differentiate themselves in a way that's meaningful to the customer take a different approach. They do their research. They anticipate and prepare. They ask great questions, and then they listen intently to the responses. In fact, they

don't do nearly as much talking as the customer does.

You might say these are all fundamentals of effective selling, and you're right. But too many salespeople simply don't know how to do it. They either aren't getting the training, or they've gotten away from some of these good habits as virtual sales and other changes in the selling environment have shifted their focus. But these basics still apply. In a virtual setting, where time might be even more at a premium, they might even be more important than ever.

A Value-Driven Approach to the Sales Conversation

We do a lot of work with medical device companies, so when I had the opportunity to talk with a surgeon recently, I was curious to hear his view on what great

salespeople do differently. Here's what he told me: The salespeople who get the most time with me are the ones who ask well-thought-out questions that apply to *my* needs, not just *their* business.

That underscores why the prep work is so important. You need to know something about their business, and you need to be able to ask questions to engage them based on that knowledge and ultimately help them think differently. How do you do that?

1. Begin with the end in mind. Before you even meet with them, you need to ask yourself why this customer would want to use what you're proposing over what they're currently doing. There has to be an emotional why. Is it going to save them money or time or enable them to deliver better outcomes for their customer? If you can't articulate an emotional why from your value proposition, then they're probably not going to change.

2. Use the emotional why to inform your questioning approach: Think in terms of what's important to the prospect, and then ask your questions in such a way that it piques their interest and shows you understand their business.

For example, many doctors are now surgery center owners, so as medical device sales rep, you might ask, "How important is your time per case in a day? If you were able to save ten minutes a case through this procedure, how much could that save you in a day?"

3. Help them discover the emotional drivers: Sales reps tend to ask questions that fall into one of four categories: Current situation, desired situation, risk/concern and benefit/reward. Usually, there's a gap between the current and desired situation, and it's important to draw that out. But these are logical whys, which don't typically motivate people to make a change.

Your follow-up questions should move them towards uncovering their emotional drivers. In the risk/concern category, you might ask, "Does it

concern you that these things you'd like to see happen aren't happening? Why?" A benefit/reward question might be, "How would that impact your business or team if you could get to that desired situation?" As they answer those questions, the emotional why will begin to come to the surface.

4. Demonstrate solutions to the problem: One of the biggest mistakes sales reps make is going to the close too soon. The next step isn't the close; it's solving the problem. When you uncover the need and someone says "that's a great question," you can get into a conversation about how to solve the problem, and that brings you to a different level. Now they want to do business with you.

Some signs that they're getting value from you and you're solving a problem? They tell you they're going to pull some more people together for a follow-up or that they need to involve some other decision-makers.

5. WAIT: Why Am I Talking? There's no point asking great questions if you're not listening to the answers. To ask great follow-ups, you have to listen to learn, not just to inject your next statement. The quality of your listening is as important as the quality of your questions.

Whether sales conversations are happening in person or virtually, salespeople have to be great questioners and great listeners. Especially now, when there's so much upheaval in the world of sales, it's important to revisit these fundamentals. New sales reps need to be trained in more than just product knowledge and the company's brand story. Experienced salespeople need to reflect back on the quality of the questions they're asking. Because if they're not bringing value that the customer cares about, that customer probably isn't going to give them any more time — or business — in return. ■

Mike Esterday is CEO of Integrity Solutions
Visit: www.integritysolutions.com