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Premature Solutioneering

Keeping Quiet Even When You Know The Answer

(This is an edited and updated transcript from part of a keynote speech I delivered in 2013.)

Picture this. You are not feeling well; maybe you are even in pain. You visit the doctor, describe your symptoms, answer a few of her questions – and in a couple of minutes the doctor has diagnosed your issue. *“No problem,”* she says, *“I’ve seen this hundreds of times and it is very easy to cure.”* **You feel relieved and happy.** The pain has already started to feel a little less severe and you may even start to smile.

Contrast that with:

You are meeting with a senior IT or Business leader from one of your customers. He tells you about a few problems his organization has been experiencing – and it is apparent that he is also in “pain”. You ask a few more questions and then feeling confident that you can help him, you state, *“I’ve seen this problem hundreds of times before and I can help you.”* You then spend a few minutes talking about your amazing technological cure for his pains. Instead of looking happy and relieved, your customer starts to look a little **frustrated and puzzled**. What just happened? Why isn’t he happy and smiling?

I want to speak with you about a disease that will afflict everyone in sales and presales at some point in their career. It does not matter how much training you have, and age, gender and experience do not matter. It’s actually a little embarrassing to talk about if you are a real pre-sales professional, but it is .. **PPS - Premature Presales Solutioneering.**

PPS happens when you just blurt out a solution (usually your solution) to the customers problem BEFORE they are ready to hear it. It’s a disease that is easy to spot in others, but hard to detect in yourself, But, rest assured, there is a cure for “**PPS**” – but only if you are ready to accept the need for change.

1. Listen To The Customer

The more experience (and confidence) you have, the more likely a target you become for PPS. Especially if you are a presales engineer with more than 3 years of experience in selling a highly technical solution set. When a customer is telling you about their problem, your job is to hear them out, and not to impress them with how smart you are. Practice “Active Listening” , Don’t interrupt, don’t negate, don’t redirect – just listen. You will be amazed at what you can learn if the customer does the talking instead of you.

2. Show Patience.

Contrary to what you may read in many sales process books, making the sale is not a fight or a contest. Pass up the first opportunity you get to strike back at the problem. Show some patience – there is no prize for being the first vendor to talk technology. One of our customers calls these the “*keys to the Ferrari*” questions as they are so tempting that you just want to reach across the table and grab the offer. Instead of diving in to talk tech, reverse back from the features, speeds and feeds to ask one more question instead. Even if the customer says, “*tell me about your left-handed, reverse osmotic encryption routines*” – you first need to know why that is important to them!

3. Show Persistence.

Just because a customer has told you about a problem does not mean that it is their only problem, or their most important one. Quite often, the first problem the customer tells you about is just a test, and they are holding back their #1 issue to see how you handle their #2 or #3 issue. You need to perform the presales equivalent of the doctor saying, “*Anything else hurt?*” or even poking and prodding a few other places and asking, “*Does that hurt?*”

4. Show Empathy.

You may have seen this exact problem 50 times before, but every person and every organization believes that they are just a little bit different and special. (Although I do believe that any seasoned SE can tell inside 15 minutes of a sales call if this is a good opportunity or not). Making the customer feel like you have a standard approach to solving the problem, particularly if you or the rep interrupts them early, is not the best path to take. Acknowledge the difference (or *vive la difference* – back to French again) and say something like “*what you are describing sounds very similar to situations we’ve seen (and helped) before. I know that every company has some special circumstances in their environment / architecture, so let me ask you ..*”.

You’ll be amazed at the difference that one piece of phrasing can make.

5. Move Forward, But ...

Before you boldly state, “*we can fix that*”, consider asking the customer what their desired or future state actually is. Of course it could be as simple as “*make it (the pain) go away*”, but they may have a different view. Focus on some of the positive outcomes and results the customer is looking for, rather than a negative (removing something).

In Summary / Next Steps

Friends do not let friends suffer from PPS. The next time you see a colleague engaging in PPS or even saying something like “let me tell you about <Product X> - it’s a game changer”. Step in and intervene, you could not only save a career, you could also save the sale!

"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand, they listen with the intent to reply.– Stephen R. Covey

Talking Points is a monthly column authored by John Care, Managing Director of Mastering Technical Sales. For more information on this and other Sales Engineering topics visit the website at www.masteringtechnicalsales.com.

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