



Mastering Technical Sales

3030 Grand Bay Blvd #333

Longboat Key FL 34228

Phone +1-215-431-1552

John@masteringtechnicalsales.com

www.masteringtechnicalsales.com

John Care, Managing Director

The First Problem Isn't Always The Most Important One!

The Benefit Of Being A Patient SE

Picture this. You are in the early phases of the sales cycle, having a conversation with the client about their needs and requirements and the customer shares a problem or issue with you. Success! You or the account executive dive down into the “pain” to get more details. In many cases that is exactly the wrong thing to do – so let me explain why the patient SE can expand the deal and lock out the competition.

First, let me state that this is counter to what many sales methodologies teach. However, that's one of the things that prompted me to write my book many years ago. I thought that what salespeople were taught wasn't the best approach for Sales Engineers. Once you establish a “Pain” then Solution Selling has you go through the 9-Block Model, Sandler and Value Selling teach you to amplify the pain as soon as it is established. Don't Do It!

A Story To Illustrate My Point

Every year I visit my local doctor and have an annual physical. The process usually starts with some light social questions and then a loosely structured interview.

His first question is, *“So what would you like to speak about today; what's bothering you?”*

My response might be, *“I have a strange pain on the inside of my right knee.”*

You'd think his next question would be, *“How long have you had this pain?”* or *“How severe is it?”* or *“Describe the pain in more detail?”* He doesn't ask me any of those questions.

Instead he repeats *“pain on inside of right knee,”* writes that down on a notepad, and then asks me, *“...and what else?”*

The reason he does that is because he is the medical expert, and I am not. His training can help him associate multiple pains and put them together, determining which issues are symptoms and what he should focus on for a man of my age and profile.

And Why That's Important

Also borrowing from the medical profession, a friend of mine who trained as a psychologist told me that the very first lesson they learn is ‘the first problem a patient gives you is rarely the most important one’. The same applies to your customers. The first problem, or pain, that a customer tells you about is rarely their most important one. Why could that be?

Some possible reasons are:

They are testing you first.
They are embarrassed about their situation
They don't trust you (or the rep)
It's the problem they are most comfortable discussing.

In our Business Value Discovery Workshops, we run through a scenario where SE's play the part of a customer. Even in that friendly, non-stress environment, we've discovered that **>75%** of the time, even an SE doesn't give another SE the #1 business issue up front in their call.

So Instead ..

Next time a customer shares an issue/pain with you, confirm it .

“Great, so you feel that the error rate in your manufacturing process is too high because of statistical measurement errors.”

Acknowledge you can assist ..

“We can certainly help you with that and we'll get back to the error rate.”

And then probe:

“Are there any other problems we should also be discussing?”

(You may need to prompt the customer with examples)

And The Outcome Is..

You would be surprised how often the customer will then give you other additional issues and symptoms. Imagine if the issue about the error rate that the customer initially mentioned was only problem #3 on their list! You could have spent the rest of the call drilling down on an issue that wasn't really driving the sale. I've seen it happen thousands of times, particularly in inside sales / telesales type situations where the emphasis is on sell the customer instead of help the customer.

By being the patient SE, and instead of leaping on the first problem, you ask the professional equivalent of *“and what else..”* you will come across as professional, competent and will learn something that your competition won't. Because, going full circle to my annual physical, that pain in the knee was an annoyance because I could feel it walking into his office, but it wasn't the #1 thing I wanted to talk about. It was just on my mind when he asked the question.

Summary

This is contrary to a lot of sales training that teaches you to drill down into a customer pain once it is expressed and “discover” everything about it. I’m just suggesting to have a little patience and take a one minute detour to ask “what else” before you dive in. The benefits of that one extra minute will often convert into a larger deal and a better competitive position.

Talk to your account managers about this strategy and try it!

“You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions.”

Naguib Mahfouz

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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