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

Patience And The Sales Engineer

Picture this. You are in the early phases of the sales cycle, having a conversation with the client about their needs and requirements. The customer shares a problem or issue with you. Success! You or the account executive dive down into the “pain” asking even more questions to obtain additional 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. But that’s one of the things that prompted me to write the MTS 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 off with some light social questions and then a loosely structured interview.

Her 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?”* She doesn’t ask me any of those questions.

Instead she repeats *“pain on inside of right knee,”* Notes that on an iPad, and then asks me, *“...and what else?”*

The reason she does that is because she is the medical expert, and I am not. Her training can help associate multiple pains and put them together, determining which issues are symptoms and what she 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.
- It's the problem their boss just yelled at them about – so it's top of mind.

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:

“What other problems we should also be discussing?”

I love this question because it implies that there are indeed more problems, plus it is an open question which invites further discussion. Asking *“Are there any other problems we should also be discussing?”* is closed and may result in a simple yes or no.

You may need to prompt the customer with examples from other customers to demonstrate your knowledge. This is the equivalent of the grim sounding medical follow-up question.

“John, typically when I see men your age they have issues with .. is that something we should discuss?”

When you think about it – doctors have been employing The Challenger Sale for years!

And The Outcome Is..

You would be surprised how often the customer will start to discuss additional issues and symptoms. Some you may be able to help them with, others not. But at least you know and get a bigger picture. Imagine if that first 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. Then you finish the call, congratulate each other on discovering a pain that you can sell into, put the transaction into the forecast, yet nothing ever happens with that customer again. Why? Because another smarter, more patient SE, uncovering priority issues #1 and #2 sets up the customer for their portfolio instead.

Be the patient SE, and instead of leaping on the first problem, ask the professional equivalent of “**and what else..?**” You will come across as professional, competent, and credible. Plus you 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 advice is contrary to some sales training which 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 short detour to ask some open “what else” questions before you dive into the uncovered pain. The benefits of that detour will convert into a larger deal and a better competitive position.

Give it a try!

“If you do not ask the right questions, you do not get the right answers. A question asked in the right way often points to its own answer.”

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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