

## **Relationship Selling is Overrated**

Relationships are overrated. Yep, I am drawing a line in the sand, and challenging the hardened belief that a sales person's most valuable asset is his Rolodex. It's not.

Every year I get a birthday card from my accountant. Sure it's a nice touch, but it doesn't make me a more loyal customer. Golf games, lunches, jovial conversations are all great tools to make friends. It is fun to get to know someone. It is nice to get beyond the suit and tie, and find out what makes a person tick. But it doesn't speed up the sales process.

In our Sales 2.0 world, customers have choice. They are able to buy products and services that fit their needs. The power of the personal relationship can be overshadowed by the power of Google. If there is any doubt in a service provider, they can be replaced quickly. The relationship may delay the inevitable, but unless you have the best answer for your customers they will move on.

What can a sales person do to fight these competitive forces? Leverage their brand. Brand is a powerful concept, but is often a misunderstood term. It is not a logo or a name; it is how your market defines you. It is how your prospects and customers describe you. As sales people we are brand ambassadors. We help advocate and educate customers on how our products and services solve problems. If you can't clearly articulate the value of your service, that's a problem.

Too often sales people are caught selling on price and other superficial benefits, because they don't understand why their customers are buying. Asking and understanding why your customers buy is critical. When you understand how and why your customers derive value from your services, then you can further refine and tailor your selling activities to build on their needs.

Let me give you an example. In the past year, LEAPJob changed CRM software providers. We transitioned from a comprehensive tool that was used in multiple industries to one specific to ours. It was a painful switch. Not only did we have to deal with the high costs of implementation, data conversion and countless planning meetings, but we were leaving a vendor that we had developed personal ties to. We really liked them. That said – we needed a tool with very specific functionality that they could not deliver. We chose a new vendor that specialized in our industry, understood our business and provided us products and services that fit us.

The sales people from our new vendor were very focused. They asked us specific questions of how we ran our business, the types of customers we had, how we wanted to use the tools and what was compelling us to change vendors. The time they spent up front understanding us provided them the insight to present a focused solution that we were excited to buy. It allowed them to develop a compelling answer that allowed us to move away from a vendor that we had a relationship with, to one that solved our business challenges.

Sales people should always be studying their customers. Try a little exercise. Make a list of your top 15 customers and ask:

1. How did they find me?

2. Why did they choose our solution?
3. What problems or events motivated them to shop for a new vendor?
4. Why do they stay our customers?

Try to identify trends, and see if you can use this information to improve your selling activities. You can then take the list a step further. Rank your customers based on commissions – who have you made the most money from? Then rank these customers based on relationships – who do you enjoy working with the most? Often you find there is no correlation between relationships and profitability. This allows you to re-ask the above questions, and make sure you are being pragmatic about your answers.

You can build new and lasting customer relationships based on how they gain value from you. I am a firm believer that the more you know about your customers, the more effective a sales person you will be. By gaining the insight of why a customer is buying your products, you can tailor your selling efforts to fit their expectations. It's your ace in the hole. The customer will choose a vendor that fits their expectations, and they will be extremely loyal to the service providers that deliver on it consistently.

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