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COMMON ENEMIES OF SUCCESSFUL SALESPEOPLE

By Andrea Nierenberg

We all work to do our best and to succeed in meeting customers' needs and closing sales. Yet, we sometimes fall short. We reflect on those lost sales and sometimes ask ourselves, "I thought I did everything right: what went wrong?" Sometimes it could be because what we think is insignificant, could be very significant to our customers.

Often a minor communication error can "kill" a deal. Think about athletes in the Olympics. Sometimes the only difference between a gold medal and coming in fifth place is determined by only a tenth of a second or a fraction of an inch.

Here are some of the "enemies" of otherwise very successful salespeople and how we can recognize them before they "attack" us:

1. Ego

It's part of what "drives" and impacts our self-worth. Yet it must be controlled, especially when we're communicating with a buyer who may not have as strong an ego as we do. The important issue here is to use our persuasion skills effectively, and in such a way that customers feel that they're in control. How do we do this?

First, agree with them, even if you know that they're mistaken. For example, the customer might use a competitor's product that is really not meeting their needs. If you criticize the competition, you could be insulting the customer. After all, the customer, for whatever reason, thought that he or she made a good decision. Your goal here is to help the person make a better decision with your product or service.

When you do agree, it indicates to the customer that you're willing to listen. Be patient and there will be a good time to respond with a question or statement to make a pitch. Ask him or her a question that allows that person to "help you out". For example, ask, "What features or benefits would cause you to consider another product or service?" Remember, your ego might want to sell price or quality. However, the customer might only care about dependable delivery. It has been said, "the

customer is always right." Give your customers a chance to be right by pushing your ego aside.

2. Impatience

Everyone has the experience of customers who don't return calls. This can be very frustrating, especially when we feel that we've got the greatest product or service. Should we become upset when this happens? Of course not. What it means is that you might have not given your offer a "fuse". If customers think they can take forever to decide on something, they probably will. It's your job to give them a reason to get back to you in a timely fashion before the great deal "blows up". Some "fuses" include: a reduced price for a specific time frame; free on-site training for your products; or special limited bonuses. Whatever you do, make sure it's for real. Otherwise, customers will know that those offers are just a "front" to bother them.

Honesty is another way to handle unreturned calls. Mention to customers that you plan to follow up. The important point to remember is to ask them, "what are the best ways to stay in touch with you?" You'll be amazed at what you can learn from this. Perhaps you'll discover that they're really not at all interested in buying. Or, if you don't get back to them by a certain date, the buying decision will be over and you might lose the order.

3. Assumptions About the Customer's Mind

Assume = lose. It's always better to be clear about what customers want and how we can deliver it to them. When you are preparing a proposal after a meeting, you might need to call up again with more questions. When you do this, preface your call by mentioning that you're working on their proposal and want to be absolutely sure of their particular needs. You may also find out some things they hadn't previously told you. If a phone call is not the best approach, then send a letter with specific questions. Then ask them to respond to the questions.

4. Levels of Formality

Sometimes we get into the dilemma of how to address someone whom we're "courting" for business. My rule of thumb is to use either Mr. or Ms. in the first few contacts. Let them tell you when to call them by their first name. Sometimes you may feel that it's strange to address someone formally. Yet my research shows that when in doubt, be conservative.

5. Talking About Things That Don't Interest the Customer

Avoid going off on a tangent. Make sure not to assume that what interests you interests the customer. For example, let's say you are selling a printing service. You might want to talk about whether the paper was recycled, or what country made the ink, however that may mean nothing to your customer. All your customer might care about is getting something printed for a fair price.

6. Customer's Point of View

Failing to know your customer's point of view could cost you the sale. Your goal always is to listen to the customer and be ready to ask the question, "What's important to you about the product or service?" This question can cut to the "chase". Getting to your customer's point of view, as fast as possible, can help you tremendously.

With all these points, please keep one idea in mind -- When we're listening to the customer, we're learning, and when we're talking, we're hearing what we already know. God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason.

You might have heard the expression, "we have met the enemy, and it is us." As a salesperson, chances are that if you patiently listen to your customers, keep your ego in check, and give clients the respect they deserve, you will win more battles.

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