

PROVEN SALES STRATEGIES THAT WILL GROW YOUR BUSINESS

Whatever career path you choose, being able to influence people will inevitably be a part of it. Your title doesn't have to have "sales" in it but everyone is selling something - your personal brand, your products, your services or even your philosophies. After 25 years at the helm of my business, I thought I knew every trick in the book and every nuance needed to close that sale. But then I attended a C200 dinner in New York recently and met Charles Bernard, founder and CEO of Criteria for Success, Inc. – and changed my mind. Charles helps CEO's bridge the gap between delivering on a vision and valuing underlying profit. He proved that this old dog could learn a thing or two about improving my sales strategy.

According to Charles, there are three fundamentals of selling: **Philosophy, Mechanics and Action**. The philosophy of discovery-based selling is ideal; better for your customers to discover how great you are than for you to tell them. Leave bread crumbs for your clients to find you because it is much more valuable for someone to discover you than for you to pound your fists declaring your greatness.

Buyers are trained to weed out the ordinary and the obvious yet many presentations start with slides on how big and how great they are. This is the fastest way to lose their interest. Buyers want to gauge the potential relationship based on their understanding of how well you know them and what impact you can have on their business.

So what's the right approach? Fundamentally understand your own businesses value proposition and spend time getting to know theirs. Most important:

- Convey you are a “feedback organization” and that you live and die by both positive and negative feedback
- Add value. Period. Customers measure value based on outcomes rather than the lowest price. World class sales teams maintain a philosophy that they are a problem-solving organization
- Make your customers know you are invested in a long-term relationship. Deals are never won in a day; make your customers know that you are the right long term partner

Sales mechanics involve heavy planning and management. Remember the factors that can and cannot be controlled. Top salespeople know that their job is to grow salespeople, not just sales. Find people who are better at sales than you. Put 12 days on your calendar a year and mandate that your sales people have to get you in front of the clients.

Develop a sales playbook structure that includes prospecting, cost and training for sales support. Great people will hire more great people and know how to help them develop into exceptional talent while staying accountable.

These are the fundamental “actions” of discovery-based selling. On top of this, you must also make your company known to the customers you are trying to reach with a carefully managed social media and PR strategy. Be discriminating when deciding where to spend your time and your money. If your customers aren't there, don't go there. Critically important: remember that your best press advocates are your employees.

Charles is a believer in working to get rid of "head-trash" in your company, or the negative thoughts that create gossip and negative behavior - it kills companies, and it's true.

It is wise to put all of your clients and prospects in a continuum, as they are constantly evolving from client to partner to advocate. By understanding where your customers struggle, senior management can stick to the big picture view. Probably most important, measure the churn within each category of your client evolution model; this truly dictates your long-term success. Plan to lose 20-30% of your business each year no matter how good of a job you are doing. Mergers, acquisitions and changes in client leadership and personnel will happen. Embrace it, plan for it and be there to support it.

Charles left us with wise parting words. *"Humans love storytelling"*. We all grew up with 'the once upon a time' interest in learning through stories. Tell the stories of your ideas, passions, lessons learned and what you and your brand stand for. It is irresistible. Oh, and don't forget the numbers. We all love to see the results." In the sales world, buyers make faster decisions on what they don't like versus what they do like. Utilizing philosophy, mechanics and action – keep your job, get promoted and head down the road to prosperity.

By Gay Gaddis (Forbes.com)
