

How to Sell Anything to Anybody

By Steve Tobak

You may not realize it, but the most critical junctures in your career involve selling. Whether you're selling a product or service to a customer, an idea or a plan to your management or investors, or yourself to an employer, your ability to sell will play a huge role in your success.

Unfortunately, most people aren't born with the sales gene. Not only that, selling has sort of a bad rep. I remember telling my parents that I was planning to transition into sales after a decade in engineering management. Initially, there was dead silence on the phone. Then my dad said, "You mean like a car salesman?"

Looking back on it, that turned out to be the best move of my entire career. Sales taught me about connecting with others, getting them on board with an idea, negotiating, and closing. I put all that to good use throughout my career as a senior executive and in management consulting. So can you.

There are four fundamental concepts you need to understand to sell anything to anybody. Learn them, practice them, and above all, make them uniquely your own by determining how to best integrate them into your DNA, your own situation, and the goals you'd like to achieve. Are you hooked? Good. That was the idea.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK.

Know your customer, stakeholder, audience, whoever you're selling to. Know their roles, responsibilities, and objectives. Understand as much as you can about what's in it for them. Know your competition and all the possible objections and hurdles you might face.

Just as importantly: know whatever it is you're trying to sell. Know it cold. Whether it's an idea, a product, a plan, whatever, know it inside and out. And, without a doubt, know it better than anyone else, especially those you're selling to.

There's nothing worse than getting beat up by a customer, your boss, or a VC because you didn't do your homework and wasted his time. I've been there. Take it from me; it really sucks. And you can kiss that prospect goodbye, sometimes for good.

ASK AND LISTEN.

Yes, I know you did your homework and now you know all this stuff. You're so prepared and passionate that you're chomping at the bit to get it out. Don't. Here's why. If you do that, you risk coming across badly. Pushy. Like it's all about you. It isn't about you. It's about the people across from you at the table. It's about their needs and goals.

So ask. Ask how you can help them. Ask what their goals are. Ask what their concerns are. Then listen. Ask leading questions and listen some more. Keep listening until you have a pretty clear understanding of the whole picture.

No, don't badger them. Sometimes you listen a little, give a little, and go back and forth for a few meetings. That's fine. You do want to be flexible and you don't want to be pushy. Just see if you can find a way to get them to speak first. Information is power.

Also listen for what really and truly matters to them. They might say a lot, but if you really listen, you'll discern what's really in it for them, what motivates them, and what obstacles you have to overcome. It's like cracking a nut. Brute force and all you've got is tiny pieces of nutmeat and shells. But if you find the right spot and do it just the right way, it opens cleanly. It's a beautiful thing. It's the same thing in sales.

MAKE A GENUINE CONNECTION.

If you have the world's greatest product or idea, that's great, I'm sure you'll kill it out there. If not, then know this: Every business transaction involves a genuine connection between individuals. It's not always a deep relationship, but it's a relationship, nevertheless.

To connect with people, you have to explain things in a way that resonates with them. If you've done your homework, asked the right questions, and listened carefully, you should know what they're looking for and how to overcome their concerns and meet their needs.

The best way to do that is to do two things: genuinely connect with the person and communicate using anecdotes and analogies that will cut through and resonate with them. That's because people aren't just motivated by logic and information, they're also motivated by emotional and primal needs.

People like to hear about ideas, features, and performance. They need to hear about benefits and what's in it for them even more. But when it's all said and done and they're on their own making a decision, it's an emotional connection to stories and people they'll remember. And that's what will motivate them to go for it.

KNOW WHOSE SIDE YOU'RE ON.

This is a tough concept for people to grasp but it is key so listen up. You may be sitting across from someone, physically opposite them, but in reality, you're on the same side. The sooner you get into that mindset, the sooner you'll get deals done.

You see, most people have sales all wrong. In a certain sense, you're actually working for the customer or whoever you're selling to. That's because your job is to understand and serve their needs. To help them achieve their goals. That's your job. That means you work for them.

And you know what? Your customers need to know that. That you're there to help them achieve their goals. That you're partners. That you're willing to move mountains for them. And oftentimes, that's what you have to do to get a deal done.

It's true even in big corporations. The sales organization is the customer advocate. In executive meetings, the head of sales represents the customer base. Yes, of course a sales VP works for her company, but if she isn't the internal champion for meeting customer needs, I guarantee those needs will not be met.

And guess what? When people pick up on your genuine desire and ability to jump through any hoop to help make them successful, that, more than anything, will help you get deals done. That's how you become successful. By convincing others that you can and will make them successful--and then doing it.

About the Author

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