
Process-driven sales finds gold in them thar calls

Appeared October 31, 2004, in the Tri-City Herald

The best product in the world isn't worth much sitting on a shelf. It needs to be sold to someone. Yet data compiled by Huthwaite, Inc., an international sales improvement firm, shows that buyers resist sales pitches and most salespeople dislike prospecting for new business.

Patrick Smith, business development manager for Congruent Software, Inc., a Seattle-based business processes improvement firm in Seattle, offered Mid-Columbia technology entrepreneurs an alternative to this discouraging scenario at the September gathering of the Three Rivers Venture Group.

Smith urged the audience to recognize that sales, like law, medicine or science, is a profession and that the route to success is to become a "value partner" by offering unanticipated solutions to problems that matter to their customers.

Hopium won't work

According to Smith, most sales efforts fail either because sales is a set of activities, rather than a true process, or the sales process does not mirror the customer's buying process. Without a clear process, the only way to manage or improve a sales function is to constantly change sales management or staff and hope for better results. "Don't get hooked on 'hopium'," Smith warned.

Using a process - a repeatable method of operation - enables you to measure results, figure out what does or doesn't work, and to improve accordingly, Smith said. Here is the process he encouraged sales people to use and entrepreneurs to adopt in managing their sales professionals.

Initiate a sales cycle

Warm-up: Do some triage on yourself. Do you know who your customer is and how your product will be used? Is your message customized to the listener, succinct and relevant?

Step one: Realize that the purpose of the sales call is to engage in a business dialogue with the goal of initiating a sales cycle - not to make a quick sale.

Step Two: Don't try to take on the world. Divide your market into small segments. Reading trade periodicals and other public data will enable you to identify urgent issues and to craft unanticipated solutions that your product or service can provide. According to Neil Rackham, author of the classic "SPIN Selling," the top reasons senior executives allow a first meeting are a recommendation from inside the organization and an external reference from a respected source. Smith recommends building your credentials by engaging in activities, such as teaching, speaking and contributing time, in venues where you will be noticed by people influential in your target area.

Hone your message

Step Three: Find the right person in an organization, customize your presentation to that listener and deliver a message that is clear and succinct.

"Everybody's message is too long," Smith said. "People remember sound bites." Make the most important point at least three times in less than 15 minutes. Do it in every message - e-mail, phone conversation, message, hand written fax and face-to-face."

Step Four: Propose a solution that demonstrates the impact or magnitude of the problem and shows how you can provide answers that the company may not find on its own.

Focus on customer needs

Present benefits rather than features. "Get really technical and you'll shoot yourself in the foot every time," Smith said. The message is not "Who we are and what we do," Smith said. A good message speaks directly to the customer's needs. It is short, informative, establishes your credentials and adds value to the customer's business. For example:

Ugly: My name is Patrick Smith. I am in business development at Congruent Software. At Congruent, we are a Microsoft Gold Partner that specializes in software development projects. That means we meet the highest level of standards. All of our engineers are Microsoft certified system engineers and software designers. I am eager to talk to you about how we might best serve your needs at Western Bank of the Columbia. I will call your office on Tuesday Sept 21st to follow up.

Better: I heard West Bank's advertisement on the radio "a safe place to put your money." A catchy slogan. But I have a question for you. Do you have any concerns about keeping that promise? Is your network safe? I can assess your network and assure it will have the ability to live up to that promise. My name is Patrick Smith I am a Director of Security for Congruent, a Microsoft Gold Partner. I am going to call your office tomorrow.

Practice makes money

In addition to having a written, executable process, successful sales professionals study the art of persuasion, plan every call in advance, set a call objective and know the difference between being of service and being a pest. Above all, engage in proactive sales every day. "You have to prospect to grow," Smith said, noting that in the business only three percent of initial technology sales calls eventually result in business.

"Keep at it," Smith said. "A three percent success rate will make you very successful."