

FABEA Takes FAB To Another Level

Everyone in sales should be familiar with the FAB formula. The basic idea is that every product has features, which in turn create advantages, which ultimately provide benefits. It's been my experience, though, that most salespeople don't use the FAB formula very effectively in their selling, and many don't really understand the way it works in the first place.

The confusion seems to center around the Advantage part of the formula, and specifically about who gets this advantage. It's not the customer! When FAB is applied properly, it's the salesperson! The key to making the FAB formula work for you is to identify Features of your offering which provide you with a Competitive Advantage and provide a Benefit to your customer as well. If there's no Advantage, you're probably selling a commodity, and the only Feature that's likely to help you there is a low price.

An Example

Let's consider that one of the features many printers promote these days is online ordering. The benefit to the customer starts with ease-of-ordering, but for many customers, consistency and control are even greater benefits. I think it's fair to say that most printing salespeople don't go much farther than talking about ease-of-ordering in their presentations.

The top performers, though, understand all of the potential benefits of online ordering, and they also understand the need to create a competitive advantage. So the first part of their selling process is to probe with questions, hoping to find need for or interest in "second-level" benefits. Then, in the presentation stage, they're positioned to say "Our online ordering system can do that!" It may very well be that the competitor's online ordering system can do it too, but the points go to the salesperson who takes full advantage of his/her product and service capabilities.

FEBA

I met a salesperson recently who introduced me to a new wrinkle on the FAB formula. Jaime Yepes works for a new client of mine in Florida—a "grand format" printing company specializing in billboards and other "superwide" applications. (For example, they've produced a full-color, 40' x 160' banner for a football stadium, and a 10,000 sq. ft. wall mural for a baseball park.) Jaime is new to the company, and relatively new to the industry, but he has more than 10 years of sales experience as a recruiter for the US Army. In that job, he was taught the FEBA formula, which stands for Facts, Evidence, Benefits and Agreement.

Facts and Features are identical in the application of this selling strategy, and Benefits are too. The difference, of course, is the addition of Evidence and Agreement. The basic idea is that you provide solid evidence to support your benefit claims, and then you ask for commitment.

What sort of evidence are we talking about? Let's say that your questioning process identifies some level of dissatisfaction with the quality a prospect has been getting from another printer. Most salespeople would probably address Evidence by showing samples of their own best work, but the top performers I mentioned earlier know that all those samples really prove is that a company is *capable* of producing high quality printing. The question in the prospect's mind is: "How do I know that *my* project will look this good?"

I listened to one of my clients explain recently that his company's quality control procedures are his most significant competitive advantage, and as evidence, he walked his prospect through a pretty detailed description of that quality control process. "The benefit to you," he said, "is that our attention to detail all through this process is what assures your satisfaction at the end of the process." Then, he handed the prospect three testimonial letters written by current clients. "Now if you'll read these," he said, "I think you'll see that there's more going on here than just a salesman talking. These people took the time to write to let us know that we've consistently met and even exceeded their quality expectations. I think that should give you confidence that you'll have the same sort of experience!"

Agreement

As you might imagine, I listened with pleasure as my client led this conversation. Unfortunately, he didn't take the next step, so I jumped in and asked: "So, does it?"

The prospect said "Excuse me?"

“Does this knowledge of our quality control program and these letters give you confidence that you won’t have the same sort of quality problems with us that you had with the other folks? I guess what we really want to know,” I said, “is if we’ve sold you. If you had an order on your desk today, would we be getting it?”

“Well,” he said, “your price would have to be competitive.”

My client jumped back into the conversation. “Do you remember what you paid for your last printing order, even just a ballpark figure?”

“Somewhere around \$600,” the prospect said.

“OK,” said my client, “if my quote on that same job was, say \$650 or \$660, would you consider that competitive?”

There was silence for a moment, and then my client spoke again. “Well, I’m pretty sure we’ll be competitive. The important thing is that you believe in our quality. Did we at least convince you of that today?”

The prospect said yes, so we accomplished some level of Agreement. I think it’s worth mentioning, though, that my client made a tactical mistake by filling the silence that followed his next-to-last question. If he’d waited for an answer—forced the prospect to answer!—we might have accomplished even more on this call. He had the *Courage to Question* that I mentioned in a recent article (Have Courage, *QP*, November 2004), but he didn’t hang in there long enough to get the answer. We covered that in the “debrief” after the call, though, and I think he’ll handle this sort of situation better next time.

FABEA

After my conversation with Jaime Yepes, I think the best “acronymic” selling strategy for a printing salesperson is a combination of FAB and FEBA. Let’s call it FABEA—Features, Advantages, Benefits, Evidence and Agreement.

If you want to be a top performer in printing sales, your first step has to be a complete understanding of your capabilities, and the competitive advantages they provide you with. Then you go looking for situations in which these Features and Advantages provide a Benefit to a prospect or customer—but don’t think it will be enough just to tell people how cool you are! Be prepared with Evidence to support your claims, and when you’ve put all of that on the table, don’t forget to ask for Agreement and commitment.

When you cover all of those bases, you’ll be very well positioned for success!