

The Difference Between “Good” and “Great”

An attendee came up to me after a recent seminar and said “That wasn’t just a good seminar, it was a great seminar!” I said “Thank you.”

This morning, one of my sales coaching clients told me about a sales call he’d been on yesterday. “It wasn’t just a good sales call,” he said, “it was a great sales call!”

To that I said “Tell me why. Tell me what makes the difference between a good sales call and a great one.”

Limited Perspective

“Well, I got a \$7000 order,” my client told me. “Wouldn’t you call that a great sales call?”

“Well, I’d certainly call it a great order,” I answered, “but I think you might be looking back at lots of other sales calls from a limited perspective. You don’t always leave with a big order—or any size order for that matter—but sometimes you accomplish great things on a sales call that you should feel really great about, even if there’s no ‘immediate gratification’ from that particular call.”

We talked for a while about the relationship he has with this particular customer. He describes it as a “great” relationship now, but admits that it took a long while to move this individual from *suspect* to *prospect* to *customer*—and two more years after that before he felt this was anything close to being a *maximized customer*. He also admitted that he really didn’t have to do much selling on this \$7000 order. “I knew this project was coming up. He called last week to ask for a quote. I e-mailed it to him the next day, and then he called me yesterday morning to tell me to come pick up the disk.”

Now, there’s nothing at all wrong with a situation like this. In fact, it’s really the kind of customer relationship that we’re all hoping for. But I can promise you something, there may not have been much selling involved in this particular order, but it probably took a lot of selling to get the relationship to the point where it is today!

The key is to understand that what got sold *was* the relationship—not the printing, but the idea that the salesperson and the printing company could be trusted to handle the printing to the customer’s satisfaction. Once you make that sale, the orders will follow.

Great Call Strategy

Another key is to understand that great sales calls might happen every once in a while just through circumstance, but they’ll happen a lot more often if you plan for them. I wrote recently that knowing your objective is a major part of building confidence as a salesperson (Think Like A Winner, *QP*, January 2004), and that’s as true of specific strategy for any specific sales call as it is for general selling strategy.

My sales call planning always starts with a simple question: What do I want the person I’m talking with to say “yes” to today? By the most general definition, I think it’s a great sales call any time you accomplish your objective!

What sort of objectives are we talking about? Obviously, there’ll be times when your objective on a sales call is to leave with an order, but far more often—especially in the early stages of a relationship—there’s no order on the table. I’ve always found it interesting that most salespeople seem to think that the “hottest” prospects are the ones who give you something to quote on the very first time you meet with them. Setting aside the question of whether these are “real jobs” or just comparison quotes, I’ve always felt that the first meeting is way too early to be talking about price!

Great First Meeting

On a first appointment, I’m hoping to accomplish three “yeses”—the first of those is that my suspect does have need for exactly the kind of printing I sell, and the second is that he/she buys enough of it to make my pursuit worthwhile. The third “yes” I’m looking for is “Yes, I’m not 100% happy with the status quo—either my current supplier or the way I’ve been ordering my printing in the past.”

That’s the kind of suspect you should get excited about! As I’ve written before, buying exactly what you sell and buying enough of it to make your pursuit worthwhile takes you only two thirds of the way to having a fully qualified prospect. The third qualifying component is showing some real interest in buying from you. Remember, the decision to start buying from you usually has to be accompanied by—or preceded by—the decision to stop buying from another printer. If there’s no level of dissatisfaction with that other printer, it’s unlikely that the decision you’re hoping for is going to happen.

That's why great salespeople sell by asking questions, and great first meeting sales calls are the ones where those questions indicate some real opportunity—not just to quote on something, but to change the status quo!

How Long?

How long do you want your first meeting with a printing buyer to last? I've asked that question in seminars many times, and the answer I usually get from attendees is that some meetings last longer than others, and it all depends on how much time the buyer is willing to spend with you. I agree that the buyer will ultimately decide the length of the meeting, but look back at the question for just a second, because what I asked is how long *you*—the salesperson!—want these first meetings to last. One of the key lessons I teach my sales coaching clients is how to build the “perfect” first meeting conversation model. It doesn't always go exactly the way you planned it, but having a plan in the first place increases the likelihood that it will!

I built my own first meeting model by considering the things I wanted/needed to learn, starting with gaining some knowledge about the company I was calling on and the individual I was talking to. Next, I wanted to learn about the printing itself, and finally, about the current level of satisfaction—or hopefully dissatisfaction!—with current suppliers. I built a list of 15 questions to ask, and through both role-play and actual sales call experience, I learned that I needed at least 20 minutes to have the sort of first meeting conversation that I really wanted to have.

Many salespeople seem to think that you should always downplay the amount of time you want—“I'm only asking for five minutes of your time.” I started telling people that I'd need 20-30 minutes. I also started asking them if they felt 20-30 minutes was too long to spend with me, and I'll never forget one man's answer. “Hell, no,” he said. “Why do so many salespeople ask me for ‘just a minute of my time’ anyway? You're trying to convince me that there's value in talking to you, but how much value am I going to get from just a minute of *your* time?”

Great salespeople know exactly what they're trying to accomplish, and they drive their sales conversations toward those specific objectives. That doesn't mean they always get where they want to go, but it happens more frequently for salespeople who have a plan and a model to follow.

That also doesn't mean that they do all—or even most—of the talking! Great printing salespeople drive their sales conversations with questions, and that's especially true of their first meetings with printing buyers. Remember, the hottest prospect isn't the one who'll let you quote on something, it's the one who's been having problems with his/her current supplier. I think the ultimate definition of a great sales call is when you find someone like that, and through your questions, you gain confidence that you have the solution to that person's problems. If you do that often enough—and then do a good job of selling yourself as the solution—you'll have plenty of “great” sales calls later on where you'll pick up a nice order!

15 Questions

If you're interested in those 15 questions I came up with, you'll find them incorporated into a selling tool called the First Appointment Prospect Interview Form which you'll find on the “downloads” page at my website: www.davefellman.com.