

The 7 Steps of the Sales Process

1. Product Knowledge

This step is fairly straight forward, but it is also the great undoing of many a technical expert turned salesperson. When one is extremely well versed in a particular product especially a technical one, it is easy to get caught up in a monologue of all the great features it provides.

The technical expert turned salesperson is so eager to explain how the product works or why it's unique that the benefits to the customer are left out of the discussion. Never assume that a prospect will easily link a feature to a benefit. That relationship must be stated clearly (something done in the presentation step 4, after the needs assessment step 5). The acquiring of product knowledge for a "technician" therefore, is less about the features of the product itself, and more about how the customer will benefit from those features. When discussing product, the technicians mantra should be; "So what?" Consider those two words to be what the prospect thinks every time a feature is mentioned, and re-learn your product from that perspective.

2. Prospecting

Prospecting, just as the word implies, is about searching for new customers. Like product knowledge, this step may seem fairly straight forward but upon closer examination it becomes more complex. The key to prospecting effectively is knowing where to dig and what to look for. It's also important to distinguish between a lead, a prospect, and a qualified prospect. The most important element in this step is to create a profile of existing customers. This may have been done at your company, but have approach tactics (step3) been tailored to match each profile. For instance, you may have identified the following major market segments: State Governments, County Governments, Consulting Firms, Federal Agencies, Utilities, Universities, but have you fully profiled each of these in order to adjust marketing tactics appropriately? A direct mail, seminar invitation might work well to generate State Government leads, but will it be effective in developing Consulting Firm leads? For each market segment do you really know what the ideal customer looks like? These questions should be answered fully in the "Tactics" portion of a marketing plan.

In the broadest sense, prospecting is an ongoing process that everyone in the company (particularly the sales force) should be involved in. This simply means everyone should have their "prospecting radar" up when they are out and about in the world. Very often, a great lead turned customer was first discovered after being heard or seen in the news at a party, or event, etc.

3. The Approach

This is where the rubber meets the road in the sales process. For our present purposes let's consider the approach in the context of a sales call rather than lead generation (i.e. the difference between a mass mailing and a telephone call). This is the step where you begin to build a relationship and the intelligence gathering continues (it started with prospecting). A good approach is crucial to sales success because it will either identify you as a bothersome

salesperson and cause a prospect's guard to go up, or it will identify you as an obliging salesperson with something of value to offer. (There is probably a middle road too, but you get the idea.). Consider the example of tele-marketers selling a seminar:

Their product is a seminar, about which they presumably have sufficient knowledge. They prospect by scanning the house lists for appropriately titled leads, (generated by earlier prospecting efforts). They approach by saying "I'm Jay from XYZ and I'm calling to follow up on an invitation to a seminar that we mailed to you last week. Do you recall receiving it?" Then the dialog begins, often it's perfunctory, other times however it can be extremely informative. The difference more often than not depends on how astute and articulate the caller is. What do you think is good about this approach? What do you think is bad?"

Quite often the type of call one makes is a follow up to some action i.e. seminar attendance, brochure mailed, etc. Technically these calls are part of follow up step 7, but let us address them in the context of a sales approach. What would be a good approach for each of the above follow up actions? Think about eliciting information and advancing the sale (closing, step 6). What would be a good approach for a cold call?

Additional Note on recording information: Regardless of the type of call or the results, it is important to take detailed call notes and schedule a subsequent action item, no matter what it is be it a week, a month, or a year down the road. (One can invent a system of abbreviations to make this easier i.e. LVM = left voice mail.) History notes are important for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is tracking where a prospect is in the sales process, including what follow up is necessary and when. Noting that "packet was mailed" or "attended seminar" or "inquired about model" is only half the information and not the most important. Why?

4. The Needs Assessment

This is arguably the most important step of the sales process because it allows you to determine how you can truly be of service. To be a highly effective salesperson, that is to sell to the prospect's needs, you first have to understand what those needs are. This means you must think in terms of solving a prospect's problem. The only way to do that is by asking lots of questions. Does a health practitioner prescribe remedies before a thorough exam? Asking good questions will not only help you determine what will best suit the prospect's needs, but it builds confidence, trust, and will very often help the prospect consider issues they may never have thought of. This last point is powerful because it provides an opportunity to showcase features, which the prospect's answers led you to. What questions would you ask to illustrate how your product is different / better than a competitor's. Although intelligence gathering occurs throughout the sales process, it is at step four where it happens in earnest. What other information would be important to gather at this stage? (hint: who's who, referrals).

5. The Presentation

Remember the discussion in step one, focus on benefits rather than features? If you consider your product / service in terms of how it benefits the customer, your presentation will be a focused and relevant dialogue rather than a self aggrandizing monologue. Nothing is worse than a sales presentation which proceeds from the seller's perspective. This is why the needs

assessment is so important and why it will ideally flow in and out of this step. A good needs assessment allows you to tailor your presentation to your audience, and keep it interactive.

6. The Close

Eighty percent of sales are lost because a salesperson fails to close. Closing is about advancing the sales process to ultimately get an order. What you are trying to sell at each stage may be different. For example, a close early in the sales process may be to get an appointment to discuss your product / service, in that case you're selling an appointment not a widget. In a later stage you might need to meet with a committee, in that case what you're selling is a meeting. Seeing the sale process in this light takes a little pressure off of each encounter and makes things a bit more manageable. But don't be lulled into complacency, you must ultimately ask for the order and no sales conversation should ever end without an agreement to some next step. Do not be satisfied with "we'll get back to you", where is the agreement in that? What could you say in response to such a remark in order to advance the sale?

In large part, closing is about discovering obstacles. Have you heard these before: "I'll need to think about it.", "It's too expensive.", "Let me run it by some other people." "Sounds good but I've already got one." What could you say to overcome these objections?

There are lots of ways to close, indeed closing a sale has become a science unto itself. Books have been written on this topic alone. But there is one elemental truth – if you don't ask you don't get. Just for fun, the following is a sampling of a few closing techniques from among the many:

- The Ask For It Close. "What do we need to do to get this model into your organization?"
- The If-Then Close. "If I could demonstrate how an XYZ model provides you with, (things you know are important based on the prospect needs assessment) then would you be willing to... demo, rent, buy, switch, etc."
- The Process Of Elimination Close. "So you like the model, you have use for it, it's not too expensive!"
- The Either Or Close. "Will that be cash or charge?"
- The Lost Puppy Close. "I guess I didn't do my job very well."

Additional note: The question "How much does it cost?" Is a great buying signal yet it is a question you want to avoid early in the sales process. What could you say to defer that question politely? When you do mention price, don't be afraid that they are too high; say it with pride. Don't forget to ask for the referral.

7. Follow-up

Good follow-up will double your closing ratio. When a salesperson makes contact with a prospect a relationship has been built, and follow-up is how it's nurtured. Staying at the forefront of a prospect's mind requires persistence and should not be confused with being bothersome. This is why it's important to get agreement on some next step each time there is contact. Follow-up therefore should never end. The pace may slow but it will never end. When a sale is made, then a new type of follow-up begins.

Follow-up conversations are best handled by the salesperson who started the relationship. Who else can better gauge a prospect's "willingness to buy", or pick up where "we last left off". This means that detailed notes must be kept on each prospect with particular emphasis on their "state of mind". It is unwise and ineffective to keep track of this information anywhere other than a centralized database.

Additional note: It's important to hold some follow-up ammunition in reserve. Overwhelming your prospects with every piece of information you possess on their first request hampers your ability to stay in touch. Having a stable of collateral materials gives you reason(s) to follow up.

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