

Preparing for the Sales Call

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Being fully prepared for the sales interview has a number of advantages for both you and the customer. By being prepared, you are better able to react to the demands of the sales transaction. You can talk about those service benefits that relate directly to the needs of the buyer. You can bring the proper materials to the interview so that it progresses smoothly and efficiently. It saves time for the buyer because he is not burdened by an inefficient interview or salesperson. You are able to set realistic call objectives and develop a sales strategy around them. You impress the buyer with your knowledge, preparation, strategy, and confidence. In other words, preparing for sales interviews leads to more, bigger, and better sales. It spells success!

Having a sales plan for each customer is nothing more than *selling by objectives*. You should plan before entering a sales situation, rather than reacting to whatever develops in the sales interview. This is not to say that if you preplan you can do without the skills necessary to spot a situation and react quickly. The chances of selling success are much greater if selling instincts are combined with preparation.

Planning a sales presentation involves nothing more than using common sales sense. You have something to offer your prospects that either provides them a benefit or helps them prevent a loss. Therefore, you plan before the presentation to gear everything you say to achieve either or both of those two objectives.

Obviously, you should know all you can about the prospects upon whom you are calling. Unless you know, you cannot hope to hold their attention to what you have to say. Figuratively, you must "walk in their shoes." You must relate what you say to their needs, their desires, and their objectives.

Get to know the real decision maker, along with those who can influence the ultimate decision, within the prospect's company. This vital information should be

ascertained as soon as possible. In addition, what is the purchase decision process? Does an individual make the purchase commitment or does a committee do it? If an individual can make the purchase decision, can she make it only up to a certain dollar amount? Are there any external influences on the decision process, such as attorneys, accountants, consultants, or business advisors?

Your primary activity in preparing for a sales call will be research. You'll want to know who to contact, their possible needs, their financial status, when they may want to buy, and who your competitors are. If you're well organized, this task will be far easier. Be sure to take advantage of your company as a source of information. Your prospect may be a former or present client of your company. In this case, a file will already exist which can provide all the information you need.

The more information you have about a prospect, the better your chances of making a sale. Some basic areas need to be explored as part of your pre-call homework. These are covered step by step in the following sections.

Who is the decision maker? When you make your sales call you don't want to waste your time. It is imperative that you meet with someone who is in a decision-making position. This person must also be knowledgeable enough to know what you are talking about. If you discover that this person does not have the authority to buy or to make decisions, you must diplomatically find out how the system works or whom you must see. Some company structures require the completion of a long chain of events before a decision can be made. If this is the case, ask your prospect, "Would you give me an idea of your company's decision-making process for a purchase such as this?" If that process involves more than one person seeing your presentation, try to arrange to show everyone at once. In some cases, however, it will be necessary for you to show several people your product at different times.

What is your prospect's current situation? In order to get a feel for the climate of your prospect's business, you need to ask some general questions. You might start off by suggesting, "Tell me a little bit about your business." This is a safe, non-threatening opener which can lead the way to more in-depth

probing such as "What's happening with sales?" or "Are you encountering any special problems with your present product or service?" You'll need to adapt these questions to your industry, however. You can see that some delicate probing can identify needs that might otherwise have remained hidden.

What are your prospects' goals? Aside from making money, what are they trying to accomplish in business? Forget about your product or service for a moment and get a grasp of the overall picture. Once you understand a company's primary purpose in the marketplace, you'll be able to relate to it in a more relevant way. This will also show them that you are interested in their business and well-being in addition to making sales.

Does your prospect have potential problems and needs? Once you determine your prospect's current situation and goals and objectives, you can readily determine if a "need gap" exists. A need gap exists when the prospect's current situation is not living up to or accomplishing his desired situation (objectives or end results). The greater the need gap, the greater and more immediate the need for the prospect to change what he's currently doing or purchasing. The greater the need gap, the greater the probability for you to make a sale.

You might also think about what the consequences could be if they don't use your product or service. Having that insight, you can develop some very strong and well thought out selling points to use in your presentation.

What Are Your Call Objectives?

Every time you see a client, you should have a reason for making that call. Dropping by to say hello is nice, but may be a waste of time. If you want to be sociable, you can use the phone. If you haven't sold the prospect yet, your reason for stopping by should be one of the action steps that will move you closer to making the sale. For example, you might stop by to show the prospect the latest in your product line or a new service you have to offer. Each time you see your prospect you should try to learn more about his or her needs. Ideally, each call will produce tangible evidence that you are making progress with the prospect; otherwise, you're just going through the motions.

Probing Questions to Uncover Needs

Although it is not generally advisable to have specifically worded questions that you will ask in a particular sequence, it is advisable to have a questioning strategy. This simply means that you should have a general idea of what you would like to ask in order to get the particular information you require.

What are the decision-making criteria? Part of your research should uncover the reason(s) why your prospect might be interested in your product or service. This is almost independent of need. You've already established or suspect a strong need, but why is that need present?

Once you have this information, you can look for the criteria used by each person you speak to in the company. In general you know that an executive will be interested in the long-term goals of the company or in increasing overall sales and profits. A middle manager will base his opinion on the cost effectiveness of your product while the first-line supervisors will be concerned with installation and operation.

When you contact each of these individuals, be aware of their different perspectives and gear your presentation to the criteria upon which their decision will be based. Everyone wants to know if the purchase will benefit him or her. If you can show everyone along the line that they, too, will benefit, then you'll be a strong contender in the race for their business.

How will you have to prove yourself? After you've presented your ideas and created some interest, many prospects will want you to prove your claims. They may ask you for a demonstration or an opportunity to try out the product in their business. An easier and less time-consuming way to prove your product or service is to offer testimonials from people the prospects know and trust.

If you can find out in advance what means will be necessary to prove yourself, you can spend time preparing to make your proof effective and appropriate to your prospect's needs.

What is your competitive edge? Is there something about you that is unique? Something that gives you the advantage over other companies and salespeople? If so, use it to your advantage. Often a minor detail will tip the balance in your direction. Many sales have been made based on the statement, "In addition to the product, you also get me. I come with the package. I'll be here when you need me to make sure that everything runs smoothly and that you realize the full benefits of the product." That kind of enthusiasm and sincerity makes salespeople winners!

During your presentation, highlight your unique selling factors. This is an excellent time to admit a limitation in your product. The customer will find out about it anyway, so you might as well score some points by being the one to enlighten him or her. When pointing out a weak point, contrast it with a strong point. For example, if you're selling dictation machines and say, "Yet, it's true that my machine will not take a standard cassette. The micro cassettes are, however, much easier to store and take up less room in your briefcase. They're actually easier to carry with you." That's honest selling that shows you are different from the rest.

What objections are you likely to encounter? When you're rehearsing your presentation, either with someone or in your mind, try imagining what the prospect's reactions will be. What questions will be asked? What resistance will you encounter from skeptical people? If you know the potential objections and questions, then you have time to prepare yourself.

What commitment will you ask? It is essential, at the end of a sales call, to know what action will follow. The only way to know this is to confirm it with the prospect in the form of a verbal agreement. There are all kinds of things you might ask for: more information, a referral, permission to give a demonstration, or, best of all, for the order itself!

Regardless of the commitment you seek, before you make the call you should have in mind a specific end result for the meeting. This is the most important part of your call objective.

How will you know the success criteria? Many products, such as business computers, serve different functions for different clients. If your product or service falls into this category how will *you* know if it is benefiting the client or not? You know some of the improvements he or she wants to make, but you can't know them all. So ask your client, "What are the criteria that you will use to judge the effectiveness of this product?" Your client will tell you what they are looking for and when they hope to see results.

There's an old adage—"If you fail to plan then you are planning to fail." In sales, this couldn't be truer. Your research and preparation will educate you so that you *will* be of service to your client. If you don't prepare yourself, you might as well be calling everyone cold without even knowing their names. It's not a very attractive alternative. Preparation and planning are like studying a map: You'll know which road to take with your prospect to get where you *both* want to go.