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20 PAGES OF RESEARCH-BASED INSIGHT, INCLUDING: SALES MANAGERS' REAL-WORLD MASTERS PROJECTS… ETHICAL COMPLIANCE… SALES SKILLS DATA: FINLAND V UK V CHINA V NIGERIA… IN-DEPTH GSSI REPORT + SALES RESEARCH ROUND-UP

LEARNING TO CHANGE

Some components of the sales ecosystem are responding. Others stand rooted in the past.

Precision Listening

W Roy Whitten & Scott A Roy

How to prepare, execute, and learn from a new way to listen

Last issue, we shared with you our thinking around "The Art of Discovery" (*International Journal of Sales Transformation, September 2016/Issue 2.3*). We discussed a nearly universal problem faced by salespeople: that "selling" is equated with "pitching." Day in and day out, it involves a process that includes: a) preparing one or more buying options for the customer, b) presenting these options in an engaging way, and c) persuading the customer to buy one of them.

Not only does this process consume significant time, talent and energy, it is the exact opposite of what great, professional selling is all about. It prepares and presents a solution before ensuring that the customer accurately identifies the problems they are trying to solve. Interestingly, this "selling style" is reinforced by a customer "buying style" that impulsively asks for – or, in the case of an RFP* or RFQ* – actually demands this approach.

We suggested a different context for sales – especially complex sales – that focuses on developing what we call a customer's "DQ" or decision intelligence. In this type of selling, you align your selling process with your customer's buying process. Then, you focus all your skill on helping your customer make the best possible decision for their business, even if that means saying no to what you have to offer.

Critical to this process is accurately discovering the root problems to be solved. Identifying these before presenting solutions is the fundamental shift in approach that unlocks larger, quicker, and more certain sales. Essential to this discovery is the skill of Precision Listening that enables customers to a) unearth concerns of which they were previously unaware and b) assess the cost of leaving these concerns unaddressed. This increases their DQ, which is what really builds the coveted "trusted advisor" relationship that drives sales.

We've been asked to expand on the "how to" of Precision Listening. Here is the three-step process that we teach to our clients and which we employ ourselves when we speak to prospective clients:

1. Prepare to be curious
2. Master the steps
3. Learn from what happened

Prepare to be curious

"It's the most amazing thing." This was from James, a senior salesperson whose job it was to "hunt" new clients for his technical services firm. "All I did was cut loose my curiosity, and everything changed!"

He was referring to the newly minted preparation process he had developed for his team: the steps that they were taking ahead of their first meeting with a prospective customer.

"We used to invest hours into figuring out value propositions for our prospects. We prepared slide decks, case studies, and business cases for alternative solutions. Then, we would practice pitching them and handling all possible objections. Then we'd show up with our material and start pitching."

That was before; now, they used a very simple, transformed approach.

"We still do our research. We read the annual reports, we search through the web sites, and we talk to others who know the customers. Then, we raise questions about the problems they must be facing – the issues, the challenges, the opportunities they might be missing. And then, we stop preparing and, instead, go talk to our prospective customers. We bring our list of questions, a clean notebook, an open mind, and a determination to get them to tell us about the problems they need to solve."

This sounds simple, but James and his team worked for several months to let go of old habits and master the new behaviour. It required practice, humility, and the willingness to risk failure. Here are the steps they took to heart during this time of re-learning. We use them ourselves, and we hope they will be of help to you as well.

Ahead of a first call on a prospective customer:

1. Prepare for a discovery conversation (not a pitching conversation) by preparing a written list of assumed "problems to be solved": the challenges, issues and unrealised opportunities this customer may be having.
2. Take the time to really adopt "raising your customer's DQ" as the purpose of your first visit.
3. Be ready to give a 30-60-second verbal presentation about you, your company and what you do – while being disciplined in redirecting the conversation from talking about "you" to talking about "them" and the problems they want to solve.

4. Learn how to slow down and get yourself into the present moment while you have this conversation. We recommend learning the skill we call Split Attention. You may find this instructional video helpful: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P756cW303M
5. Take notes – on paper or electronically. This signals your intention to listen carefully and remember what is said, and it actually helps you do it!

Set up your notebook with a vertical line one third of the distance from the right edge. On the left side of this line, you will take notes about what they say. To the right of the line, you quickly "park" what you are thinking, want to ask about or want to offer, but at a point later in the conversation.

Master the steps

The five steps below are deceptively simple. You will need to stay relaxed and curious in order to do them naturally, flexibly and in a way that is authentic to who you are at your best. Again, we recommend mastering the Split Attention technique, or some other way of keeping yourself present, composed, and thinking clearly while you listen.

1. Lead your customer to talk about the problem(s) they are trying to solve.
2. Listen to what they say, take brief notes, and regularly play back to them what you've heard them say so they know you are listening. NB: play back the left hand side of your notes page (what they are saying), not the right hand side (what you are thinking)!
3. After you've played back, be quiet and let them continue. Let them determine the pace and the subject matter of the conversation. Do not share your thinking, your questions or your opinions yet. Save that for later.
4. When they run out of steam, pick something they've mentioned that needs more exploration and say: "Tell me more about…"
5. When they've completed sharing what they have to say, then start introducing things from the right side of the line. Now you can guide the exploration to the other things you see as important.

Learn from what happened

Too often, salespeople move quickly from one thing to the next. Getting great at this listening technique requires personal reflection and collegial feedback: getting insight and feedback from others.

Use the steps above to review your customer conversations with others who were present or whose opinion you trust. How well did you do each step? How well did you maintain your relaxed state of mind and your open curiosity?

It's simple, not easy, but so worth your attention. Master it, and everything you do – selling, coaching, managing, trouble-shooting – will become sharper, incisive, and clearer.

Enjoy.

*RFP = request for proposal; RFQ = request for quotation.

Note: DQ Sales® is a registered trademark and Precision Listening is the copyrighted material of W Roy Whitten, PhD and Scott A Roy.

About the authors

Founded in 2009, Whitten & Roy Partnership operates in 19 countries around the world. It helps leading global businesses and organisations in the developing world transform their sales results.

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