

Want increased sales? Stop answering prospects' questions

By DAN BURKE AND DONNA COHEN

A trap awaits even the most promising talent in technology sales. At best, it results in lost revenue. At worst, it harms prospects and clients.

The trap? Answering prospect questions.

How can this be possible? Isn't the salesperson supposed to answer questions? The answer is "no" if you want the sale to result in the best possible outcomes for all involved. Here's why.

In technology sales, prospects routinely ask a few deadly questions (and sometimes a long list of them in the form of an RFP) that result in what we call "feature wars." The loser of the feature war is every salesperson that gets suckered into the battle.

Why? Because features are meaningless unless they bring specific, measurable benefits. Simply put, technology features are irrelevant outside of the context of specific prospect challenges or opportunities.

A great example was a recent effort by a company looking to purchase a multi-million dollar Customer Relationship Management solution. It assembled a detailed RFP that each vendor was required to answer. All but two vendors failed to ask further questions as a standard practice in their sales processes. All but two went to work frantically and diligently answering the RFP, as they were asked to.

The other two, recognizing the trap, requested multiple meetings with executives and key stakeholders. They were

gladly granted access and it was obvious, just by the level of sophistication of their approach, and the quality of their questions, they would end up in the final running. They did.

Yes, they did eventually answer the incredibly long and tedious list of RFP questions. But not until well after they were sure of what was meant by each of these questions, what the implications of each question were to the customer, and ultimately, what the ink and paper represented in the real world of client challenges.

The rest of the salespeople followed an amazingly common path to monstrous sales costs and minimal results. Weeks of energy resulted in not only a lost sale, but lost credibility for their companies and software. Even worse, one of the companies had software commonly perceived to be functionally superior to the application ultimately selected. However, due to its sales approach, the customer was convinced that these vendors would not serve them well, and, software superiority was not the primary deciding factor, since they didn't need all the bells and whistles offered.

So which questions should *not* be immediately answered? They sound something like, "how does your product compare to your competitor's product?" or "can you put together a proposal for me?" or "do you have a brochure you can send me?"

The unwary sales professional falls into the trap and mindlessly begins to respond. He quickly scrambles to produce a brochure, proposal or presentation, and



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begins describing the feature, functionality and benefit list of his wonderful, marvelous product. Notice that we did not say wonderful, marvelous, "solution?"

The battle-wary professional, usually the local top producer in his or her domain, knows what is going on and approaches these questions differently.

Here's the rainmaker's response to questions like these: "That's a good question. Before I answer it, could I ask one question first? What challenges do you think you might solve with our product?" So rather than being dragged into a meaningless comparison, the professional moves to better understand the problem.

The next question he or she typically asks is something like, "How were you anticipating our product might benefit your organization?"

Here are a few more examples of questions that should be asked before performing demonstrations or answering prospect questions about features or capabilities:

"That is a good question, tell me

more about that... "

"Could you be more specific?"

"Could you give me an example?"

"How long have you been trying to solve that problem?"

"What have you tried in the past?"

"How did that work?"

"How much do you think you would save if you could solve that problem?"

"In round numbers, how much do you suppose that will cost over a year?"

Ultimately, the strength of sales professionals is in their relational skills. They are naturally bent to please, solve problems and answer client questions. However, that strength can result in undesirable outcomes when the focus of the sales effort shifts away from solving client problems to feature functionality discussions that are relevant only after a clear picture of client needs is formed. Until then, answering a client's request for a proposal, presentation, or demonstration is irresponsible and a waste of time for all parties involved.

If you want to dramatically boost your sales, stop answering questions and start asking them.

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