To Know Me Is to Trust Me

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Earning the buyer's trust is a prerequisite for success in selling industrial goods. This paper examines the process of earning the buyer's trust and suggests that demonstrating truthfulness, providing benevolent service, and establishing credibility are fundamental attributes which the industrial sales person must demonstrate to potential customers.

INTRODUCTION

Consider the persuasive challenge confronting a new but trustworthy salesperson selling a new product for a new company in a new market. Any tools or techniques that could speed the rightful attribution of trust from potential buyers to this new salesperson would be most welcome information, especially if they come in time to make next month's quota and mortgage payment! This article describes some simple but highly effective tactics that can help a sales executive earn the buyer's trust. But first, it examines the nature of trust as it relates to buyer/seller relations.

In the long run, the best way to win a potential buyer's trust—and to keep it—is to truly and completely deserve it. Not only is being trustworthy the best way to earn the buyer's trust, it is also important for the sales person's own well-being and overall job performance because of its impact on the rep's self confidence, self esteem, and freedom from guilt. As Bhide and Stevenson [1] recently pointed out: "Business men and women keep their word because they want to."

A trustworthy sales representative (or "rep" for short) will become trusted once the potential buyer has taken the time to get to know the rep and his or her methods of business conduct. The key is having multiple contacts with the potential buyer. The salesperson needs to create an environment in which the potential buyer gets to know the rep, and the sooner the better.

Most sales reps, however, are very impatient. Few deserving individuals are willing to simply wait for the long run to arrive in order to reap the many rewards of being considered a trustworthy partner in a mutually beneficial business relationship with any given buyer. And these rewards are great. In addition to the previously mentioned intrinsic benefits, trusted sales executives experience significant increases in sales revenues (and, of course, commissions), a shift in role from persuader to problem solver, easier access to decision makers, referrals, lower selling expenses, fewer calls on an account to close a sale, and all of the other advantages that are typically held by an "in-supplier."

New sales reps are among the least patient because so few potential buyers know them, and therefore trust them, yet. These rookie reps are in a hurry to earn trust sooner, because they realize that in some short-sighted selling
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organizations, many new sales reps who miss short-run sales goals are fired. This “separation” could occur before these long-run attributions of trust (and all of the associated benefits) are given enough time to develop.

Veteran sales executives also want to speed the attribution of trust. Professionals with more than 20 years of sales success and solid long-term relationships with major accounts are continually meeting new people at new or even existing accounts whose trust must be earned. And as far as the veteran sales rep is concerned, the sooner trust is earned, the better.

The point is that a lot of highly trustworthy individuals who do, in fact, deserve to be trusted would like to know how to convince people of their trustworthiness in shorter periods of time. They are searching for more productive and efficient methods to achieve this highly desirable goal.

Buyers also want trust to be established. In surveys, they often rate this salesperson characteristic as the most important quality they look for in a salesperson [2]. It reduces the buyer’s perceived risk as well as stress and allows the buyer to feel more comfortable with the buying decision. It’s a win-win situation. The buyer wants to trust the salesperson, and the salesperson needs that trust. Both parties benefit as individuals, and the resulting higher level of productivity benefits their employers. This, of course, contributes to our society’s economic prosperity.

In a recent survey conducted on how sales executives earn buyer trust, highly successful manufacturer’s reps were asked how many sales calls were necessary in order to gain the trust of a prospective buyer [3]. The responses ranged from 1 to 10, with 3.6 as the average. An earlier study on the topic reported a range of from 1 to 29 calls and an average of 5.6 in order to gain the buyer’s trust for a sample of 42 sales reps of medical goods and services [4]. It is not completely coincidental that it has also been reported that the average number of calls necessary to close a sale is five [5].

Although trust development is critically important for salespeople, all business executives need to earn another person’s trust at one time or another. Unfortunately this article can’t provide you with any magic “trust dust” that can be blown in someone’s face. But it can tell you about some simple trust earning tactics that will help you succeed in earning their trust. If executed properly, these tactics will increase your productivity and efficiency in speeding the rightful attribution of trust from others.

DEMONSTRATING TRUTHFULNESS

The first such tactic is demonstrating truthfulness to the potential buyer. This is a key factor in earning trust. Obviously, being honest and telling the truth are absolutely vital. While preparing this article, the author had the opportunity to talk with Willis Wolf, former CEO of the Olsen Electronics Corporation. He has over 40 years of highly successful sales experience and explained his philosophy on earning the buyer’s trust very succinctly: “Never lie, cheat, or steal — period.”

By taking a proactive stance, however, a deserving sales rep can decrease the time it takes to earn a buyer’s trust. The key here is to demonstrate truthfulness by making a large number of promises that are kept. By doing so, the sales executive proves that his or her words and deeds are linked. Remember the experiment with Pavlov’s dog? A bell was rung immediately before feeding the dogs. Eventually, the dogs began to salivate whenever they heard the bell. They learned that food was provided when the bell was rung. Potential buyers also experience the same type of learning process. When a salesperson makes enough promises that are kept, the potential buyer eventually learns to expect the rep to fulfill his or her promises. This is what trust is all about.

For example, the sales rep can begin by making an appointment for the first sales call, rather than cold calling. By setting a time and day for the call and then being on time, the process of making and keeping promises has begun. During the first sales call, the rep can promise to follow up with a telephone call at a certain time, say 3:15
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on Thursday, to provide additional information. When the rep makes the call at precisely 3:15 on Thursday with the information sought, another promise has been made and kept. Whereas each of these has a small impact, the cumulative effect can be very significant. To the extent that the sales rep can consistently demonstrate truthfulness over time, in a variety of settings, and with a consensus of people within the buying organization, these efforts will greatly speed the attribution of trust.

Another aspect of demonstrating truthfulness involves being extraordinarily truthful. For example, a potential buyer may ask a number of competing sales reps to recommend an order quantity for a given project. If other sales reps recommend a quantity that could well exceed the buyer's initial needs and the buyer has an excellent understanding of the true quantity needed, the rep who suggests a more modest initial order is likely to be perceived as "extraordinarily truthful," or distinctively honest in comparison to the other sales reps who exaggerated the estimated amount needed.

Another way to demonstrate truthfulness is to explain the product's pros as well as its cons. Such a two-sided argument helps demonstrate truthfulness and may be quite effective, especially when the buyer is extremely well-informed and sophisticated. Other means of demonstrating truthfulness include the use of facts and figures rather than generalities when describing a product ("It's 74 inches long," rather than: "It's very long"), back up claims with proof of such as testimonials and other third party verifications, use written rather than verbal contracts, and include a written guarantee.

Demonstrating truthfulness also relates to a concept known in the social science literature as "the cost for lying" [6]. Both sales people and potential buyers know that a salesperson who is caught telling a lie is likely to lose the order, perhaps the account, and possibly even the rep's job with this company. The greater the sales rep's cost for lying, the more likely that his or her message is perceived as truthful because the buyer assumes that the sales rep would not take such a risk when the potential penalty is so high. The salesperson can highlight this "cost for lying" in discussions with the potential buyer, thereby increasing the probability of being perceived as someone who would not make the costly mistake of lying.

PROVIDING BENEVOLENT SERVICE

Providing benevolent service is the second basic sales tactic for speeding the rightful attribution of buyer trust. The perceived motives of the sales executive are critically important in a potential buyer's evaluation. Those sales reps who are perceived as wanting to help (rather than harm) the buyer will more probably be liked and trusted. Furthermore, when this desire to help is perceived as altruistic in nature, rather than self-serving, the attribution of trust is even more probable. What this means is that the sales rep needs to provide outstanding service to the potential buyer, to consistently and in a variety of ways demonstrate an intense and real concern for solving the customer's problem, and to be perceived in this way by a consensus of people within the buying organization.

For example, establishing common ground, developing rapport, never rushing a potential buyer, taking the time to provide what are perceived as useful, "special" services for an account, agreeing with the prospect whenever possible, having a positive outlook, smiling, and being polite, friendly, and courteous contribute greatly toward earning trust. Obviously, the sales executive should never boast about the commission that would be earned from the buyer's order, because this would suggest that the motive was suspect. Instead, whenever it is true and likely to be perceived as such, the salesperson should let the buyer know that her primary concern is for the buyer to be well served, that she enjoys helping the buyer, that she enjoys the job itself (rather than the rewards), and that she could never benefit from the customer being poorly served.

Bill Barrows exemplifies this attitude of providing benevolent service. He is President of Bill Barrows and Associates, a manufacturers' rep organization based in Hudson,
Keeping promises builds trust.

Ohio. Bill is a senior citizen who recently told me: “As long as my health is good, I don’t plan to retire. It isn’t that I need to work in order to make ends meet. I want to keep selling because it makes me feel good to help my customers solve problems. It provides me with a sense of satisfaction that I can’t get anywhere else.”

ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

Establishing credibility is the third selling tactic that sales reps should use to speed the rightful attribution of trust. This can be employed at any time, but it may be especially useful in the early stages of a business relationship. Establishing credibility could also be referred to as the “never wear a plaid sports coat” tactic. In order to be trusted, the sales rep must first establish credibility by being taken seriously and considered a professional.

It is very important to understand that trust is a matter of perceptions, and these may or may not be consistent with the reality of any given situation. A given sales rep could be the most trustworthy individual in the universe but mistakingly viewed by a potential buyer on the first sales call as an entirely untrustworthy person. This is because buyers make judgements of trustworthiness based on bits and pieces of evidence. Some of this evidence is spurious, and the result is incorrect stereotyping.

For example, there is clear and conclusive evidence that manner of dress impacts on first impressions relating to perceptions of trustworthiness. Some people hold the view that anyone wearing a bow tie is not “serious,” or that anyone wearing a plaid sports coat is, at best unprofessional, and at worst, dishonest. John T. Molloy’s book The New Dress for Success [7] is generally viewed as a standard reference on how manner of dress can impact on establishing credibility within the corporate world. Essentially, Molloy’s suggestions relate to dressing in a certain way so that a target audience will perceive the person as a member of a particular reference group. The key, of course, is dressing so as to be categorized into the desired group.

The sales rep can, of course, establish credibility in many ways other than manner of dress and grooming. For example, making eye contact and speaking slowly contribute toward establishing credibility, and therefore trust. Furthermore, successful sales executives often engage in what is known as “impression management” when they tactfully indicate professional achievements, such as having received a “Sales Person of the Year” award, professional designations such as CLU, or graduation from a prestigious university.

Remember, too, that some buyers assume that sales reps are untrustworthy until conclusive evidence to the contrary is provided. Consequently, the sales rep who establishes credibility early has an advantage in overcoming these unfavorable expectations. Those who don’t are likely to continue being viewed according to the potential buyer’s original, negative perceptions unless and until the buyer takes the time to get to know the sales rep well enough to correct such an inaccurate categorization.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the issue of earning trust in buyer-seller relationships. Trustworthy sales reps could simply “let nature take its course” and wait for the potential buyer to naturally, but ever so slowly, attribute the characteristic of trustworthiness to the deserving sales executive. Unfortunately for both the seller and the potential buyer, this process may take considerable time. During this period, the potential buyer forgoes the advantages that come from purchasing the seller’s products, devotes perhaps unproductively high amounts of time to vendor search and analysis, Lying destroys trust.
The sales rep who establishes credibility early has a clear advantage.

and experiences relatively high amounts of perceived risk along with the attendant and unpleasant stress. As has been argued before, the potential buyer wants to trust the sales rep in order to overcome all of these undesirable experiences.

For the sales rep, too, this period prior to the buyer's attribution of trust is an agonizing time. Being tested, knowing that the people with whom you are working do not trust you (yet), and being judged as relatively unproductive on the standard measure of performance, sales revenue, all contribute to a less than optimal work environment. So both participants in the potential exchange have a lot to gain from the correct and appropriate attribution of trust to worthy sales executives.

The simple tactics discussed in this article can effectively speed the earning of trust by sales reps. By successfully implementing the various techniques of demonstrating truthfulness, providing benevolent service, and establishing credibility, both participants in the process will benefit, resulting in a classic example of a win-win situation sooner than would otherwise be the case. The key to long-run success, though, continues to be providing exceptional professional service to the buyer, always doing what you say you will do, and deserving the customer's trust by being a truly and completely trustworthy individual. It's really very simple, isn't it?

REFERENCES

5. Sales Reps Are Earning More Than Ever Before, Marketing News 16, 16 (June 6, 1988).

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