

GROWERTALKS

Features

10/1/2018

Step 5: Setting the Pace of the Sales Process

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Every sale has a life of its own and every sale has a speed or pace at which you and your customer move through the steps in the process. It's critical that YOU are in control of that pace because that can work to your advantage.

As we've discussed in past episodes, the basic steps of the selling process are building rapport, discovery and confirmation, finding the right solution and selling the product. Since customers aren't normally focused on the pace of the selling process, you're free to present the solution to his or her problem when the time is right.

But exactly when is the right time to present solutions to your customer?

My first few suggestions should be pretty obvious: 1) Don't present new solutions when your customer is too busy to listen; 2) avoid presenting new ideas when the customer is exhausted, such as at the end of a long day; 3) don't present that sure-fire solution when your customer is angry over things that you cannot control; and 4) remember that telephone calls, text messages and emails to your customer's phone can completely disrupt an otherwise great presentation, so make sure you have his or her undivided attention.

To illustrate that last point, here's yet another story from my early days in seed sales:

When I joined a seed breeding company in the early 1970s, I literally didn't know a pansy from an alyssum, but the breeding and seed production staff were very patient and taught me what I needed to know. Within a year, I was promoted to sales manager and began calling on our broker customers.

My very first sales trip was to a large brokerage firm in the Philadelphia area. When I was ushered into the buyer's office (a 40-year veteran of the seed business) I could feel my knees knocking. I started the presentation by telling the buyer that we had a new petunia that was just about the color of his tie ... then RINGGGG! went his phone. He took the call. When he hung up, we started over. I told the buyer that we were introducing a unique new color of impatiens, and before I could describe this world-beating new product, RINGGGG! and he was on the phone again. I was completely undone by the interruptions.

After he completed his third call, I said, "Mr. Newman, I want to end this sales call, but could I have another appointment for the same time next week?" He was confused, but he agreed.

I knew I had to find a better way to present our products, but most importantly, I had to find a way to get him out of his office for the presentation ... away from his phone!

Flipping through a magazine, I saw a new gismo called the portable Kodak Carousel Projector (remember, this was

in the early '70s, way before laptops and PowerPoint). There was the solution to my problem! Just shoot 35 mm color slides of our new varieties and put on a professional show for my buyers.

It only took a week to put the show together. I went back to Mr. Newman's office and announced that I had a slideshow for him, but we needed to use a dark conference room to see the slides. This worked like a charm ... he left his day-to-day problems in his office and was transported to the land of new seed introductions in his conference room. Since this Kodak Carousel Projector was just introduced, I figured that none of the other seed salesman would have one. I figured correctly and was the first seed salesman to visit customers and put on a slideshow.

(One interesting sidebar to that story: Mr. Newman tore into each new introduction I presented. I figured he was so negative, he wouldn't take any of them for his new catalog. Yet when the show was over and the lights came up, he smiled and handed me a list of the new varieties and the quantity of seed he wanted. He got a big laugh out of hazing the new seed salesman and we became fast friends.)

A great way to analyze the proper speed of the selling process is to select a customer and a specific product and construct a "sales process timeline." Here's how to do that:

First, select a date when the order needs to be booked. In the horticultural market, more often than not, that booking date is dependent on seasonality, early order discounts or product availability.

Next, after selecting the date by which you want to book the order, you can plot the steps of the selling process on a calendar, working backwards in time to the date of your next call. Since the most important milestones in the selling process are: 1) Building the relationship; 2) the discovery process; 3) confirming the information you've uncovered; 4) finding the right solution; and 5) presenting the product, those are the steps you definitely want to plot on your calendar.

By asking yourself how many sales calls it will take to pass through each of the five key steps in the selling process, you can build a timeline for booking the order. This timeline also provides a series of sound objectives for each sales call.

Thinking through the steps of the selling process also gives you a chance to pre-plan key questions (especially "thought transfer" questions for each call—see article 3 in the May 2018 issue of *GrowerTalks*). Pre-planning all the important questions you need to ask your customer will make your sales task roll smoothly.

After completing the selling process timeline, you'll see what kind of pace is required to book the order when it needs to be booked. Sometimes you need to step on the accelerator to work through the selling process steps (adding extra sales calls can help you speed up the selling process).

Controlling the pace of the selling process can be a challenge due to unforeseen events—after all, you can only control so much. But remember, planning ahead, then sticking to your plan and following the steps of the selling process, will allow you to get back on course when the headwinds subside! **GT**

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