

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Step 1: Finding Common Ground

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Each of us, whether a veteran road warrior or behind-the-scenes support staff, is selling something every day. It might be a product or service, a better way to do something at work, your point of view ... even getting your kids to clean their rooms ... it all requires salesmanship.

What is salesmanship? In general, it's the ability to successfully convince someone to buy your product, service or idea. But really good, effective salesmanship follows a very specific process. It's more science than art.

Step one? Establishing common ground—a rapport, if you will—with the decision maker. Because you can't sell a \$5,000 product on a \$50 relationship.

Rapport: a fish story

Whatever your product may be, people will not buy your offering unless they want to. And if they don't want to, they'll always find a reason to resist. On the other hand, if they want to do business with you, they'll always find a way to say yes. And people most often say yes to those they know, like and trust.

That requires building a solid relationship with your customer—a rapport. Sometimes a relationship can be built quickly... think about that person you “just hit it off with” the first time you met. Sometimes this is a very slow process. But one almost sure-fire way to accelerate the rapport-building process is to find some common ground. Let me give you an example:

About a year ago, I was traveling with a new sales representative, introducing her to the growers in her new territory. This new sales rep was an excellent grower herself, but she had no sales experience. And to compound the problem, she was replacing a rep who had been in that territory for over 20 years and had moved to a competing firm, so she would be battling with him for the same business.

We visited one customer who said flatly, “I will still buy all my inputs from the old salesman.” I replied, “Okay ... but before we discuss that issue, I have a question I have been dying to ask: In the hall outside your office you have a picture of a young man holding on to a VERY large fish. When I was 11 years old, I lucked onto a very large fish and my father—now 99 years old—has the very same picture of me on his wall. Could you tell me the story behind that picture?”

The customer's face lit up, and for the next 45 minutes, he and I exchanged fishing stories—his about his grandson in the picture and me about my very special fishing buddy, my dad.

Needless to say, my new sales rep started to fidget and was visibly undone by the length of our fishing stories. We then got down to business and I listened to how great our previous rep was and how much he had done for this

customer. After agreeing that loyalty was something that, as a company, we strongly believed in, I asked him if he thought our company had been a factor in how good the previous salesman had been ... how we supported him in his sales efforts. He agreed that we had done a stellar job supporting the previous salesman. I asked if he liked dealing with his assigned customer service representative from the office. Again, he said she was the greatest. I closed the call by asking him to please look over the business he hadn't placed and perhaps give us some of it.

"After all," I concluded, "This young lady is just starting her career and you know how hard it is to attract new talent into our industry. Please consider giving her a chance and some business."

He looked at our new salesperson, smiled, and said he would find some orders for her when he got home that night.

This story illustrates the power of establishing common ground ... the first step to building a strong relationship. Always be on the lookout for clues as to what interests the people around you.

Here's another story, this time illustrating the importance of finding common ground when selling ideas:

Several years ago, I held a marketing position in a company. In this company, was a product manager who was a pro at torpedoing most of the marketing strategies I proposed for his department. I decided that I would make it my business to rebuild my relationship with him and see if that helped.

One afternoon when I dropped by his office, he was looking over some plans for what appeared to be a remote-controlled airplane. I took a chance and asked him if that was his hobby. He smiled and said yes, he was deep into the remote-controlled airplane business and it had gone way beyond a hobby. I kidded him about always being portrayed as such a hard-nosed businessman, then told him I had built a glider with my son last year. We called it "The Gypsy Girl." We made such a mess of it, it never flew more than 30 yards.

A couple of weeks later, I was getting into a van for a ride to O'Hare airport, and on the seat next to me was a magazine completely dedicated to the very big (and lucrative) business of professional competitive remote-controlled airplane flying. I opened it to a story that was all about a very successful and very large remote-control business, and guess who owned the business? That's right, my nemesis, the product manager! I clipped out the story and sent it to him from my hotel that night.

When I got back to my office, on my desk was the nicest note from him and he invited me to lunch and to see his shop. As we got to know each other we found lots of other common interests. From that day on, not only did he support my ideas, I found him to be a marketing genius and always took my ideas to him for improvement.

Often, we get discouraged when an idea or a product isn't well received. We imagine some complex reasons for the rejection. But in reality, maybe we just need to go back and "reset" our relationship with the decision maker—start fresh to build a solid relationship. **GT**

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