

GROWERTALKS

Features

8/1/2018

Step 4: Honoring Your Customer's Problem

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Have you ever agonized over a problem for weeks, then explained the issue to a friend or family member and then they flippantly give you their solution after about two seconds of thought? How did that make you feel? It happened to me once and it made me feel downright stupid! It also made me wish I'd never brought up my problem with this person.

The lesson I learned? If a customer brings up a problem they're having, be very careful how you react.

How you respond to your customer's problems can have a bigger impact on your relationship with him or her than actually solving the problem. Granted, as sales people, we need to take a real interest in our customer's problems. We need to ask as many good questions as we can, uncovering all the nuances of the issue. As we ask these questions, it forces our customer to rethink the problem, and many times they discover some angle they'd overlooked.

So asking questions is good. What you should avoid, however, is giving instant, rapid-fire solutions before honoring the problem with some deep thought. This is especially important when you know, or think you know, the solution. You must stifle the urge to blurt out an answer. You might think that offering a solution quickly will show your customer how smart you are, but, actually, offering a quick solution can be tough on your relationship. Here's yet another case where I learned my lesson the hard way:

Many years ago, I was traveling with a seasoned sales representative. We were going to revisit one of his key accounts and before we went in he said to me, "Dean, you cannot do what you did here last time ... he will throw us out!" I was shocked because I remembered the last call as being very productive. I asked what I'd done and he said, "During our walk around the greenhouse, the grower asked a lot of questions about some of the problems he was having. You gave him very good answers and you gave them immediately after each question. After the call, the grower told me he thought you were a know-it-all!"

After the honest-but-stinging appraisal soaked in, I realized he was absolutely right: I didn't give the customer's questions the respect they deserved and that made for a very bad impression.

When we realize that we need to show real interest in what our customers are saying that's the first step in creating a good impression. Here are two techniques that work almost every time:

First, ask more questions about their problem. Second, take written notes as you're listening. Tell the customer that these are good questions that will require some research. At the end of the call, summarize your customer's questions/problems and tell him you'll get back to him. Reaching out to your customer after doing some research accomplishes two objectives; you have a better chance of offering solid information and you create another chance to build your relationship with your customer.

It's important to remember that when a customer asks you a question, you're probably not the only person he/she's asked. Often, he/she will ask several people their opinion and then compare their answers. Knowing this, it's a good idea to ask if he/she has received any other opinions and, if so, what did others think? It's also important to ask what your customer thinks of the various answers he/she was given ... you may learn what NOT to tell him/her.

Last year, I learned another valuable lesson about providing information to customers:

I was traveling with a sales rep who specializes in the microgreens business. All the production is done indoors with shelves and lights, where all environmental factors can be controlled. Most of the product was germinated and grown for just a few weeks before being cut and sent to health food stores (it all looked like Kentucky bluegrass turf to me!).

As we made our calls, I was impressed with the depth of this salesman's knowledge. At the end of the second day, a customer asked a question that I'd heard the rep answer at least three times before. Oddly, this time, rather than give the full answer, he only gave a little bit of the story to the customer.

When we got out to the car, I asked why he didn't give all of the information to the grower as he'd done in previous calls. His answer was simple and very true: "Dean, you don't give them all you know at once! Save some for down the road ... these growers have to NEED your help before they are receptive. When you tell them everything at once, you make it look too easy!"

A sales representative I've idolized for at least 20 years has one more reason for telling his customer he will get back to them with the results of his research into the problem: At the end of the call, he says, "Can we meet two weeks from today at the same time? We can discuss what I've been able to uncover, plus other related issues." In other words, he uses this technique to set the date of the next appointment and gains agreement about the topics to be discussed. What a wonderful way to gain permission for another meeting and work on behalf of your customer as well!

Several times in the first three installments of this discussion on selling skills, we addressed the importance of asking the right questions. But no discussion of questions would be complete without looking at how we should react when we're the ones being asked the questions. Honor the customer's problems, recognize the importance of the customer's questions and take a real interest in helping the customer solve his/her issues.

When the customer gets what he/she wants, you'll get what you want! **GT**

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