

## Earning the “Yes” through Effective Customer Attitude Management

**By: Kriss Barlow**

Wouldn't life be grand if everyone you targeted in your employer sales effort was a willing purchaser of your product or service? Magically, you use your relationship sales process and they say, “Yes! I'm interested.”

But, alas, there is no fairy godmother and sales seldom works that way. More often than not, you find yourself in the midst of a situation like one of these:

*“Bill Smith, the HR director at Company X Manufacturing has 300 employees. He currently has no onsite health options offered. I know we could help him, but he doesn't seem to have any interest.”*

Or

*“I spoke with Dr. Johnson this morning and he said he'd be happy to send us all his cardiology referrals if we would get rid of Dr. Brown, our Chief.”*

Or

*“Mary Anderson is willing to consider us for the our new scheduling service. But, she's not convinced we're going to deliver the service in the way we promise—and she needs proof.”*

The list could go on and on. The ability to deal with customer attitudes—to listen, respond and manage their issues—is a key to sales success. When you start the process, it's important to clearly identify the customer attitude you're dealing with and implement a process for management of that attitude.

The process does presume the salesperson uses good relationship sales approaches. With good attitude management, there's a built-in assumption that the sales methodology is dialogue-based and that is focuses on understanding the customer's needs.

The method also requires that the salesperson offer advantages targeted to the customer's expressed needs. The salesperson needs to be an active listener, allowing for a healthy exchange of ideas and an articulated customer buy-in. The best attitude management in the world will not make up for a poorly developed sales strategy or a dump-the-bucket, tell and sell approach!

## **The Indifferent Customer**

Indifference is likely the most challenging customer attitude of all. And it appears very early on in the selling cycle. The indifferent client has no perceived need for what you offer: In general, they demonstrate no need to spend time with you, listen to what you have to offer—actually, even to be nice to you.

This is the guy who sits across the desk from you (assuming you even got the appointment) and just nods or mutters one-word answers to your questions on that first sales call. Yep, selling to the indifferent customer can be a painful experience.

In our industry, these prospects usually act indifferent because of three reasons:

1. They already have what you provide and are satisfied with their current provider.
2. They provide the service in-house and feel this adequately meets their needs.
3. They believe they don't have a need for any service—not just yours.

In employer sales, the rep often encounters companies who have services in-house and those companies who feel no obligation to offer outside services to their employees. An employer with an on-site nurse, for example, may not believe it's necessary to have a relationship /affiliation with your occupational health program.

Once you've uncovered indifference in a prospective client, the first step is to determine why. Is it because they're satisfied with a competitor, because they're offering the service in-house or because they have no perceived need?

At this juncture, the salesperson needs to decide whether the client is truly worth the effort. In some situations, it's appropriate to provide the prospect with a broad overview, thank them for their time and move that contact to the back of the list. But that's not always the best course of action for every indifferent client you run up against. Many times, it's the salesperson's job to identify the best way to manage the indifference.

## **Do the Due Diligence**

Preparing background information is valuable in working with the indifferent customer. Since this prospect has no need to disclose information about their current situation or their current provider, the salesperson needs to be very prepared with good questions and insights. In working with the indifferent prospect, the representative's sales goal may be as simple as planting some "seeds of doubt," providing a couple of key thoughts that leave the prospect thinking, "I wonder if my provider is doing all they could in that area?"

Doing your homework allows you to understand the prospect's current provider and also positions you to drop bits of information that differentiates your organization in a positive way. For example, "Dr. Smith, I know you're very satisfied with your current referral situation. In the event you have a patient with XYZ insurance, which is accepted at my hospital, I just want to

make sure you're comfortable with our process and the knowledge that we have one of the nations premier cardiac surgeons on our staff."

Converting an indifferent prospect is a longer-than-average proposition. The most effective method is to do your homework and recognize vulnerabilities in their current situation. From there, the salesperson can use dialogue and provide insights to demonstrate where the prospect's current process may have gaps. Move slowly and look and listen for potential problems with their current provider. If you feel some interest, test their level of readiness for fixing those problems. That's converting an opportunity into a need—and that can set the tone for your relationship from here out.

## **The Skeptical Client**

Skepticism is another attitude often presented in the sales call. . This is demonstrated when the prospect is interested and has a need for something you offer. But, when you begin to talk about your product and service, they become skeptical that you're truly able to provide all that you have described. This attitude appears right after you introduce the benefits of your product.

The client might say, "I heard that same promise when I signed up to work with the other group." Or, "I just can't believe that your surgery department truly runs on schedule." These prospective clients want what you offer; they just don't trust that you can deliver it.

Managing skepticism starts with isolating the concern. The salesperson might say, "So you're asking me to demonstrate our surgery department's ability to run on schedule." When the prospect clarifies their need to hear proof, the salesperson has to be prepared to select a source that demonstrates the organization does deliver (based on the insights the salesperson has gathered about the prospect) and then offer it as proof.

Proof sources may include: clinical/statistical outcomes, research articles and statements/testimonials from valued peers. In our surgery example, the proof source may be a tracking log of scheduled versus actual start times in the operating rooms for the last 90 days. It's the salesperson's job to determine the type of proof source that will be accepted by the client and then provide it. Most of the articles, publications and outcomes that are a part of our material packet are designed to manage skepticism. Use it when the time is right.

Once proof is offered, the salesperson must measure whether it's been accepted. A critical mistake often made by those new to the process is to keep proving and proving. Instead, offer the proof and then ask, "Does that answer your concerns?" If "yes," then move on with the dialogue. If "no," query the prospect to determine what other type of proof would work. For example, "Would talking with another surgeon about the changes and new time management system might be helpful in addressing your concerns?"

Pay attention to timing and you will be easily able to identify this attitude. Skepticism generally appears right after benefits are introduced. The prepared salesperson with the proof and sources to demonstrate the product/service capabilities and who is able to test for effectiveness and then

move on will be seen as professional and become a great resource for the prospect. That prospect is on the way to becoming a valued client!

## **Management of Objections**

Sometimes, prospective customers object to something you've said or some aspect of your product or service. There are some who may object to something that they've misunderstood as fact. Others will challenge something that's indeed a fact about your product or how you do business—something you can't change. While both types of objections will appear at the same point in the selling cycle, they need to be managed differently.

Objections generally show up toward the end of the cycle, either when you're about to close or when you've offered your closing statement. The confident salesperson is thinking they've "done the deal" and the client counters with a "not so fast" sort of statement.

I truly believe this is why the groups we interview point to *closing* as one of the skills they most want to improve in our sales training sessions. Often, when salespeople have tried to close and have been confronted with objections, they believe it's because their closing skills went awry.

But, in most cases, if the salesperson uses a good sales process, objections serve to clarify and allay the prospect's last-minute concerns or unknowns. The salesperson has to be prepared for this and to assume that there may be objections. It's just part of the process.

Because the selling cycle is often long and complex—and in reality, there may be other providers in there, working to get the business as well—prospects may misunderstand what you provide. They may have you confused with someone else, have only heard pieces and parts, or have mistaken what was discussed.

For example, the prospect may say, "Well, I'd like to do business with you, but I need a clinic with 24-hour coverage." Because you offer this, your natural tendency is to leap up and say, "We have that!" There's a better approach, however. Start by ensuring that this is the only issue keeping the client from a purchase. Then, once you've gotten them to agree that if you could provide this, provide the fact and move toward closure.

The dialogue might go something like this: The salesperson says, "So, you're interested in shifting to our clinic, but only if we provide 24-hour coverage, is that right?" When the client agrees that this is the only thing keeping them from moving forward, then you let them know that you understand why this point is so valuable and that you do indeed have that in place.

### *CLAMPing Down on Objections*

When dealing with these objections or skepticism, we use an acronym to assist sales people in remembering how to be proactive and professional—through the CLAMP process:

C=Clarify      Ask a question to ensure you have clearly identified the objection.

L=Listen      When the prospect responds, listen to their words, priorities and expectations.

A=Answer      Give a clean, positive response.

M=Monitor      See if the reply/reason offered was able to overcome their concern.

P=Proceed      Move on to closure or the next phase in the selling process.

In summary, misunderstandings should be carefully assessed and isolated as the only issue between preventing the process from moving forward, then clarified with actual policy or fact. Many organizations may see the same kinds of misunderstandings arise—that's good news, because it allows you to pre-plan and prepare for their management.

There are clients who would like to do business with you, but may have one objection—something you can't fix or change—that's keeping them from becoming a client. In occupational health, the most common objections are *price* and *location*. In physician relations sales, this may include managed care plans offered, location or a specific personality issue.

Let's admit it, the salesperson is just not given the power to offer services at the price they want, to build a new clinic or to negotiate a contract. The reality is that there will always be things we cannot change. But, all is not lost, there is still good opportunity to manage this attitude and make a sale.

Objections due to fact really can only be managed when there is a preponderance of good reasons for buying that is more compelling than the one unavoidable fact that cannot be changed. The salesperson's role is to remind the prospect of all the needs that can be met with your service and position how this can outweigh the one negative.

For example, "I know you and your team were excited about our worker injury triage program and 24-hour access to an occupational medical physician. I'm assuming that will make the extra 5 minutes in the car to reach our clinic a worthwhile investment, am I right?" If they're not yet convinced, the salesperson will need to uncover more needs and benefits and continue to work to put more attributes to tip the balance.

Lastly, remember that price is always a function of value. For some clients, the world seems to start and stop on a dime, but surveys and personal history demonstrate these people are the exception. The vast majority of clients want value and are willing to pay a bit more if you can create a compelling case for doing so. Being able to do so truly separates the good salesperson from the pack.

Effective management of objections based to fact requires that the salesperson have a good accounting of the needs that were matched to benefits and agreed upon earlier in the sales cycle. The salesperson needs to be focused and proactive—using limited words and strong sentences to remind the prospect what they're interested in achieving as a result of working with you.

## **Closing Thoughts**

Many outside of sales believe a good salesperson is a good talker. While many do bring that attribute to the table, it's the ability to listen, evaluate and offer value that really makes an effective salesperson. This is never truer than when the sales process uncovers customer attitudes. Salespeople who really want to excel in the profession must take on the responsibility of learning to recognize the attitudes and manage each and every one with a defined process.



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