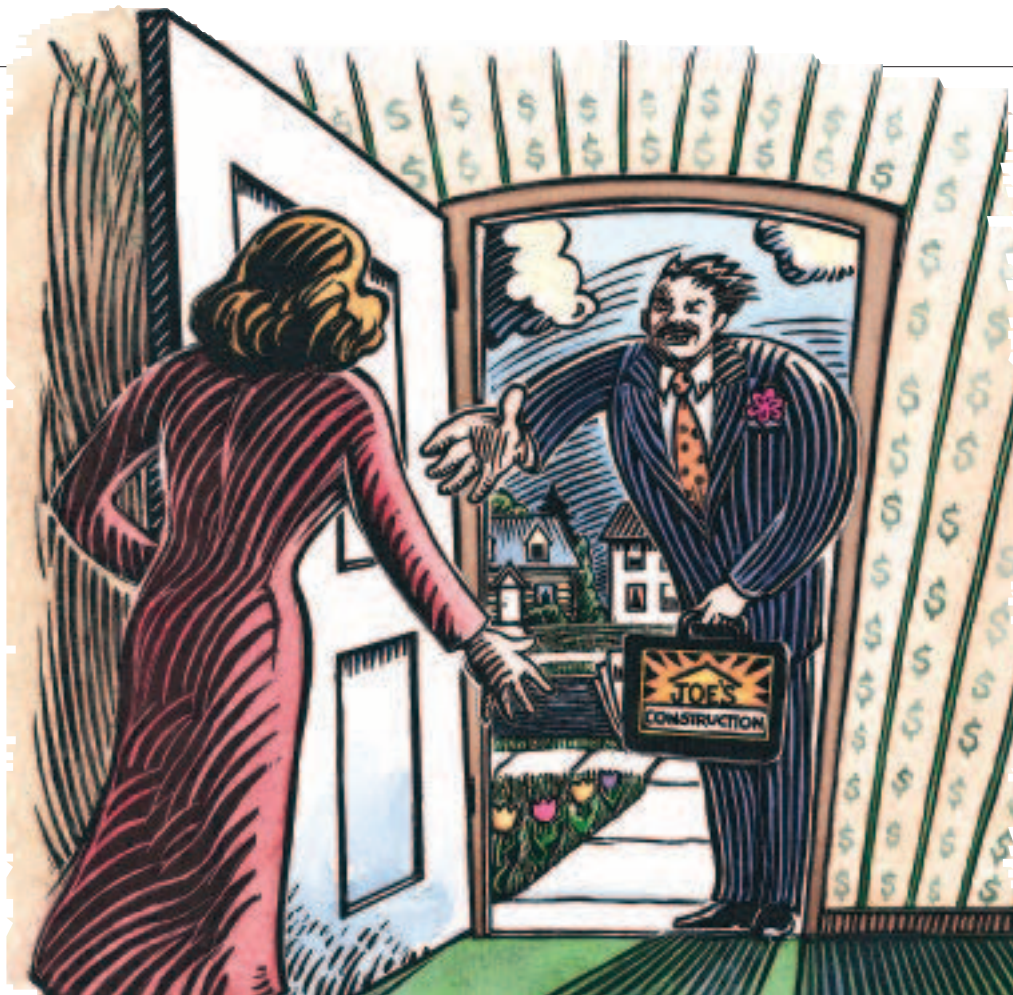




ILLUSTRATIONS BY MOIRA NORTH

Sales for People Who Don't Like Selling

Sales. The very word conjures up images of a vacuum cleaner salesman coming up the sidewalk in wingtips. Contractors who dislike wearing the salesman's hat (along with the wingtips) often rely on word-of-mouth referrals to keep the jobs coming in. But no matter what you call it, calling on potential customers makes you a salesperson.

In many ways, selling is like a building project. Successful building or remodeling projects start with a set of plans. By following the plans carefully, you achieve your goal: a quality job and a satisfied customer. Selling is no different. You start with a sales plan, and follow it step by step until you achieve your goal: new business.

Qualifying the Lead

The first step in effective sales is weeding out the "suspects" from the "prospects." You've got to concentrate your efforts on people who actually want to do business. It's surprising how many sales appointments are spent with the wrong people present or wasted on "window shoppers." You (or your office help) need to do a little phone work before you schedule an appointment.

Nail down the time frame. Ask your phone prospect when they actually plan to do the work. Don't be rude, but excuse

Use these tried-and-true techniques to land more jobs and spend less time selling

BY JOSEPH STODDARD

Advice On Price

- Never reveal your prices until you're sure the prospect is ready to do business. Once you reveal the price, any value you've added to the job will be forgotten; warranty and service won't mean a thing once you're out the door. Chances are your prices will wind up in the hands of your competition and become a tool used to sell against you. Instead of leaving written estimates, I provide prospective customers with a professionally printed "17 Reasons Why" sheet that outlines the advantages of working with our company, along with an 8x10 photo of our staff.
- **Compare apples to oranges.** Make it difficult to compare your price to the competition's by adding extra value to the package. Offering better warranties or extended service agreements are two that I like. Also, try to feature products that no one else makes available.
- **Always sell value, not price.** Find creative ways to point out that the low price is seldom the best deal. I like to compare long-term costs of ownership that include not only the selling price, but also the yearly maintenance and energy costs.
- **Use equivalent monthly costs.** A \$30 "monthly investment" is a lot easier to swallow than a purchase of several thousand dollars. Compare the daily investment to something easy to give up, like a cup of coffee.
- **Work from a price book.** Work from a standardized price book whenever possible, and structure your prices so you have a little room to offer discounts for cash payment or senior citizen eligibility, for instance. Documented pricing is a lot more credible than making prices up as you go along.

— J.S.



yourself unless they're planning the work for the immediate future. In selling, the last person in the door usually gets the job, so any time spent in preparation for a job two years from now will almost certainly be wasted.

Scheduling the appointment. Make sure everyone has allowed enough time for your appointment. If your presentation takes two hours, then make sure the client or clients will be available for at least that length of time. If they are serious about the job, they'll be happy to set aside a block of time for you. This is a good way to test the water before going further, and it will weed out the suspects.

Make sure everyone is present. Never schedule an appointment unless all the decision makers will be present: both the husband and wife, the entire church board, and so on. Otherwise, you'll be relying on someone else to sell your product to the absent decision makers. This is one of the biggest mistakes made in sales, and one of the easiest to avoid.

Older clients. Always find out if older folks have adult children or other relatives who will be part of the purchasing decision, and make sure all are present at any sales meeting. If you doubt the importance of this issue, think about your own parents and how you would react if you thought they were being taken advantage of by a salesperson.

Setting Sales Goals

Once you've qualified the prospect and scheduled your first sales call, you need to set a goal for the sales meeting.

Different products and services have different "sales cycles" — the length of time between the first meeting and actually doing business. Replacement windows and roofing, for example, can and should be sold in one call. A room addition, however, might take a couple of meetings, and a custom home might take months of intense design and selling effort. No matter what the length of the sales cycle, you need to establish a goal for what each sales call will produce.

Your first goal is to get the prospect out of the marketplace as quickly as possible. If your potential customer becomes significantly involved with another company while waiting for you to "get back to them," you're a goner. This means always going to an appointment with the idea of getting some type of commitment from the prospect.

While it's not reasonable (or appropriate) to expect someone to commit to a custom home the first time they meet you, it is reasonable to expect a commitment for the next meeting, and possibly a refundable deposit for design services. In the sales world, these little commitments are called "closes," and they should all lead to the big close — a signed contract with your company. A good way to keep your prospects dealing with you and not your competition is to develop a system that can provide pricing and other information on the spot.

Your First Call

The days of a fast sales pitch are over. Today, the salesperson has to be a trusted adviser, an expert in his or her field. That

doesn't mean that a planned sales call is no longer needed; in fact, just the opposite is true. Everything you do and say should be a planned event, and should be written out, memorized, and practiced. The better prepared you are, the easier it will be for you to deal with events that could undo your entire effort (an unusual question or an intervening friend, for example).

Classic sales training emphasizes five basic steps for sales calls:

- Warm-up, or approach
- Questioning or investigation
- Presentation
- Close
- Follow-up

The Approach

The approach involves getting comfortable with your prospect. First impressions are hard to undo, so always be on your best behavior. Some sales courses insist that you shower the prospect with "sincere compliments" and other gimmicks to gain trust quickly. I've found the best approach is to sincerely thank your prospect for taking the time to see you. People are very busy today, and their time is important to them.

An emotional issue. People make purchases primarily for emotional reasons, then justify their decision later with facts. This law of human nature almost never changes. If you think selling is a matter of going to someone's house and spouting off for an hour about how great your product or service is compared with the competition's, you're missing the boat. Before you present facts and figures, you need to develop the emotional issues that will persuade your prospect to do business with your company.

No one buys a room addition because they want a room. What people want is more comfort or a nicer place for their kids to play. A new furnace doesn't just give them heat, it gives them peace of mind by providing good health and safety for their family. Vinyl siding is more than just siding, it's prestige in the neighborhood and pride in ownership. By focusing on the emotional issues, your prospects will talk themselves into doing business with you — if you let them.

Investigate and Interview

The interview can and should take place while you're measuring and poking around. While you're getting the

physical facts you need to do the job, you will also be getting the emotional facts you need from your prospect. Conduct the interview in a conversational tone, and ask about the prospect's personal interests, family, and so forth. Your prospects will feel much more comfortable and you'll develop a sense of trust and credibility in their eyes.

A big mistake I used to make in sales was not involving the customer. I used to wander around by myself measuring and writing while the prospect waited in the kitchen. Having the prospect help you as you measure or sketch is an ideal way to keep them involved and offers you an opportunity to keep painting those vivid emotional pictures. You should also ask questions that will help discover the buried pipe in the wall or the hot water heater that vents into the attic.

The interview and investigation phase offers salespeople many opportunities to close in small ways. Having your prospect answer certain types of questions will establish a "yes" momentum that will help set the stage for doing business with you. "Won't it be great to look out your new window at the sunset?" "Would you like us to repair this door when we do the rest of the job?" Other questions invite the prospect to make decisions as if they had already committed to the job: "Do you think the gray or the brown shingles would look better?" "Would you rather we use the side door or the garage?" These are all referred to as secondary closes.

Handling Objections

During the interview and investigation, your prospect may question or raise objections to what you are doing and saying. Don't make the mistake of interpreting objections as some kind of personal insult. Objections should be viewed as an opportunity to continue selling.

For example, suppose a prospect says: "We don't think your company is big enough to handle this job." To respond to this type of objection, you should repeat the objection, acknowledge that it's a good question, and then give an example of someone else who had the same concern: "That's a good point, Mrs. Brown; I'd be saying the same thing if I were in your shoes. Mr. and Mrs. Jones had the same concerns, but then were very pleased with the job we did for them...."

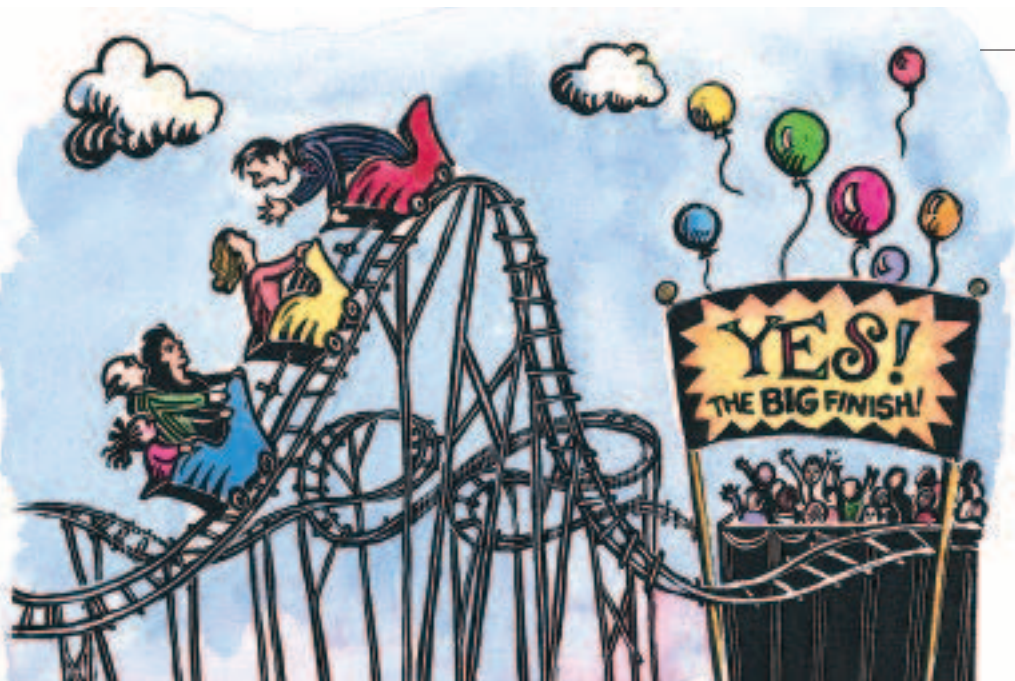
Loose Lips Sink Ships

The hardest thing for salespeople to do is stop talking. They can't wait to tell a prospect what a great job they can do, and will often interrupt with their own thoughts and ideas the minute a prospect starts to speak. Here are some guidelines to follow as you interview your prospect:

- Let your prospect talk twice as much as you. Keep time mentally to make sure you are not dominating the conversation.
- Never cut off your prospect. After you ask a question, allow them to talk until they are done.
- When asked a question, mentally count to three before responding. Prospects want to feel that their questions are being taken seriously.
- Always have a blank pad of paper handy and take lots of notes. You'll talk less when you're taking notes.
- Avoid discussing controversial subjects. An off-hand remark about politics or religion can cost you a sale.
- Never use foul language or tell off-color jokes.

— J.S.





Always agree that the question is a good one and provide reasonable proof that there is nothing to worry about. The most common objection encountered is the price. You'll never eliminate this objection, but you can learn how to respond to it (see "Advice on Price").

The Sales Presentation

The sales presentation is arguably the most important phase of the sales process. But no matter how strong your sales presentation is, it alone will not convince a potential customer to choose your company. The actual presentation should only be done when you are fairly certain the prospect is ready to make a decision in your favor. At this point in the sales process, you're now providing evidence to support the decision. The real purpose of the presentation is to provide the facts necessary to confirm the buying decision and to obtain a commitment from the customer.

A Presentation Book

Most presentations today are assembled in the form of a book and include company history, testimonials, product literature, photographs of jobs and customers, and warranty information. The following guidelines will help you prepare your presentation book:

Include "hands-on" items. Prospects need to stay involved during a sales call. Having something in their hands — photographs, product literature, and warranty cards — helps relieve tension.

Use the right photographs. Every

single picture you carry should have people in it. I personally think the "people" content of the picture is a lot more important than the project content, although obviously your photos should pertain to what you're trying to sell.

All testimonials are not created equal. Testimonials are valuable sales tools, but don't stop there. Try to get testimonial letters, along with a photograph, from people who work for the same company as your prospect, or go to the same church.

The Close

A presentation should be simple and direct, and you should always ask for the business. It has been estimated that more than 80% of sales calls end with no one asking for business. This doesn't mean you have to apply high-pressure sales techniques. People have been hassled by salesmen for several thousand years and will absolutely resent pressure from you. But you shouldn't end the presentation until you have asked for the business; if you don't, there's almost no hope that you'll get it.

If, after asking for the business, the prospects say they need to "think it over," try to uncover any underlying objections. It's surprising how often you can close a sale by clearing up a final point or two. If they still need time to think, set up another appointment to "work out the final details," and thank them for their time. The fact that they're willing to meet again means you're still in the running.

There are a couple of other items to

keep in mind during the presentation. Never assume that someone referred to you by a past customer is automatically a buyer. In these situations, you should always give your entire presentation. Cutting your presentation short will cost you business.

On the other hand, know when to quit. You can talk yourself right out of the work by not being aware of subtle clues. If your prospect asks, "How soon can you start?" or offers some other buying clue such as a noticeable change in body language, ask for the business, and be prepared to pull out your agreement and start writing.

Always Follow Up

Even if you failed to land the job, follow up on your sales visit with a phone call thanking your prospects for their time. If the job later goes sour, they may very well tell others that they should have gone with your company. But if you successfully sell the job, the follow-up list is a little longer.

Send a small gift immediately after the sales closing. On a recent sales call, the customer had a four-year-old son who kept walking away with my tape measure. A day or two after closing the sale, I delivered a tape measure to the customer's son.

Take photos as the job progresses (don't forget to include people in the photos), and send copies to your customer.

Make sure your company provides all that was promised to the client. I hand out referral certificates when I write the sales agreement, and after the job is complete (and the customer is satisfied), I ask them to fill out the certificate.

Cultivate goodwill by occasionally calling the customer or sending a holiday card. This requires scheduling discipline, but keeps your name fresh in the client's mind.

You don't have to enjoy sales to recognize the important role it plays in your business. And if you truly dislike the sales process, that's all the more reason to be an effective salesperson. Remember, the more effective you are at sales, the less time you'll spend selling. ■

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