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Selling Services Is Different

Marketing your personal services is different from marketing cars, appliances, or retail goods . . . with services, people are buying YOU.

—Rick Crandall¹

Selling accounting services is very different from selling products. And, in many ways, an accounting sale is unlike any other service provider's sale. Bob Gaida, partner of BDO Seidman, LLP, had experience selling tangible products before moving to public accounting. He says, "With products, the buyer is not buying you. Many times you will buy a product and loathe the salesman. With public accounting, the buyer must trust you, have chemistry with you, be able to communicate with you, and not fear you."

To make your sale, you must build rapport with prospects or clients, you must understand their situation, and you must create a custom approach to meet their needs. And you must communicate this in a way that causes them to take action because of the picture of benefits you've created in their minds.

Let's look at some of the ways accounting services are different.

More Trust

Selling accounting services requires more trust in the service provider than in a product seller. When you purchase a product, the product itself does a great deal of the selling. You can see the product. Do you like its color and design? You can touch the product. Do you like its feel? Does it fit? Sometimes you can taste or smell or hear the product. When buying accounting services from you, a person or committee cannot see, touch, smell, taste, or hear your final product. Even when they see the final work product, they generally can't judge its quality. They must trust *you* to deliver what you say you will deliver for their benefit.

More Communication

Because people cannot use their senses to test-drive accounting services, much more communication between the customer and the seller is necessary. The seller must convince the prospect that the seller's accounting services will benefit the potential client. Often great sellers will offer a small service first, so the prospect can be persuaded that great service can be had. Mike Kruse, managing partner of Kruse & Associates, in Nashville, Tennessee, who is profiled in Day 6, began offering a "business physical" that has helped skyrocket his business. He said, "Once potential clients experience our kind of service and the quality of our results, very few will not do business with us. It has been a differentiator for us."

In his book *Trust in the Balance*, Robert Bruce Shaw points out that integrity and concern alone are not enough to establish trust. Results must be produced for genuine trust to be established between people or organizations.

PORTRAIT OF A SALES LEADER

BOB GAIDA could have been a CEO in many types of businesses. He possesses a unique combination of drive and compassion, intelligence and judgment, and an eye for detail and creativity. Gaida is deeply involved in the operations of his clients as well as the operations of his accounting firm. During the last few years he has advanced from a partner in the New York office to office managing director of the Woodbridge, New Jersey, office.

Gaida is the "dean" of the BDO Sales College, a two-year intensive sales training program for the professionals in the firm. He has led numerous successful firm-wide efforts. Gaida said, "Seidman & Seidman began its practice 80 years ago helping small- and medium-size businesses keep the tax bill low. Seidman grew to become a national firm on its reputed tax prowess. I am glad to lead us back into a strong emphasis on tax. For most businesses, tax is the largest bill paid. If we can help them keep taxes as low as possible, we can make a huge contribution to their bottom line.

"I started in public accounting in July of 1968 directly out of college," Gaida said. "Uncle Tony, my godfather, was an entrepreneur and had his own business. In the circumstances under which I grew up, most of the men that I had as role models were employees. But Uncle Tony was his own boss, and he had a nice shop. He did well and lived well,

Making a sales presentation to a prospect can suggest integrity and concern. But to establish a strong bond of trust, the prospect must also see results.

*Quality in a service or product is not what you put into it.
It is what the client or customer gets out of it.*

—Peter F. Drucker²

More communication is necessary because the accounting seller is attempting to paint a picture in the mind of the prospect. Whether it's verbalized or not, prospects have their own picture of what they want. If you ask the right questions and listen well, you will be able to "see" this picture. The initial communication of taking the order usually involves asking many probing questions. In some cases, prospects are not exactly sure what they want. In others, prospects may not tell the seller everything.

and I liked his spirit and his philosophy on life. He seemed like a much freer person than other men who were employed. So he was very much a role model who inspired me to want to do something that would be in business and entrepreneurial in its nature."

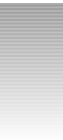
Gaida worked in a bakery during his youth. He said, "Part of my job there was to not only bake the pastries but also be out in the front selling them." He became the manager of one of the stores while in high school. So early on Gaida had to deal with all of the aspects of running his business. He went on to say, "I just found it natural to talk to people. I moved on to jobs selling magazines and Tupperware in college. The regional guy wanted me to give up college and sell Tupperware full time.

"I got into public accounting from observing people in business. So when I went to college, I studied accounting and liked it. Accounting seemed to be a good sounding board for whatever else I might do. I joined Seidman thinking that I would not necessarily do that for the rest of my life," Gaida says.

Gaida thought accounting would teach him things about running a business. Today he proclaims, "Helping our clients succeed in their businesses is one of the highest callings a young person can have. Serving medium-size companies and families and helping my partners succeed are very important to me. I really enjoy the differences that public accounting brings to a person's career."

Prospects Are Fearful

More communication is also necessary because prospects often have many fears about buying accounting services from a new provider. “Will the tax advice I receive from these new accountants be as aggressive (or conservative) as I want?” many prospects are wondering. “When the accounting systems get installed, will the reports be timely and will they help me make better decisions?” People usually can tell right away when a product stops working. For example, the car stops running or makes a strange noise. When accounting, tax, or consulting services do not work, it may take years to find out.



A purchase decision is not a decision to buy an item . . . but a decision to enter a bonded relationship. . . . This requires of the would-be seller a new orientation and a new strategy.

—Tom Peters

The Selling Cycle Is Longer

The selling cycle for accounting services is quite long compared to many other services and products. People attending my training classes estimate that, on average, businesses change accounting firms every 12 years. (Some CPAs estimate that businesses change accountants every 5 years.) Neil Rackham, in his book *SPIN Selling*, demonstrates how businesses go through a predictable cycle of making decisions to change service providers. Rackham points out that needs usually begin with some small imperfection in service and over time “become wants, desires or intentions to act.”³

Accounting Is an Intangible Service

Accounting is an intangible service, not an intangible product. Intangible products are insurance policies or investments. Although they are intangible, these products are created, and then sold. Accounting services are sold, then “manufactured” to order. In our training course *Five-Star Customer Service*, accountants learn how to take the order from a prospect. Taking the order progresses through a four-step process:

1. Prepare.
2. Ask and listen.
3. Write it up.
4. Restate and confirm.

In the preparation step, you must begin to anticipate the client's goals and attitudes. Then, in step 2, you must put the preparation on hold while you listen to your client's—stated and unstated—needs and wants. Writing it up in step 3 engages another sense for both you and your client. And, of course, restating and confirming in step 4 compares the picture in your mind with the picture in your client's mind.

Terry Orr, the sales leader you met in the Day 5 chapter, says, "I think selling accounting and consulting services is really about deeply understanding a client's situation. It is about finding solutions to problems. If you take that attitude, then what you are selling is the ability to solve business issues. Everyone is seeking various answers and the skill is being able to listen with your ears and see with your eyes, to really uncover their true needs. True needs are wants or desires. I might think that a client should have a particular need. But unless the client really wants to address the need, it is not a true need. I don't know that crunching numbers has a lot to do with selling, but solving people's problems has a lot to do with selling."

Harry Beckwith, author of *Selling the Invisible*, says, "The most compelling selling message you can deliver is not that you have something wonderful to sell. It is: 'I understand what you need.' When you can listen with your ears and your eyes, you really begin to understand your client."⁴



The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said.

—Peter F. Drucker

The Professional Makes the Sale

Professional salespeople often have difficulty selling accounting services because so much of the sale has to do with the trust, communication, skill set, and chemistry between the prospect and the CPA. In most cases, the CPA who is going to do most of the work makes the sale. For this reason, many CPAs are hesitant to sell more services because it will be they who must do the work.

Bob Gaida says that many professionals are afraid of selling at first. "There is deep fear of selling because people know it's an important attribute today to be successful and they don't know how to do it. Very few firms provide ample training in this area. So it's difficult for an achievement-oriented person. This type of individual gets very anxious wondering, 'How will I master this?' There is not enough guidance and training being given there."

156 Better Selling Helps Your Clients

In more sophisticated selling systems in accounting firms, highly skilled sellers are called relationship brokers. These people generally are CPAs or highly trained consultants who can “talk the talk” of the service and build a relationship with the client. Jim Heller, a CPA in Milwaukee, says, “I have become expert at selling that which I do not do.” One of the real keys to strong profits in today’s accounting firm is to appropriately leverage your resources. In firms where partners are responsible for \$1 to \$5 million in billing, partners spend very little of their time actually doing the work. These types of partners are the relationship managers, relationship brokers, or client service partners.

Understanding how selling accounting services differs from other types of sales is crucial to being successful in the accounting business. When you understand the challenges, you are better able to prepare for the test of selling: seeking out a qualified prospect and persuading him or her to hire you.

Don’t Wing It

If you agree that selling accounting services is more difficult, does it make sense to just “wing it,” as so many CPAs do? To sell well, you must study and train to be successful in accounting sales. Taking a one-day CPE class or reading one book on selling will not make you an expert.

The mark of good salespeople is that customers don’t regard them as salespeople at all, but as trusted and indispensable advisors, auxiliary employees, who, fortunately, are on someone else’s payroll.

—Harvey Mackay⁵

Mike Kruse says, “I think selling can be learned. Mostly it’s just having a perspective and a determination that selling is important. If somebody feels that it’s important, he or she can learn it.”

Perhaps many CPAs are lulled to sleep as a result of the “ringing of the telephone.” When you perform excellent work for clients, they refer you to others. Bankers and attorneys witness your work and refer you. When that new prospect calls as a result of a referral from one of these sources, it feels like you are selling. But really, the prospect is presold. Now your job is to determine if this is a client for whom you can produce real value. In a good selling system, many call-ins should be turned down. Think of it this way: If the only clients you get are the ones who call you first, then you may be getting

the clients no one else wanted. Selling involves seeking out prospects of the types you want who are both qualified and interested in doing business with you.

Summary

Selling accounting services is different from selling most other products and services. People are buying you and may not be able to judge the quality of your actual services. You must focus on increasing communications and building trust. Prospects may be fearful and the selling cycle may be long. Don't be lulled by repeat and walk-in business. Active selling allows you to develop the type of client base you want.