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Advancing Commitment

[To achieve success more rapidly] double your failure rate.

—Thomas J. Watson, Sr.¹

Believe it or not, in most of your sales contacts with prospects and clients, the ideal outcome is *not* to close the sale. If you expect to close the sale at each contact, you will not only be disappointed, but too impatient and pushy. Superficially, selling is your goal with every contact, but it is unrealistic. In addition, until you know something about the prospects—and they know more about you—signing them up could lead to more trouble than profits. Of course, for each sales contact you *should* have a goal, so you need to have a variety of possibilities in mind.

Closing is that one fantastic moment when a person who was a prospect says yes to becoming a client. However, if you are in the relationship business, you will actually retard the development of a long-term relationship if you put too much focus on closing the sale. And you may start relationships with the wrong types of clients.

Don't Push Too Fast

People buy for *their* reasons, on *their* terms, and on *their* timing—not yours. Bill Fingland says, “We noticed a significant decrease in closed sales when we tried to shortcut the many meetings it took to land a good account.”

Meeting a prospect for the first time and expecting the prospect to say yes to your proposal for a long-term relationship is like proposing marriage on a first date. Even if you get a yes, the probabilities are not good for a successful relationship. When you start closing the sale too soon, prospects may conclude that you want the business without regard to their true needs. By the same token, if you view closing the sale as a one-time event, you are missing the vein of gold in the recurring relationship.

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“Closing the sale” sounds negative. “Closed” sounds like a final event. And it has received far too much emphasis. Rather than closing a sale, think of opening a relationship. Opening a relationship is a positive event. Opening a relationship is the start of a series of events that becomes a growing process.

Advance the Relationship

Rather than closing the sale, think of each step in the selling process as advancing commitment. Advancing commitment is a series of steps prospects take in response to you that move them along the continuum toward becoming clients. The early steps would be things like agreeing to go on your newsletter mailing list or agreeing that another meeting would be beneficial. Advancing commitment is the most difficult action we have to perform, yet it should be the easiest.

At least 75 percent of your success in selling will come from your ability to influence people to act in everyone’s best interest.

Mark Kaland, whom we met in Day 16, says that sometimes he will give away a small service in the proposal process just to demonstrate capability and interest.

Many people view selling as a strategy where you do something to someone. With this perspective, it’s no wonder that CPAs shy away from the process. Many of the sales training classes and books seem to pit salespeople *against* potential buyers. Some approaches are “in your face” aggressive. Much of the focus is on manipulative tactics. With this inappropriate approach, the marketing process is not built on a foundation of trust, but of gimmickry.

I would like you to view that moment in time when your prospect says yes to your proposal as just another step in a very logical process. All along the way you will advance the prospect or client’s commitment to a higher level. For example, when you meet a prospect for the first time, your objective might be to advance his commitment by visiting with you again. Or, for an existing client, you may wish to advance the commitment to a higher level of loyalty to your firm. You may advance commitment with a new prospect to obtain a tour of her facilities and meet other executives. Or, for a prospect on the verge of making a decision to hire you, you might advance that person’s commitment by getting him to talk with one of your satisfied clients.

When you view the process in this way, you will know all along how prospects or clients feel about your proposal; rarely will you ever be surprised.

The Decision

Asking for a decision is easy when you have laid a solid foundation for a relationship. Many times, though, you believe that you are laying a solid foundation but you are not receiving positive feedback from your prospects.

Two key methods will enable you to advance commitment with your prospects: trial closing techniques and asking for the business.

Telling is not selling. The CPAs who are best at gaining new business are those who let the prospects do much of the work of closing the sale. When prospects are talking, you are learning what they want. After you make each benefit statement, a trial closing question will let you know where you stand in the process.

Some Trial-Close Questions You Can Use

Trial closes include questions like these:

- Ms. Prospect, if you were to select us, when would you want us to start the work?
- Mr. Client, what do think about this aspect of our service so far?
- Mr. Client, would you want us to work in your office or in ours?
- Ms. Client, are the fees we are quoting about right?
- Mr. Client, if we got the report to you by . . .

The answers to the trial-close questions tell you where you are in the process. A well-built sales presentation flows naturally into a yes response from your buyer. One of the best ways to do this is through the use of trial closes.

David Morgan, whom we met in Day 1, says, “I just like to let prospects talk. First you want to listen to them and see that you know what it is they want. If I try to sell them what they don’t want, it will backfire. Second, you want to know their hot buttons, which they’ll tell you. And then you start finding out what is it that they are not happy with where they are. I will tell them how we could solve an issue, and then ask him or her, ‘How does that sound to you?’ You find out the problems and you know where you are in the selling process.”

A trial-closing question calls for an opinion. The prospect’s response provides you with a lot of information. When you ask questions and the prospect talks, you will create more trust and a very positive selling environment.

Building Communication

The people who are the very best at influencing others are those people with empathy and sensitivity. They listen closely to what others are saying, and they listen for all the messages—even those being communicated between the lines. The more you listen to what a person is really saying, the more that person will trust you and will be open to your influence. A basic rule is that you should never say anything you could ask in a question. Again, telling is not selling.

With each response that you receive from your prospect, an acknowledgment that you heard the person will strengthen your case. A simple “uh-huh” or “I see” may be all you need most of the time. Take a note or two, but keep your eyes focused on the person with whom you are communicating. Nod, or paraphrase what people tell you. When you are actively listening to prospects or clients, you are building a deep level of communication. When you are listening, your prospect’s natural resistance goes down.

A Gallup poll found that the most affluent people in America rated understanding and respect from others as their most important measure of success. It seems that we truly understand and respect ourselves only when we feel that we are understood and respected by others. And we will go to great lengths to garner such respect. When we feel that someone respects us for who we are and what we have accomplished, we tend to be more open to that person’s influence.

Dick Reck, whom we met in Day 17, says, “When I really understand the needs and wants of the prospect, I rarely have to give a written proposal. Last year, with over 90 closed transactions, I wrote only two proposals. I’ll see a big thick document from one of my competitors on the desk and I’ll just go in and talk to the prospect and listen. I spend my time convincing the prospect he needs all our services, that he will make me the preferred provider and the sole source. In the long run, if we have built better communications and satisfied the client’s needs, it doesn’t matter that it cost 25 percent more to work with us.”

Patience is a most necessary quality for business; many a man would rather you heard his story than grant his request.

—Lord Chesterfield²

One of your clients’ greatest needs is for you to listen without bias. This doesn’t mean just listening and waiting for a chance to argue a point or jump in and resume your presentation; I mean totally without bias or

assumptions. When you actively listen to clients or prospects, you are demonstrating your high esteem and respect for their opinions.

Advancing Commitment

As you proceed through the commitment process, there will be times when you think prospects should say yes, but they don't. This usually indicates that you have not covered all the bases well. When this happens, try to step back and cover the area of concern. For example, if you hear, "Your fees are too high," that means that your prospect did not see the value in your services. You should go back to this step in your selling and cover all value bases again.

Author Ron Willingham says that clients always weigh the benefits vis-à-vis the cost before making a final decision. Willingham recommends that before you ask for a decision, you are sure the prospect is picturing the value outweighing the cost. This process will enable you to see things from the prospect's point of view, and this is the *only* view that will enable you to advance commitment on a consistent basis.

Advancing commitment is the simple process of asking for a decision at the right time. Advancing commitment with your prospect means you want to obtain a commitment from the person with whom you are meeting to take the next step with you.

You can advance commitment by asking the controller to introduce you to the president, who may be the final decision maker. You can advance commitment by asking the person with whom you are meeting to allow you to spend time in the accounting department reviewing internal controls and documentation. Of course, advancing commitment may also entail asking the prospect to become a client.

Closing Techniques

Whether you are advancing commitment or seeking a commitment to open the relationship, there are several excellent old-fashioned ways to do it. Use these techniques carefully—only after you have built a relationship and the right to ask in a persuasive manner.

Although the following case study appears in Jeff Everly's bio in the Day 4 chapter, it illustrates such a valuable lesson that I'm repeating it again here. When I first heard of Jeff Everly and David Frazier, partners of Yount, Hyde & Barbour (YHB) and leaders of the banking services team, I was working with another client, whom I'll call ABC CPAs. ABC had just lost a proposal to YHB, and they were surprised by this. So the managing partner of ABC asked me to perform a lost proposal review for the firm.

To perform a lost proposal review, among other things, I talk to the decision makers and influencers at the lost client. So I spoke with two of the bank officers—the CEO and CFO. Both generally gave me the same story. Both initially felt that ABC was going to be the winner of the engagement, but they had invited a Big Five firm, a regional firm, and Yount, Hyde & Barbour to provide a proposal. YHB was invited only because the CFO had heard that the firm had some banking experience. The officers did not consider YHB to be in serious running at the beginning, but they had to have three proposals. Yount, Hyde & Barbour partners David Frazier and Jeff Everly appeared before the bank audit committee and made the presentation to it.

At the end of the proposal, Everly and Frazier spoke personally to each person on the audit committee and asked him or her, in a general way, for their business. As Everly and Frazier left the room, they spoke to the CFO and CEO. At the end of the audit committee meeting, the vote was three for ABC and three for YHB. It was tied. The audit committee decided to adjourn and gather additional information. Later that afternoon Everly called the bank's CFO and asked if during the interview process, any additional questions had arisen. The CFO responded, "Yes, there were two questions." Everly responded with an overnight letter. He called the CFO and the CEO the next morning again expressing his interest. The letter was passed out to the entire audit committee members and they voted 6 to 0 to hire YHB.

The audit committee members said to the officers, "This firm seems to want our business. They've answered all our questions." The partners from ABC never called back. They never asked for the business. Members of the audit committee judged this to be a lack of interest and perhaps a bit insulting.

It is *very* important to demonstrate your interest in your prospective client by asking appropriate closing questions.

Types of Closes

The Direct Close. The *direct close* is the most frequently used closing technique. Using it, you simply ask for the business in no uncertain terms. Terry Orr says, "Sometimes I will just say 'I've gotten to know you and I'd like to work with you. What are some things I could do to help the most right now?'"

The Approach Close. The *approach close* is used at the beginning of the presentation. It may sound like a trial close, but it calls for a decision. The approach close goes something like this: "Will you tell me, one way or the other, at the end of our meeting today if my service will meet your needs?"

If the prospect answers yes to this approach close, you have advanced his or her commitment to make a decision today. If the answer is no, then you may want to inquire as to the prospect's process and its timeframe.

The Sharp-Angle Close. The *sharp-angle close* comes at a time near the end of your presentation when the prospect has a request that you can fulfill. The prospect may say something like "I hope you are not going to run a bunch of inexperienced people in on me." In turn you might say, "Ms. Controller, I've heard how other firms do that and I know how it feels. If I could assure you that all of our CPAs will be experienced, would you engage us?"

Ben Franklin was very persuasive. Over two hundred years ago, he used what is sometimes called the T-account technique. He drew a horizontal line across the top of a page and a vertical line down the page, forming a "T." On the top of the left side he wrote "Yes" and on the left side he wrote "No." In the column under "Yes" he would write all of the reasons to go forward with the decision; under "No" he would write all of the reasons not to proceed. The graphic presentation when the yeses outweigh the nos is persuasive to both factual, left-brained buyers and emotional, right-brained buyers.

The graphic presentation alone is powerful. But to involve your prospect more deeply, you then step back and look at your T-account graphic and ask, "Is there anything you can think of that should prevent our doing business together?" Write down their responses in the appropriate column.

The Change-Places Close. The *change-places close* asks prospects to tell you what you need to do to have them sign the engagement letter. The change places close goes something like this: "Mr. Prospect, if you were in my shoes and wanted to do business with your company as much as I do, what would you do?"

The Assumptive Close. The *assumptive close* asks for a minor decision—assuming that your prospect has made the major decision. Assumptive questions are ones like "With whom should we work?" or "In addition to the items we have covered, is there anything else we should cover before we get started?"

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Henry Ford used the assumptive close to sell millions of his black-only Model Ts until creative marketers offered color options. When you assume that your prospect is going to engage you and ask, “Which one?” you have a powerful force working for you.

Pay Attention to Personality Cues

People have different personality styles and each style type responds to the pressure of the decision-making process differently.

Highly analytical people will decide slowly and methodically. If you pressure them too much, they will say things like “If you need to have an answer now, the answer is no.” Give a thinker time to process the information, but advance commitment by determining a time in which a decision will be reached.

Highly social people do not want to take the risk of making a decision alone. Their worst fear is making one of their colleagues angry. Help them reach a decision by bringing in people who will help them bear the risk and support them.

Director-type individuals can make decisions as soon as they feel they have a grasp of the situation. They appreciate a straightforward and direct approach: “I’d like to work with you, Ms. Client—when can we get started?”

Summary

If you have a relationship that is built on trust, it will be strong and all selling pressure will be perceived as low. Asking for a decision will be easy. If the relationship is new and weak, however, all decision making will be more tense. If you spend time to build trust, your closing will follow as a natural part of the sales presentation. In fact, if you do not invest the time to build rapport and trust, you really do not have the right to ask for a person’s business.