



Selling: From The Customer's Perspective

By Jim Stewart

Jim Stewart is a regular contributor to North Country Business on topical business issues. This article is the first in a series of articles on Selling Techniques.

Often, sales professionals find it difficult to put various selling skills and strategic sales concepts into the proper perspective. The customer is the most important factor in any selling situation, and it is critical to understand and develop a sales strategy or presentation that relates directly to the customer's point of view (i.e., perspective).

When making a purchase, individuals (some consciously, others unconsciously) move through six distinct decision-making stages. In order to be successful, sales professionals must know which stage the customer is in and adapt their style/presentation accordingly.

Customer's Decision-Making Stages:

- **Unawareness** is the initial stage when the customer is not even aware that the company, product or service exists. They are wondering, "Who are you?" and "Should I meet with/listen to this person?" The skill(s) required by the salesperson during this stage include prospecting and positioning.
- Next is the **Awareness** stage wherein the customer first learns of the product/service, the company, and the person doing the selling. The customer reflects on the following: "Do I feel comfortable with this person?" and "What do you do?" During this stage, rapport must be established; this is essential for any successful sales strategy. It is a fundamental concept in any non-manipulative selling approach that people will only buy from another person when a basic level of trust and rapport exists, creating a "comfort level" or "buying climate" before the sales rep and customer "get down to business."
- **Knowledge** is when the customer is exposed to more specific information about the product/service and begins to consider some potential benefit in purchasing. The customer typically queries the salesperson about, "Why should I listen to you?" and wonders "Can I benefit from doing business with this person?" During this knowledge stage, the salesperson must successfully employ communications skills to open up and explore possibilities.
- At the **Likeness** stage the customer's conversation turns to matters involving "How does this product / service work?" or "Does the proposal/idea make sense?" The customer may agree that one particular offering/service is superior to any other comparable offering. When the customer arrives at this likeness stage, the salesperson must rely on superior presentation skills to encourage the customer to respond with "Yes, this makes good sense." *How* information is presented is every bit as important as *what* is being presented.

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- When the customer arrives at the **Preference** stage, they begin to focus on “Where will this idea/product/service fit in with my plans?” Emotion plays just as important a role in convincing the customer of the value of an offering as logic, so planning and considering what motivates a person, both emotionally and logically, can pay great dividends. At this stage, the salesperson may also have to rely on objection handling skills.
- The final stage is **Purchase**, and this stage does not occur until the customer fully decides they would rather make this positive decision over anything else they perceive they can buy with the same amount of money or effort. “Should I commit to take this action now?” and “When are we going to do this?” will typically be the focus questions at this stage. At this stage, the salesperson must be able to execute the transaction and employ sensitive and intelligent closing techniques.

Professional salespeople must plan their presentation to take into account the process that their customer is moving through. This planning does indicate/require rigidity; rather, it demonstrates the salesperson’s keen awareness and sensitivity to the challenge of the selling situation.

Once a presentation is planned, it may take on countless variations, since no two customers are ever alike. Good execution of a sales plan requires the salesperson to be capable of employing an arsenal of finely tuned skills to respond to each customer with sincerity and conviction.