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Shut Up and Listen

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"I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening."
– Larry King

I have been training salespeople for more than 20 plus years. One of the most fundamental, basic skills taught by every single training provider is that of how to handle the discovery meeting. Ideally, it is where the salesperson focuses on understanding the customer's business and applications for his or her products.

However, if the discovery meeting is so basic and fundamental, why do so many salespeople struggle with executing this critical skill? Let me go a little further: Why are salespeople so horrible at this? If you don't believe me, observe a role play or go in the field and observe a discovery meeting. What you probably will observe is the salesperson talking and not asking questions and listening.

So what is the why behind this bad execution? Said another way, what are the barriers regarding salespeople not effectively executing a discovery meeting?

Here are my thoughts:

The number one barrier: Salespeople think they are adding value when they are talking. They feel that is what the prospect wants—for us to enlighten them.

The number two barrier: Time. It takes more time to listen, and for whatever reason, salespeople feel they are wasting either the prospect's time or theirs as they would prefer to get right to the prognosis without the diagnosis. They feel the customer is a professional listener.

The number three barrier: They do not set effective expectations with the prospect. We have trained the prospect that we will come in and talk—and not ask questions.

Remember, the customer is asking: Can I trust this salesperson? The value of discovery is to improve the quality of the dialogue with the customer. You can earn the business by learning the business. An effective discovery meeting is a differentiator.

But common knowledge is not always common practice.

So if the discovery skill is so fundamental, why is it not done or done effectively? I think it has a lot to do with the attributes of the individual. In my book, *Reignite: How to Rekindle Your Passion for Selling*, I provide an overview of the attributes of top performers which include attitude, motivation, accountability, and integrity. Let me demonstrate how the attributes of top performers actually drive the execution of the key skill of discovery.

My Motivation: Do I see the value of spending my time this way? Have I taken the time to properly prepare for the meeting by writing out questions? Have I collected data on the account such as reviewed its website, LinkedIn page, and any other publicly available data sources?

Remember, high-performing salespeople (those who exceeded quota at least three years in a row) are more than twice as likely to conduct pre-call plans as their peers. They also spend 16 percent more time in enablement activities (training, research, prep) than their peers.

My Attitude: Do I feel like I already know everything about the company and application? Have I heard it all before and already know what the solution is? Do I feel like the customer doesn't want me to know? Is it outside my comfort zone to spend too much time on discovery?

My Accountability: Do I feel like I owe it to the customer to understand their situation? Am I being measured on what I know about their business? How can I be accountable to value if I don't understand their business and application?

My Integrity: Do I resist selling in the discovery meeting? Did I tell them I want to understand their business and as soon as they provide me an opportunity to sell, I take it? Am I an empathetic listener? Do I ask simple questions that I could obtain answers to before the meeting through data gathering thus hurting my chance to build trust and show professionalism?

Effective discovery is a mind-set. Done correctly, you can effectively position your solutions in relationship to the prospect's challenges. You quickly elevate the customer's perception of your value—from being viewed as a commodity/vendor show up and throw up to a consultant/strategic resource who is interested in learning the customer's challenges prior to presenting a solution.

Lastly, by listening more effectively, you are building trust and creating a nonthreatening environment. Dr. William James said, "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated."

Question: What percent of the time do you talk vs. listen in an initial meeting with a prospect?

Scott Anderson is a founding principal at Diamond Performance Solutions LLC and RevenueForce LLC. He is co-author of the book Reignite: How to Rekindle Your Passion for Selling. Scott spent his entire career—more than twenty-five years selling, managing salespeople, and providing sales consulting, training, and coaching to some of the biggest and best sales organizations in the world. He has worked with leading organizations including 3M, IBM, Cargill, UnitedHealth Group, Carlson Companies, Andersen Windows, Wells Fargo and The Hartford. He has authored numerous articles on sales effectiveness. He resides in Dallas, Texas. He can be reached at 612-961-1778 or email: sanderson@revenueforce.com.