

‘DEVELOPING THE ART OF SALES AND MARKETING’

By Kim Tasso

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THE SALES FUNCTION

DEVELOPING THE ART OF SALES AND MARKETING

Starting a business can present many problems but sales of a product or service are essential if that business is to survive. **Kim Tasso** offers advice on how to sell successfully.

The idea of selling often sends shivers down the spines of even the bravest entrepreneurs – with the triple fears of embarrassment, rejection and failure as the enemy. Yet when you realise that you have probably already “sold” yourself and your idea in order to secure business partners, finance, professional advisers and sometimes even employees it does not seem quite so daunting.

The two most common mistakes for those unfamiliar with selling is to avoid it altogether or to plunge in with little preparation (and then quickly retreat after a first spectacular defeat). There is no reason why you should have studied marketing (how to promote your product or service) so you may be unaware that it can make selling (closing the deal) a lot easier.

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Who are your customers?

Within your business plan you will have identified your target market. Do some more research to really develop an understanding of who your potential customers are, where they are, what channels they use (high street shops, intermediaries, the internet etc) and the sort of people that they are. Start up businesses will often focus on a particular niche as it is easier and cheaper to concentrate limited resources this way. The nature of the marketing and selling tools you will adopt will depend on whether your customers are primarily consumers (B2C) or businesses (B2B) and their particular attributes.

Buying processes

You need to understand how customers buy your type of product. Is there more than one person involved in the decision? Do they have budget and procurement procedures? Do they operate a preferred supplier panel? Part of your initial research – which involves you talking to and learning about potential buyers without the pressure of needing to sell – helps you understand the likely selling cycle. In complex sales situations you will need to create a number of contacts over a period of months and then may have to go through a formal tendering process in order to secure an order.

How marketing helps

With marketing you can create a brand that differentiates your product (or service) and raises awareness so that potential buyers are alerted. Marketing has tools for generating publicity or placing advertisements in traditional channels and in the new social media. You might develop a database or purchase lists of prospects and design direct marketing or telemarketing campaigns to raise awareness, generate interest, make offers and establish contact with potential customers. If you are selling a product that has a relatively low price it may be that you can avoid personal selling altogether (aside, perhaps, from providing a customer services help line) – as all business is transacted through your web site. In this case you will need to be familiar with search engine optimisation techniques to drive the right sort of traffic to your site. However, if you need to get intermediaries on side (for example, retailers, distributors, independent advisers etc) or your customers are organisations then you need to develop the skills, systems and appetite for personal selling.

Set targets

You will know what income you need to generate. So break this down into how many customers you will need to win, each spending how much – on a monthly or quarterly basis – in order to achieve this. Bear in mind that no one achieves a 100% conversion rate and that some buyers may take a lot longer to buy than others. Now you should be getting an idea of how many people you need to contact, to meet and to convert to reach your targets.

Sales training

I recommend that people invest in some form of sales training. The more complex and expensive your product – and particularly if you are selling intangible services and/or to organisations – then the more important this becomes. You could just buy a couple of sales technique books or invest in a two day intensive course. It will be time and money well spent. Good sales training will guide you to manage the various activities and monitor your progress. It will also help you achieve early success – which builds confidence – and enable you to select appropriate specialist sales resources once your business is established.

What is the need?

For any sale to take place the buyer must have a need. Learning about the particular needs of each buyer – and then matching the relevant features or benefits of your product/service – to those needs is the essence of selling. So during the initial stages of any sale ask relevant questions and listen carefully to the responses so that you tailor anything you say about your product accordingly.

Strong proposition

You must be clear about your proposition. Can you explain – in non technical terms – what value your product or service delivers? Too often selling fails because the focus is on the features – eg it has 40 gigabytes, 200 staff etc – rather than the benefits – eg it makes things faster and therefore cheaper, it reduces the need for a separate department. It helps if you understand how you alter your proposition depending on the particular needs of any buyer.

Sales meeting management

Once you have generated an opportunity, perhaps through a telephone call or a recommendation, you should plan how you will proceed. Think about what you ideally want to achieve at a meeting – what you need as the outcome – whether this is a signed order or an agreement to a further meeting or a tender. Consider how you will use the time available:

- introducing yourself;
- getting on as people;
- finding out about the customer and his/her organisation;
- identifying their needs and concerns;
- describing the product or service you are offering;
- exploring the use and purchase options;
- understanding the buying process;

When you first make contact with potential buyers you need to concentrate on developing the necessary rapport and trust

- dealing with questions and objections; and
- gaining agreement to the next stage or a commitment to buy.

It is all about people

Before someone buys your product or service, they need to 'buy' you. When you first come make contact with potential buyers you need to concentrate on developing the necessary rapport and trust. Empathy is a key skill here – it means seeing things from their perspective and adapting what you say and how you say it to match their agenda, needs and style. This can be hard when you are excited about your product or service as you may be tempted to spend all the time talking about your interests, rather than listening to what the buyer has to say. It is especially important when there are numerous individuals involved in the purchase decision – you need to work on getting them all on side – both on an emotional and a rational basis.

The value of relationships

If your market is served by a small number of intermediaries, then you must focus on developing relationships with those people. The sales process is similar except that you are trying to encourage them to recommend your product or service to their valued clients. So creating trust and adding value (perhaps by introducing people to them that they find useful) and a regular dialogue is important. Once you have a customer you need to stay in touch – find out about their changing needs, seek referrals, ask for their input on new ideas and offer further products and services. Many businesses find that the majority of their income is generated by existing customers so having a database to maintain the data and prompt regular contact becomes an important marketing and selling tool. ■

FURTHER READING

- There is lots of introductory material (including information on courses) on marketing and selling at web sites such as www.cim.co.uk and www.businesslink.gov.uk.

For a full list of additional resources, see pages 26-27.